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Reconceptualising Conversion: A phenomenological analysis of religious conversion, with particular reference to Maurice Merleau-Ponty

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I declare that this thesis was composed by myself, that the work contained herein is my own except where explicitly stated otherwise in the text, and that this work has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification. Parts of this work have been adapted from my article, 'Maurice Merleau-Ponty and the Philosophy of Religion', published in *Religious Studies* online (2020) by Cambridge University Press. It is reproduced here in adapted form with permission from Cambridge University Press. Where this occurs, it has been referenced in the text.

Jack Williams

Abstract

Religious conversion is often understood as a sudden, dramatic, emotionally intense, one-off experience which utterly revolutionises a convert's life and religious worldview. This conception of conversion is driven by the influence of William James's The Varieties of Religious Experience (1902), along with a strain of Protestantism which emerged in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century North America. Contemporary social scientific analyses of religious conversion reveal that conversions are in fact often long-term processes which play out over multiple years. Philosophy of religion has not often considered the question of religious conversion and, where it has done so, has adopted a Jamesian model as its object of study. Consequently, philosophical research into religious conversion often misidentifies its object of study, overemphasises the immediate experience at the expense of longer-term effects and processes, and is biased towards the experiences of modern Protestant Christians.

This thesis offers a philosophical reconceptualisation of religious conversion by way of phenomenological analysis. It is informed by recent social scientific research, especially that of Henri Gooren, and adopts a more process-oriented, long-term view of conversion experiences which can unfold over a number of years. The thesis is philosophically influenced by the twentieth-century French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose phenomenological philosophy provides resources for thinking about conversion processes which occur over a longer time period and are affected by a convert's immersion in a material, linguistic and social world. Embodiment, expression, and community are the three philosophical themes about which this thesis turns. Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of embodiment, complemented by recent developments in cognitive science, enables an articulation of the embodied, belief-forming context within which conversion takes place. Without reducing conversion to physical or physiological processes, a philosophy of embodiment is able to present a view of human subjectivity as material and physical and explain how affective and embodied processes can influence, shape, and precipitate conversion. Added to this philosophy of embodiment is an analysis of expression. The thesis explores Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of language, focusing on the human's immersion in a linguistic world and speech as accomplishing thought, and appends a Wittgensteinian praxeology and argument for the affectivity of language. It is argued that religious expression, rather than following conversion, is in fact capable of shaping belief, preceding and contributing to the conversion process, and works through the affective pathways of the body. The final philosophical theme of the thesis is the effect of community on conversion. Community is examined both as the context for ritual as well as that which offers a feeling of belonging. With reference to ritual studies and affect theory, respectively, community is understood to be a deeply affective experience which shapes how an individual believes and thus contributes to conversion experiences.

This thesis contributes to the philosophy of conversion by refocusing research on the subjective experiences of converts and correcting the dominant stereotype of conversions as one-off dramatic events. It also builds a bridge between conversion studies and a wider

philosophical anthropology, whereby the process and experience of conversion can affect how we understand human experience, belief, and freedom.

Lay Summary

This thesis aims to develop an understanding of conversion from a philosophical perspective. Conversion – the transition of an individual from one religious belief or worldview to another – has long been interpreted in terms of a sudden, dramatic event. Influenced by the psychologist William James and the experiences of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century North American Protestantism, much research has focused on the "conversion experience", an instant, personal, emotionally intense experience of sudden and dramatic transformation. I show in this thesis that this focus on the sudden and dramatic is misleading, and that conversion is much better understood as a long-term process which can unfold over many months or years and is affected by the material, linguistic, and social context of the convert.

Building on this interpretation of conversion, I have used the work of French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty and the philosophical method of phenomenology to develop a new understanding of what conversion is, how it affects and is affected by the human body, and what this can teach us about human experience in general. My thesis focuses on the theme of embodiment, the fact that all human experience is limited and structured by the human body and the world which it inhabits – this is an idea which Merleau-Ponty first developed in 1945 and I have complemented it with recent findings in cognitive science. I develop a theory of belief as affective – that is to say, belief is not just about articulated propositions but is fundamentally a matter of feeling which can be influenced by processes in the human body.

In developing my thesis, I therefore analyse certain aspects of the conversion process which are all affected by the fact of embodiment: these are expression, ritual, and community belonging. I show that each of these are processes which occur in the body and are both affected by and able to affect the body of a religious practitioner. In this way, these aspects of religion are capable of altering the process of belief-formation and in so doing begin or contribute to the process of conversion.

This might sound like I am advancing a reductive account of conversion – that is, it might seem as if my argument about embodiment would imply that conversions are nothing more than physical or physiological processes and nothing to do with rationality, free choice, or religious authenticity. This is a conclusion I wish to avoid and so my thesis also seeks to develop an alternative framework within which we can understand the material and embodied processes of conversion (and religion more generally). I argue that the theoretical separation of mind and body leads us to believe that embodied processes undermine our freedom. Merleau-Ponty sought throughout his work to challenge the separation of mind and body and I use this aspect of his philosophy to develop an account of religion and religious conversion which does not automatically dismiss it as unfree, coercive or self-deception. While the questions of freedom are not fully answered in this thesis, I argue that a reconceptualisation of the relationship between mind and body is necessary if we are to understand notions of freedom, authenticity and rationality in relation to religious and spiritual practices.

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I am deeply indebted to the love and support of my family. My parents, Mark and Louise, have always encouraged me to take risks and pursue the things which most excite me; it is their influence which gave me the confidence to pursue doctoral research. I have always loved the company and friendship of my siblings, Eva, Tom and Martha, and my brother-in-law, Josh, who are source of inspiration and fun. A particular thanks goes to Tom for proofreading the final draft of my thesis.

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To Rosie

Abbreviations

Maurice Merleau-Ponty

SB	*The Structure of Behaviour*
PhP	*Phenomenology of Perception*
VI	*The Visible and the Invisible*
SNS	*Sense and Non-Sense*
PrP	*In Praise of Philosophy*
S	*Signs*
'OPL'	'On the Phenomenology of Language'
'PP'	'The Primacy of Perception'
'EM'	'Eye and Mind'

René Descartes

Principles	*Principles of Philosophy*
Meditations	*Meditations on First Philosophy*
Letters	*Philosophical Letters*

Husserl

Crisis	*The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*
LI	*Logical Investigations*
Ideas	*Ideas*

William James

Varieties	*The Varieties of Religious Experience*

Jean-Paul Sartre

BN	*Being and Nothingness*

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Introduction

Religious conversion appears to be an odd phenomenon. Religions appear to be complete and comprehensive entities, holistic worldviews capable of providing meaning, direction, and identity to their adherents. Within a religious framework, one knows who one is, the nature of ultimate reality, how to relate to other people, how to behave, and the direction in which history – both global and personal – is heading. What, then, would prompt an individual to abandon such a framework in favour of another? If we assume that people tend to hold beliefs that are consistent and mutually supportive of one another, it seems strange that certain people find themselves adopting new beliefs, apparently contradictory to other beliefs they hold, and rejecting the old ones. For non-religious individuals who join religious communities, the decision to adopt a set of beliefs, practices and behaviours which may bear very little relation to one's previous way of life and which guide potentially life-altering decisions such as where to live, who to marry, what career to pursue, and so on, seems equally puzzling. Conversion looks like it should be a highly destabilising phenomenon which would normally be resisted by most human beings – and yet it is something which seems to appear throughout human history. For these reasons, religious conversion has been the subject of many social scientific investigations which have been able to offer various causal explanations and models based on the kinds of sociological and psychological influences that might affect experiences of conversion. These studies have yielded important results; however, there are also deeper and more philosophical questions arising from the apparently surprising phenomenon of conversion. What is it about the human situation, human existence, and human ways of knowing that makes conversion possible? These are the questions of the present thesis. I seek to investigate the phenomenon of conversion from a philosophical perspective in order to understand precisely what conversion is, its phenomenal character, the phenomenological and existential conditions which can precipitate or inhibit conversion, and how it relates to human life and experience more broadly. My intention is that such a study can help us to achieve greater conceptual clarity about an important religious phenomenon, and in so doing potentially offer some resources to aide a normative evaluation of conversion. I also propose that a philosophical study of conversion will inform our understanding of philosophical anthropology and that by studying the process by which an individual's beliefs, worldview and identity change, we will uncover important philosophical insights into questions about human belief-formation, the nature of rationality, and freedom.

It is not difficult to justify the importance of studying religion today. Despite predictions in the 1950s and 60s that the processes of secularisation increasingly would leave religion without influence in the modern world,[1] the continued prominence and importance of religion across the world today is widely recognised. In 1993, Lewis Rambo described an 'amazing resurgence of religious vitality' across the world in the preceding two decades, citing the resurgence of Buddhism in Asia and Islam in the Middle East along with the development of charismatic and liberation theologies within Christianity and of New

[1] See, for example, Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1967); Bryan R. Wilson and Steve Bruce, *Religion in Secular Society: Fifty Years On* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

Religious Movements (NRMs) in Europe and North America.[2] In 2010, Henri Gooren traced the global resurgence of religion to the early 1980s, a development which includes Ruhollah Khomeini's 1979 Islamist Revolution in Iran, the Moral Majority movement in 1980s America, the 'vigorous religious and political charisma of Pope John Paul II', the role of Catholicism in the Polish anti-Communist movement, the growth of Pentecostalism in 1990s sub-Saharan Africa, the rise of Hindu nationalism, and the growth of Islamic fundamentalism and international terrorism which led to the terror attacks of 9/11.[3] 'The unexpected growth of New Religious Movements, the resurgence of Islam, and the proliferation of various forms of charismatic-Pentecostal and vigorous forms of Roman Catholicism and Protestantism in many parts of the world' further support the resurgent religion thesis, according to Lewis Rambo and Charles Farhadian.[4] Birgit Meyer has described the growth in the influence and position of Pentecostal Christianity in Ghana,[5] while Brad Christerson and Richard Flory describe a movement of independent charismatic Christian leaders, capable of attracting tens of thousands to prayer rallies and well-connected with Republican political leaders, which is rapidly growing in the US and further afield.[6] Global Pentecostalism continues to grow apace and, while estimates on the global numbers of Pentecostal and charismatic Christians vary dramatically, the figure is reliably in the hundreds of millions. This is a diverse and global movement, with Han Chinese and African Independent Churches making up a large portion of the numbers.[7] Even if one agrees with Callum Brown's analysis that the myth of secularisation popularised in the 1950s and 60s is not quite the myth it is often claimed to be,[8] it is still the case that religion plays an important role in many people's lives and remains politically influential both globally and locally, even if this influence is not as strong as it once was.

Religion is clearly a worthy subject of research – but what of conversion? For Rambo and Farhadian, conversion should be studied because its impact 'encompasses religious, political, psychological, social, and cultural domains' and 'has inspired some of the greatest changes to the human condition'.[9] Between 800 and 200 BC, 'through the influence of Platonism, Mahavira, Buddha, King Ashoka, Confucius, Laozi Lao-tzu, Homer, Socrates, Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the recording of the Upanishads, new ideas shaped the world.'[10] Each of these moments was marked by conversion as figures such as Mahavira, Shakyamuni Siddhartha Gautama, Confucius, and King Ashoka left behind old ways and turned to

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[2] Lewis R. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 1.
[3] Henri Gooren, *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation: Tracing Patterns of Change in Faith Practices* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 5–6.
[4] Lewis R. Rambo and Charles E. Farhadian, 'Introduction', in *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, ed. Lewis R. Rambo and Charles E. Farhadian (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 6.
[5] Birgit Meyer, '"Praise the Lord": Popular Cinema an Pentecostalite Style in Ghana's New Public Sphere', *American Ethnologist* 31, no. 1 (2004): 92.
[6] Brad Christerson and Richard Flory, *The Rise of Network Christianity: How Independent Leaders Are Changing the Religious Landscape* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 1–2.
[7] Allan Heaton Anderson, *An Introduction to Pentecostalism: Global Charismatic Christianity*, second edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 3.
[8] Callum G. Brown, *Becoming Atheist: Humanism and the Secular West* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 3–8.
[9] Rambo and Farhadian, 'Introduction', 2.
[10] Rambo and Farhadian, 2.

something new. In the following centuries, conversions have regularly opened the door for new religious ideas, identities and practices – including Saul (first century), the Prophet Muhammed (sixth century), Guru Nanak (fifteenth century), Joseph Smith (nineteenth century), and many more.[11] Rambo and Farhadian conclude that 'the combined influence of religious converts over the centuries has led to massive social and cultural change in the history of the world.'[12]

This global-historical view is but one perspective on conversion. From the perspective of an individual life, an experience of conversion can be just as momentous. T. M. Luhrmann describes the process of conversion within American charismatic churches as a revolution in one's understanding of one's own mind brought about by the discovery of a God who is deeply and personally intimate.[13] Many of the stories of conversions presented in Gooren's *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation* (including conversions to and from Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and NRMs) involve feelings of life-changing experiences and the sense that conversions are experienced by the convert as providing a new direction and meaning to their life.[14] For Gooren, conversion consists in 'a comprehensive personal change of religious worldview and identity'.[15] A person's sense of who they are and how they relate to the world, other people, and the whole of reality can change through conversion, with potentially revolutionary consequences for that individual's beliefs, relationships and behaviour. Further, as Christopher Lamb and M. Darrol Bryant note, religious conversion can be controversial, raising questions of freedom and manipulation, authenticity and self-deception.[16] Conversion is thus deeply significant on both a global-historical and an individual level, and is thus a worthy topic of research.

Methodology

Over the past century, much work in the disciplines of psychology, sociology and anthropology has been carried out in the field of religious conversion and religious experience more generally.[17] These social sciences have brought a variety of methodologies and approaches to inform their understanding of religion and conversion. Luhrmann's study into American charismatic Christians made extensive use of participant observation, in which 'we anthropologists learn, or at least try to learn, from the inside out'. For two years she regularly attended church services, joined a weekly house group, went to church conferences and spent hours interviewing and conversing with church members.[18] As a

[11] Rambo and Farhadian, 3.
[12] Rambo and Farhadian, 3.
[13] T. M. Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God* (New York: Vintage Books, 2012), xv, 40–41.
[14] Gooren, *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation*, 69–113.
[15] Gooren, 3.
[16] M. Darrol Bryant and Christopher Lamb, 'Introduction: Conversion: Contours of Controversy and Commitment in a Plural World', in *Religious Conversion: Contemporary Practices and Controversies*, ed. M. Darrol Bryant and Christopher Lamb (London: Cassell, 1999), 16–17.
[17] For an excellent overview of the major developments in this field throughout the last century, see Gooren, *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation*, 19–42. See also Rambo and Farhadian, 'Introduction', 6–7, 15–16 for a description the development of sociological, psychological and cognitive neuroscience approaches to conversion.
[18] Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back*, xx.

psychological anthropologist she also ran an experiment to test empirically the effect of spiritual practices on an individual's mental processes.[19] Similarly, Susan Harding's study of American fundamentalist Christianity involved over two hundred hours of formal interviews with church members, plus many more attending church services, Bible studies, and so on. By collating many hours of interviews, conversations and field notes from her own participation, she was able to perform linguistic analysis of fundamentalist Christian discourse.[20] The method of collecting accounts and stories from religious practitioners can be traced at least as far back as William James, whose foundational *Varieties of Religious Experience* was based on his collection of a vast quantity of sources – both historical texts and contemporary written accounts which he discovered or had sent to him – describing accounts of religious experiences.[21] The analysis of texts is also a historical method used in Eugene Gallagher's analysis of conversion narratives in the ancient world,[22] as well as Bruce Hindmarsh's work on Evangelical conversion narratives in early modern England.[23] Another paradigm defining study, Lofland & Stark's 1965 'Becoming a World Saver', was 'based on observation of a small millenarian cult, headquartered in Bay City', observation which was then analysed according to the characteristics of those people who were more likely to become converts.[24] More recently, Rambo has developed his model of conversion based on surveying relevant literature, conducting interviews, and undertaking participant observation.[25] Gooren's 2010 study of conversion proceeded by the method of narrative analysis, for which he gathered a large number of personal conversion stories from books, journal articles and internet sources, in order to understand how conversions work as or within an individual's life narrative.[26] Peter Stromberg's psychoanalytical approach to conversion involved the analysis of interviews that had been conducted with converts in order to uncover if and how the conversion experience transformed the convert's life.[27] In her study of religious experience, Ann Taves has sought to bridge historical and ethnographic methods with the natural sciences, drawing methods in from religious studies, anthropology and history, as well as psychology and neuroscience.[28]

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[19] Luhrmann, xx. For details of the experiment, see 193–216.

[20] Susan Friend Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), x–xii.

[21] *Varieties*, 12. As Matthew Bradley notes in his introduction to the Oxford World's Classics edition of the *Varieties*, central to James's method was 'the examination of personal testimony'. Matthew Bradley, 'Introduction', in *Varieties*, xi.

[22] Eugene V. Gallagher, 'Conversion and Community in Late Antiquity', *The Journal of Religion* 73, no. 1 (1993): 1–15.

[23] D. Bruce Hindmarsh, *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative: Spiritual Autobiography in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

[24] John Lofland and Rodney Stark, 'Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective', *American Sociological Review* 30, no. 6 (1965): 862–63.

[25] Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 7.

[26] Gooren, *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation*, 16–17.

[27] Peter G. Stromberg, *Language and Self-Transformation: A Study of the Christian Conversion Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

[28] Ann Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered: A Building-Block Approach to the Study of Religion and Other Special Things* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), xiii–xiv.

Across these various social scientific methodologies, we can identify a number of commonalities. First, these are empirical methodologies. Whether through the use of observation, interview, the collation of sources, or experiment, the social scientific approach uses empirical methods to gather data for analysis. Granted, participant observation will generate a different kind of data to a psychological experiment and these two datasets will be amenable to different kinds of analysis. Nevertheless, both share the belief that, in order to understand religion and/or conversion, it is necessary to observe empirically the lives, stories, behaviours and language of religious people. Second, these methods are analytical. Following the careful description of phenomena or collection of data, researchers analyse their findings to reach conclusions. Such analyses take place both on the individual level, aiming to understand how an individual experiences religious phenomena, and on a more general level, looking for similarities between individuals and groups, sometimes developing more universally applicable models. Third, social scientific methods are non-judgemental. They generally avoid asking the question of God's existence or the veracity or legitimacy of conversion experiences in favour of a careful and unbiased reporting of experiences. For Rambo, the kinds of questions pertaining to a descriptive (rather than normative) approach are: 'What actually happens in the conversion process? What behaviours are changed? What sorts of experiences are elicited in the process?'[29] Further, many social scientific methodologies in religious studies require not just a suspension of the question of God's existence but a degree of empathy and understanding on the part of the researcher. Luhrmann describes the 'anthropological attitude' as seeking 'to understand before we judge'.[30] Similarly, the more experimental methods intend to reduce the effect of the researcher's own assumptions and biases, subjecting the phenomena to experimental testing.

The social scientific methodology is clearly successful and has produced useful and important results. What, therefore, is missing from this kind of research that necessitates a philosophical investigation into conversion? First, a philosophical – and specifically phenomenological – methodology can answer the question of what it feels like to convert. The emphasis in the social sciences tends to be towards causes and models rather than the description and explanation of subjective experience. Even for studies oriented more towards the subjective experiences of individuals, such studies tend to be refracted through the question of *how*: Luhrmann asks *how* American charismatics come to experience God as personally present; Harding asks *how* fundamentalist Christian discourse works.[31] Indeed, following his survey of social scientific literature on conversion, one of Gooren's proposal for future research is the reestablishment of emphasis on subjective experience.[32] The methods of phenomenology enable a deeper analysis of the subjective feeling, the what it is like, of conversion that can often be overlooked in other disciplines.

A second, related question which philosophy allows us to ask: what does it mean to call something conversion? Philosophical reflection can offer conceptual clarification of

[29] Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 6.
[30] Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back*, xxiv.
[31] Luhrmann, xix; Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell*, xii.
[32] Gooren, *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation*, 46.

concepts which can benefit future research – philosophical or social scientific – into the phenomenon. Social science can already do a lot of work here: the kind of empirical study native to the social sciences can offer a detailed and reliable picture of particular human experiences. It is important that concepts such as conversion are based on what is actually experienced by humans if they are to be useful for describing and explaining the phenomena to which they apply. The methodologies of the social sciences can do this in a more systematic way than other approaches. For example, they avoid the potential systematic bias created by relying on famous and often valorised examples of the conversions of influential religious figures – such as those of the Buddha, St Paul or Augustine – which may not be representative of most human experiences. A concept formed through reflection upon famous written accounts from history might be able to shed light on the experience of extraordinary figures (the religious geniuses, as James would call them) but cannot reliably be extrapolated to the lives and experiences of ordinary people. Thus, social science is an important resource for the clarification of concepts to do with subjective human experience. However, this is not the whole story. Describing what someone experiences or what an experience is like is not the same as explaining what something is. What we find in social scientific literature on conversion is a great diversity of experiences. What, if anything, unites these diverse experiences into a single concept we can call conversion? Of course, all concepts are inventions of the researcher – there is nothing beyond the researcher's reflections which explicitly links the experience of a nineteenth-century American man who converts to Methodism after being convicting during a tent rally with a twenty-first-century European woman who converts to Islam because she believes the religion is more respectful towards women than contemporary culture. If we are to regard these experiences as linked, this requires philosophical reflection. For a phenomenon such as conversion, where the application of concepts across history and diverse cultures always risks distorting the phenomena, precision in concept application is important; this is where a philosophical investigation can be fruitful. Out of this source material, we will attempt to refine and clarify the concept of conversion so that we can understand more clearly what it means to call something conversion.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, philosophical research into conversion allows for integration with a more developed philosophical anthropology. How we interpret conversion will be affected by our prior beliefs about philosophical anthropology. What it means to convert, which aspects of conversion we regard as the most important, and how we normatively evaluate conversions will be affected by our prior view of human belief, judgement, and freedom. Equally, a philosophical investigation into conversion will also have implications for our philosophical anthropology. Questions around what it means to believe, what worldviews and identities are and how they interact with one another and other aspects of human experience, how humans make judgements and decisions, and the degree and kind of freedom humans have in determining their beliefs and actions – all of these will be influenced by our research into conversion. This investigation thus exists in a dialectical relationship with pre-existing philosophical anthropology. All of the questions raised here have been answered many times before; these philosophical reflections form the philosophical context within which this investigation into conversion takes place and will

inform the kinds of questions I will ask and how I evaluate the evidence. At the same time, the phenomenon of conversion, in its fecund diversity and complexity, will repeatedly challenge our philosophical presuppositions and motivate further philosophical reflection and investigation. Thus, both conversion studies and philosophical anthropology benefit from this approach: conversion studies is able to become grounded on sophisticated philosophical reflection, while philosophical anthropology finds in conversion a meaningful and deeply influential human experience which will raise new questions, challenge existing assumptions, and drive the pursuit of philosophical anthropology forward. Hence, it is important that we begin with a clear sense of how to understand human phenomena such as belief, worldview, identity, judgement, and freedom; it is equally important that we remain open to modifying these understandings as we progress. The rich phenomenological tradition of the last century has the resources to support this kind of research, offering a sophisticated method of analysing a phenomenon such as conversion and history of reflections upon the human condition which can provide a starting point for our study.

Religious conversion has been the primary site for research into conversion over the last century and thus will be the primary focus of this thesis; however, other significant transitions in worldview or identity elicit many of the same questions we have asked concerning the process of belief-formation and identity and worldview change. Thus, we should expect commonalities between the process of religious conversion and similar non-religious conversion. As Ann Taves notes in her work on religious experience, there is a need to work comparatively – but not just by comparing one religion with another. Rather, 'we need to compare things that people consider religious with similar things that they do not.'[33] The reason for this is that if we are to understand religion as a human phenomenon mediated through human ways of perceiving, believing and knowing, then the ways in which humans perceive, believe and know other phenomena similar to religion will provide insights into religion itself. If the purpose of studying religious conversion is to discover insights for philosophical anthropology, then choosing only to study *religious* conversion risks distorting our findings. Thus, conversions to or from Marxism, environmentalism, atheism, and so on would also fit into the scope of this project and should be considered conversions. While the scope of secondary literature has meant that much of the discussion in this thesis focuses on religious conversion, it is my contention that the processes described herein will apply beyond the strictly religious domain. Indeed, if we are to garner more general conclusions regarding philosophical anthropology from this study, they must.[34] Hence, when this thesis discusses religious conversion, it should be taken broadly to

[33] Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, xiii.

[34] The concept of religion itself has, in recent decades, been challenged by religious studies scholars. Some scholars have suggested that the diversity of experiences that have been called religious by researchers is so great that distilling the essence of what makes something religious is impossible. Others have argued that the concept of religion is a Western invention, which is inapplicable to non-Western cultures, with a history of imperialism and violence. Categorising experiences outside Western Christianity as religion distorts other cultures and subjects them to the dominating force of Western hegemony. Timothy Fitzgerald has argued that the ideological baggage of the concept of religion is so great that it should be jettisoned in the study of global cultures. There is not the space to engage with this problem in the current thesis; however, the issues raised should offer a note of caution against defining the experiences of other cultures too readily. Given the sustained use of the concept of religion by religious studies scholars, philosophers of religion, and other

include these other kinds of conversion, with the caveat that further research is needed into the precise relationship between religious conversion and its so-called non-religious variants. While there will not be the space in this thesis for such a project, my intention is that the findings in this thesis might support future research in this direction.

In a similar way, our study predominantly concerns conversions which occur within religiously pluralist societies. It seems common sense to suggest that a necessary condition for conversion experiences is religious pluralism: this is needed if there are to be viable religious alternatives for an individual to convert into. However, this need not be the case. In his typology of conversions, Rambo includes intensification, 'the revitalized commitment to a faith with which the convert has had previous affiliation'.[35] Thus, the experience of conversion is possible in more religiously hegemonic societies but will more likely consist in changing levels of commitment to the dominant religious system. This reflects Bruce Hindmarsh's comment that in late medieval Europe, Christianity had become so dominant that conversion denoted entry into a religious order.[36] Most of the available evidence on conversion comes from religiously pluralist societies and therefore the conclusions reached in this thesis are most reliably applicable to conversion experiences within such pluralist societies. However, this is not at all to say that the processes involved in conversion cannot operate within religious hegemonies. While extrapolation from pluralist to hegemonic conversion experiences must be done with care, I believe it is possible, albeit with more tentative conclusions.

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academic researchers, I am content to use the term in this thesis. However, I would suggest that the aforementioned dangers arise when the concept of religion is defined too narrowly and diverse cultures are either shoehorned into a narrowly defined Western concept or excluded altogether. A broader concept might risk including phenomena that some researchers would want to exclude from religion (such as humanism, political ideology or affiliation to a sports team); however, I would suggest that we in fact benefit from the inclusion of a wider range of phenomena in our study. The assumption that religious experiences are utterly unlike any other human experiences is unwarranted and I argue that we will understand religion better if we may also study similar religion-like experiences alongside it. For further reading on this debate, see Mark Owen Webb, 'An Eliminativist Theory of Religion', *Sophia* 48, no. 1 (2009): 35–42; Richard King, 'The Copernican Turn in the Study of Religion', *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 25, no. 2 (2013): 137–59; Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Timothy Fitzgerald, 'A Critique of "Religion" as a Cross-Cultural Category', *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 9, no. 2 (1997): 91–110; Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1993); David Chidester, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996); S. N. Balagangadhara, *'The Heathen in His Blindness...': Asia, the West & the Dynamic of Religion* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994); Jonathan Z. Smith, 'Religion, Religions, Religious', in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 269–84; Donald S. Lopez Jr., 'Belief', in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998); Christopher R. Cotter and David G. Robertson, 'Introduction: The World Religions Paradigm in Contemporary Religious Studies', in *After World Religions: Reconstructing Religious Studies*, ed. Christopher R. Cotter and David G. Robertson (London: Routledge, 2016), 1–13; Kevin Schilbrack, *Philosophy and the Study of Religions: A Manifesto* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 74–94.

[35] Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 13.

[36] Hindmarsh, *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative*, 23.

Phenomenology

We have now introduced conversion as an important topic of research and discussed how it is often researched in the social sciences. We have also noted what is missing from this kind of research and indicated the benefits that might be brought to bear by a phenomenological methodology. Now we turn to a discussion of this phenomenological methodology to outline precisely the approach I will take in this thesis. We need to elaborate upon what we mean by a phenomenological methodology since, as Dermot Moran notes, phenomenology does not cohere clearly into one identifiable method but contains a remarkable diversity of approaches, methodologies, emphases and practices.[37] To begin to clarify what we mean by a phenomenological methodology, we can take our lead from David Woodruff Smith, who defines phenomenology as 'the study of consciousness – namely, various forms of conscious experience – as experiences from the first person perspective.'[38] Phenomenology is to do with what it is like to undergo various kinds of conscious experience. This is a good summary of the phenomenological methodology, although some important clarifications are called for. First, and contrary to how phenomenology is sometimes misconstrued by analytic philosophers of mind and social scientists, phenomenology is not the same as introspection. Phenomenology does not proceed 'as if by putting up a phenomenological periscope and looking around the mind, each peering into our own Cartesian theatre'.[39] While introspection might be a useful tool in empirical psychology or philosophy of mind,[40] Husserl insisted that the phenomenological methodology 'is exclusively a matter of studying the general essences of experiences and relations among these, not a matter of empirical study of one's individual experiences'.[41] Phenomenology, then, is a second-order reflection on conscious experience which seeks not to describe various experiences but rather to elucidate the different kinds of conscious experience (perceiving, believing, feeling, thinking, and so on) and how they relate to one another. Smith suggests that there are three stages of phenomenological reflection: 1) we begin with a familiarity with forms of lived experience; 2) on this basis, we can reflect on the structure of these forms of experience; 3) following this, we develop an analysis of their structure.[42] As Smith and Thomasson argue, this does not equate to a denial of the psychological or neuroscientific causes of conscious states; rather, phenomenology proceeds on the assumption that, whatever the cause, the conscious states themselves can be studied.[43] Thus, whatever we decide to be the underlying psychical, psychological or neuroscientific cause of (for example) perception,

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[37] Dermot Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (Oxford: Routledge, 2000), 3.
[38] David Woodruff Smith, 'Phenomenological Methods in Philosophy of Mind', in *Philosophical Methodology: The Armchair or the Laboratory?*, ed. Matthew C. Haug (London: Routledge, 2014), 336.
[39] Smith, 345.
[40] Although not without certain difficulties; see Smith, 344–45; Eric Schwitzgebel, *Perplexities of Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA.: The MIT Press, 2011).
[41] David Woodruff Smith and Amie L. Thomasson, 'Introduction', in *Phenomenology and Philosophy of Mind*, ed. David Woodruff Smith and Amie L. Thomasson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 6; see also *LI*, 183—4.
[42] Smith, 'Phenomenological Methods in Philosophy of Mind', 346.
[43] Smith and Thomasson, 'Introduction', 6. See also John Bickle and Ralph Ellis, 'Phenomenology and Cortical Microstimulation', in *Phenomenology and Philosophy of Mind*, ed. David Woodruff Smith and Amie L. Thomasson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 152.

phenomenology can help us to answer what it means for a particular mental state to be called perception and how states of perception relate to each other and to other kinds of mental state, such as belief, emotion, and so on.

This is what I mean when I propose a phenomenology of conversion. While the question of how it feels or what it is like to convert is important, this is but one step in the phenomenological method. As Smith suggests, following a description of this form of experience, a phenomenology of conversion will reflect on the structure of such experiences, looking for commonalities and differences across various reports of conversions, and then analyse the structure of such experiences and how they relate to the broader structure of human experience. Thus, the kinds of questions my thesis seeks to answer include what it means to call an experience a conversion, what must be the case for us to describe an experience as conversion, and how experiences of conversion relate to and interact with the rest of an individual's mental experiences or other kinds of mental content.

So far we have outlined the kinds of questions that phenomenology seeks to answer and how this methodology might relate to a study of conversion. However, we are yet to say a great deal about what the phenomenological methodology actually consists in, short of that it is not equated with mere introspection. An important part of the phenomenological method is what Edmund Husserl described as the *epoché*, reduction, or bracketing of the natural attitude.[44] As Smith and Smith note, there are various ways of interpreting Husserl's conception of *epoché*, which range from *epoché* as the basis for an ultra-idealist metaphysics through to *epoché* as a mere shift of attention within a common-sense realism.[45] The intention of this thesis is not to achieve a full or correct interpretation of Husserl but rather to use a phenomenological methodology to understand conversion; thus, if my conception of *epoché* differs from Husserl's (or Merleau-Ponty's), this is no concern, so long as a clear methodology can be articulated and defended. For the purposes of this thesis, I will understand the *epoché* as primarily a redirection of attention. Smith and Thomasson describe the point of the reduction as being 'to redirect our focus away from the entire empirical, natural world, including our real psychological experiences, and to refocus our study of the mind on the essences of conscious experiences of various kinds, including especially their intentionality.' On their interpretation, the phenomenological reduction involves two steps: a reductive step and a generalising step. The reductive step involves a shift of focus away from experience as disclosing a world of objects and towards experience *qua* experience. It is 'not an ontological reduction, but rather a methodological narrowing of focus'. The generalising step involves an abstraction from a particular experience (this visual experience of a swooping bird) to an examination of the general types of experiences (the character of visual experience in general).[46]

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[44] *Ideas*, §§31-2.

[45] Barry Smith and David Woodruff Smith, 'Introduction', in *The Cambridge Companion to Husserl*, ed. Barry Smith and David Woodruff Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 11–14.

[46] Smith and Thomasson, 'Introduction', 9. See also Smith, 'Phenomenological Methods in Philosophy of Mind', 348, the source of the bird example.

Matthew Ratcliffe similarly describes the *epoché* as 'a shift in perspective' which facilitates 'a kind of stance or standpoint through which aspects of experience that are more usually overlooked are explicitly reflected on and studied'. Thus, if I want to reflect upon my visual experience of a cup as a phenomenological achievement, I do not reject my acceptance that the cup actually exists but rather 'I preserve the sense of conviction that is part of the experience but detach myself from it so as to study its nature.'[47] To move beyond individual experiences, a 'complete *epoché*' totally suspends the natural attitude, according to which the world within which I experience myself to be located is believed to exist.[48] Thus, the sense that I belong to this world is revealed to be a phenomenological achievement through 'an attitudinal shift through which the structure of experience as a whole is subjected to scrutiny.'[49] Again, this complete *epoché* does not involve sceptical doubt in the existence of the world but rather a shift in attention whereby the commitment to the world's actual existence is noticed as an integral part of the world-experience.[50] Indeed, as Ratcliffe argues, the *epoché* reveals that belief in the world is unlike any other belief and in fact not really a belief at all but rather 'an all-pervasive practical orientation… [which] amounts to a sense of both the world's existence and one's participation in the world'.[51]

Applying the method of *epoché* to conversion means going beyond simply asking what it feels like to convert but rather involves reflection upon and analysis of the structure of conversion experiences. Descriptive accounts of conversion will be necessary components of this analysis but only the first step. By reflecting on the essence and structure of conversion experiences, we will discover both what it means to call an experience a conversion and also how such experiences are related to other mental experiences (such as believing, perceiving, expressing, and intersubjectivity), which are themselves understood and analysed through phenomenology. The shift of attitude enabled by the *epoché* is a particularly useful tool in studying conversion. Studies of religious experience can be particularly susceptible to the intrusion of metaphysical considerations. Even when not intended as such, either psychologism (i.e., reductionism) or theologism can creep in: that is to say, studies of religious experience often (explicitly or implicitly) either suppose that the experiences described are probably untrue,[52] or that God is revealed in the experiences.[53]

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[47] Matthew Ratcliffe, 'Some Husserlian Reflections on the Contents of Experience', in *Philosophical Methodology: The Armchair or the Laboratory?*, ed. Matthew C. Haug (London: Routledge, 2014), 353–78.

[48] For Husserl's comments on the natural attitude, see *Ideas*, §§27-30.

[49] Ratcliffe, 'Some Husserlian Reflections on the Contents of Experience', 357.

[50] Husserl specifically distinguishes his *epoché* from Descartes's sceptical method on these grounds:

> If I do this, as I am fully free to do, I do *not* then *deny* this "world", as though I were a sophist, *I do not doubt that it is there* as though I were a sceptic; but I use the "phenomenological" ἐποχή, which *completely bars me from using any judgement* ***that*** *concerns spatio-temporal existence (Dasein)*.
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> *Ideas*, §59 (emphasis original).

[51] Ratcliffe, 'Some Husserlian Reflections on the Contents of Experience', 358.

[52] Such as Daniel Dennett, for whom the explanation of religious belief and conversion by way of memetics is *ipso facto* evidence for the falsity of religious claims. Daniel C. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (London: Penguin, 2007), 185–86.

[53] Jean-Luc Marion's work exemplifies the tendency to theologise analyses of religious experience and I agree with Dominique Janicaud's criticism of the theological turn in French phenomenology. Similarly, John Cottingham reaches theological conclusions in his study of religious perception and I agree with Mikel Burley's

The phenomenological reduction allows these questions to be suspended without being ignored. Thus, this thesis treats conversion as a human subjectively experienced phenomenon. This means that theological questions about what might be revealed about the divine through conversion experiences are bracketed. I contend that, even for the theologian who is ultimately interested in such questions, conversion can be understood as something that happens to human beings within their subjectively experienced lives; it has a particular structure and feel, and relates in specific ways to other subjective experiences. Understanding the human pole of this divine-human encounter will influence further theological reflections.[54] Therefore, a phenomenological analysis of conversion as a subjective human experience which brackets questions of theology will be a valuable resource for the theologian. This thesis will also bracket questions about the empirical causes of conversion. This is not to say that we do not care about the ways in which neurology, physiology, psychology or society might cause or influence conversion, or that we regard conversions as some *sui generis* experience that cannot be further examined. Indeed, this thesis will examine in detail a number of empirically observable factors which can contribute to conversion. However, this thesis treats these factors as interesting only insofar as what they can reveal about the conversion experience. In this context, to bracket the empirical causes of conversion means to put out of play any questions about what the empirical causes of conversion might say about its legitimacy or authenticity. Thus, this thesis is concerned with understanding what the experience of conversion is like and how this experience interacts with human subjectivity and embodiment more generally, and puts out of play any questions concerning the origins of conversion experiences insofar as they might inform a normative evaluation – positive or negative – of conversion.[55]

Before moving on, we must first deal with a potential objection to my use of the *epoché* in this thesis. I will later introduce Maurice Merleau-Ponty as a key philosophical influence in this thesis; however, Merleau-Ponty is often presented as being critical of Husserl's *epoché*. Many commentators have noted Merleau-Ponty's apparent assertion that the *epoché* is impossible or incompletable.[56] This view is based largely on comments Merleau-Ponty

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objection to Cottingham's conflation of descriptive and normative registers. See Jean-Luc Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002); Dominique Janicaud, 'The Theological Turn of French Phenomenology', in *Phenomenology and the 'Theological Turn'*, by Dominique Janicaud et al., trans. Bernard G. Prusak (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 16–103; John Cottingham, *The Spiritual Dimension: Religion, Philosophy and Human Value* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Mikel Burley, 'Prioritizing Practice in the Study of Religion: Normative and Descriptive Orientations', *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 79, no. 4 (2018): 437–50.

[54] Luhrmann, who remains strictly neutral on theological questions indicates the relevance of a non-theological approach to theologians thus: 'Yet I believe that if God speaks, God's voice is heard through human minds constrained by their biology and shaped by their social community, and I believe that as a psychologically trained anthropologist, I can say something about those constraints and their social shaping.' Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back*, xxiv.

[55] This mirrors Smith and Thomasson's comments on the place of phenomenology in the philosophy of mind: 'whatever gives rise to our conscious experience, the essences of our experiences of various types are there to be studied in their own right'. Smith and Thomasson, 'Introduction', 6.

[56] See, for example, Eric Matthews, *The Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty* (Chesham: Acumen, 2002), 34; Stephen Priest, *Merleau-Ponty* (London: Routledge, 1998), 24; Gary Brent Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty: A Search for the Limits of Consciousness* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1981), 194–95; and M. C. Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, second edition (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1997), 71–72.

makes in the preface to his *Phenomenology of Perception* which can be read as a critique of Husserlian phenomenology.

> The most important lesson of the reduction is the impossibility of a complete reduction. This is why Husserl always wonders anew about the possibility of the reduction. If we were absolute spirit, the reduction would not be problematic. But since, on the contrary, we are in and toward the world, and since even our reflections take place in the temporal flow that they are attempting to capture (since they *sich einströmen*, as Husserl says), there is no thought that encompasses all of our thought.[57]

While this interpretation of Merleau-Ponty is common, it is not accurate. Joel Smith has argued that Merleau-Ponty's commitment to *être au monde*, referenced in the above passage, does not imply a rejection of the *epoché* as is often supposed. Being in the world as it is described by Merleau-Ponty (and also the *Lebenswelt* in Husserl)[58] is not a judgement but a non-cognitive and pre-objective attitude or orientation; while the *epoché* will suspend our judgements about the factual or objective existence of the world, the phenomenological world – that in which we perceive ourselves to be immersed – survives the *epoché*.[59] Smith argues that Merleau-Ponty's contention with Husserl concerns not the possibility of the phenomenological reduction but Husserl's transcendental idealist reading of the *epoché*, according to which a clear and complete understanding of the phenomenological world revealed by the *epoché* is possible. On Smith's view, such a move is incompatible with Merleau-Ponty's insistence on the 'ambiguity, indeterminacy and opacity' of the world, which cannot be grasped fully in one go.[60] Hence, to say that the reduction cannot be completed is not equivalent to opposing it on methodological grounds but rather another way of stating the limited grasp we have of the world and the phenomenological importance of standing in wonder before it.[61] In a similar vein, Sara Heinämaa has argued that Merleau-Ponty does not reject the *epoché* but characterises it as an ongoing (and hence incompletable) affective event. Because on Merleau-Ponty's view perception is fundamentally affective – that is, evaluative judgements are intrinsic to perception and not added later – a suspension of the natural attitude must suspend these affective attitudes as well as our theoretical beliefs.[62] Merleau-Ponty connects the *epoché* to the passion of wonder, a passion which precedes evaluation and interrupts our habitual ways of seeing the world, making 'possible a change of direction'.[63] If, through the *epoché*, we are to redirect our attention towards the often taken-for-granted features and structures of our experience, as David Woodruff Smith, Thomasson and Ratcliffe all suggest, then the passion

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[57] *PhP*, lxxvii–lxxviii.
[58] *Crisis*, 111–114.
[59] Joel Smith, 'Merleau-Ponty and the Phenomenological Reduction', *Inquiry* 48, no. 6 (2005): 559–60.
[60] Smith, 561–62.
[61] *PhP*, lxxvii, lxxxv.
[62] Sara Heinämaa, 'From Decisions to Passions: Merleau-Ponty's Interpretation of Husserl's Reduction', in *Merleau-Ponty's Reading of Husserl*, ed. Ted Toadvine and Lester Embree (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 2002), 132–35.
[63] Heinämaa, 141.

of wonder will interrupt our common-sense assumptions and direct our attention to that which is normally missed.

So far we have been able to articulate more clearly what we mean by a phenomenological methodology and discussed the place of the *epoché* in phenomenology. A potential problem which remains if we are to adopt a phenomenological approach to studying conversion is that it appears that it is not possible to do a phenomenology of someone else's experience. Many commentators on phenomenological methodology suggest that phenomenological analysis proceeds on the basis of familiarity with first-person subjective experiences of consciousness;[64] a phenomenology of perception is possible because most people know what it is like to perceive and so can analyse its form and structure on the basis of this familiarity. Indeed, it is important to guard against the assumption that any proposed phenomenology of religious experience would be easy or suppose that its possibility is guaranteed. If, as has often been suggested, religious experiences are ineffable, then they are not good candidates for phenomenological reflection. As we have discussed, phenomenology involves more than just a feeling or description of what something is like; phenomenology proceeds by a process of reflection and analysis on the features, structure and relations of various conscious experiences. If a religious experience is ineffable then it is not apparent that someone could perform a phenomenological analysis of even their own religious experiences – never mind the troubles that would emerge in trying to understand the experiences of another. The problem that plagues the theological phenomenology of philosophers such as Jean-Luc Marion is that the experiences analysed are described as private and personal, not shared by their non-religious counterparts. This makes phenomenology as a communal enterprise difficult and can lead to misunderstandings on both sides. Our research must proceed on the assumption that religious and conversion experiences can be described and communicated at least to some extent, otherwise our phenomenological project will never get off the ground. While this is an assumption on our part, it is an assumption supported by the vast array of ethnographic literature on religious or conversion experiences.[65]

Nevertheless, we recognise that this is a real problem for any attempted phenomenology of conversion. Even if we reject the claim that conversion experiences cannot be described in language, conversion is not a common or universal experience, of a kind with perception. A phenomenology of conversion, if it is to be successful, cannot without alteration adopt the methods of figures such as Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre or Merleau-Ponty, whose phenomenological analyses concerned experiences that could more clearly be described as universal, such as perception, time-consciousness, shame, and so on. Before suggesting a more detailed way forward, the general approach I wish to pursue is summarised by David Woodruff Smith: 'we must practice *empathy* with the position of the subject of the form of experience under phenomenological analysis.'[66] Some conversion researchers will have

[64] Smith, 'Phenomenological Methods in Philosophy of Mind', 346; Ratcliffe, 'Some Husserlian Reflections on the Contents of Experience', 357–58; Smith and Thomasson, 'Introduction', 6–7.
[65] See, for example, *Varieties*; Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell*; Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*; Gooren, *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation*; Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back*.
[66] Smith, 'Phenomenological Methods in Philosophy of Mind', 347.

experienced conversion themselves; others will not have done so. To make phenomenological analysis possible and relevant across the spectrum of religious beliefs and experiences held by researchers, we must practice empathy, identifying shared experiences or parallels based on our shared humanity and similar physiology. While we must be careful not to assume that we can easily understand how another person's experience feels, we should also be careful not to overstate our differences. With care and attention, phenomenology of religious experiences such as conversion can proceed along a path which draws parallels and finds analogies with more common experiences, while remaining guided by the descriptions of converts.

A potential way forward can be found in the work of Matthew Ratcliffe. Ratcliffe uses a phenomenological methodology to analyse unusual or uncommon experiences. Most notably, Ratcliffe has adopted this approach to researching various psychiatric conditions and,[67] more recently, the experience of grief.[68] In different ways, Ratcliffe interprets both psychiatric conditions and experiences of grief in terms of world disturbance of destruction. In both of these cases, Ratcliffe takes phenomenological analyses of a universal feature of human experience – that of being in and having a world – and reflects upon what happens and what it is like when this is somehow disturbed. In this way, phenomenological reflection on common, everyday human experiences can offer insights into a phenomenology of less common, more unusual experiences. Ratcliffe uses written accounts psychiatric illness or grief which he then analyses according to phenomenological categories in order to understand how these unusual experiences are similar to and deviate from ordinary human subjective experience. I propose a similar approach can help us understand conversion. In order to understand how an individual's beliefs, worldview and identity can change through conversion, and what this feels like, it will first be necessary to understand how belief, worldview and identity formation works and is experienced ordinarily in human beings. Then, employing empirical research into conversion from the social sciences, we can analyse how these processes relate specifically to the experience of conversion.

As we will discuss in chapter one, the conception of conversion with which this thesis will work is not of a one-off event but rather a long-term process which can span over multiple years. Accordingly, our method will diverge from a more classical phenomenological methodology which can analyse more immediate, individual and universal experiences such as perception (Merleau-Ponty), shame (Sartre) or encounters with others (Levinas). We will discover that not only is a conversion not a universal experience but it is also not even one single experience. Without wishing to pre-empt the next chapter, it is important to draw attention to this feature of conversion experiences at this stage since it has methodological implications. If a conversion experience is conceived of as a single short-lived event, then

[67] Matthew Ratcliffe, *Feelings of Being: Phenomenology, Psychiatry and the Sense of Reality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Ratcliffe, 'Some Husserlian Reflections on the Contents of Experience'; Matthew Ratcliffe, *Real Hallucinations: Psychiatric Illness, Intentionality, and the Interpersonal World* (Cambridge, MA.: The MIT Press, 2017).

[68] Matthew Ratcliffe, 'Towards a Phenomenology of Grief: Insights from Merleau-Ponty', *European Journal of Philosophy* online (2019): 1–13; Matthew Ratcliffe, 'Sensed Presence Without Sensory Qualities: A Phenomenological Study of Bereavement Hallucinations', *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 2020.

there appears to be more scope to isolate and then phenomenologically analyse the experience; if, on the other hand, conversion is found to be a more complex, multifaceted and long-term process, there will not be a single and discrete experience available for analysis. Therefore, a phenomenological analysis of conversion as attempted by this thesis will not be a phenomenology of a single conversion experience but rather multiple analyses of the various components and aspects which make up conversion, their essential features, how they are structured, and how they relate to one another and to a convert's wider mental life. Rather than a phenomenology of conversion, therefore, we might suggest that it would be more accurate to speak of phenomenologies of conversion.

Finally, a brief word on the role of social science in a phenomenological analysis of conversion. As we have seen, conversion is not a universal process and many people will never experience conversion. Even those researchers who have experienced conversion cannot from their own singular experience extrapolate an understanding of the diverse array of conversion experiences across times and cultures. Hence, any conversion researcher will rely on some source material (either gathered as part of primary research or located in secondary literature). However, the above comments demonstrate that simply describing source material (or personal experience) is insufficient for a phenomenology of conversion; phenomenology is not just to do with what an experience feels like but involves and analysis of its structure and relations. Additionally, the quality and reliability of source material can vary dramatically and for many sources, phenomenological accuracy is a lower priority than concerns such as proselytisation, encouragement, apologetics, and so on. Social science can give a clearer sense of how conversions are experienced and the extent to which such experiences vary between different people and cultures. Its methodology of data collection, working across diverse cultures and peoples, and attempting to detach research from an individual's personal assumptions and commitments can provide a more reliable sense of what conversion is. We can thus use these findings as more reliable source material for phenomenology and attempt to analyse its structure and relations with other experiences. This can also be integrated with a broader phenomenology of human experience which can take in, for example, belief, perception and expression, thereby enabling us to locate conversion within a wider view of human consciousness.

At the same time, phenomenology can complement sociological, psychological and anthropological studies into conversion. Phenomenology is concerned with how human subjects experience the world. By bracketing metaphysical questions, phenomenology directs its attention towards subjective experience, the ways in which human subjects perceive and experience the world. Hence, the world that is analysed in the perceptual and experiential world; the object of phenomenological study is human perception. Phenomenology is thus an anthropological discipline: its purview is human experience and it has the resources to help explain who we are and how we experience our world. Its concerns are thus related to the concerns of the social sciences. Through investigations into the human mind, structures of human relationships, or the varieties of human cultures, the social sciences seek to understand the human experience, human formulations of meaning, and drivers of human behaviour. Phenomenology offers another angle on these same questions: whereas psychology, sociology and anthropology examine publicly available

evidence (psychological experiments, demographic data, cultural artefacts, and so on), phenomenology aims to analyse the publicly inaccessible subjective experiences of human beings. This endeavour is possible because phenomenological researchers are themselves human beings, sharing a similar physiology with other humans and capable of empathetic imagination. The social sciences are often described as empirical, in contrast to philosophy which is more abstract or analytical. While there is some merit to this distinction – the social sciences tend to deal with a kind of evidence that is more easily observable and public – it is not accurate to call philosophy (or at least phenomenology) non-empirical. Phenomenology does engage in a kind of empiricism, through the observation and analysis of perceptual evidence, either one's own or that of another. While this kind of phenomenological evidence might appear too vague or abstract to the social scientist, the experiences which phenomenology attempts to uncover are real experiences. The subjects who are studied by the social sciences have subjective experiences which feel a certain way to them and interact with other experiences they have had. A study of a phenomenon such as conversion which does not consider the phenomenology of the conversion experience will be incomplete. While a social scientist might maintain that the phenomenological experience is simply inaccessible to public discourse, the phenomenological method at least offers the possibility that we might be able to comprehend – or at least begin to understand – what it is like to be the people that social science seeks to understand.

Outline of thesis

This thesis consists of five chapters: two of which expand on some of the issues about conversion and philosophy raised in this introduction, then three which deal with the themes of embodiment, expression, and community as influences in the conversion process. Chapter one expands the discussion of conversion in order clearly to define the object of research. It begins by tracing the history of the term, finding its origins to be in Christian thought, with the contemporary notion of a conversion experience as a personal, sudden and dramatic event emerging after the sixteenth-century Reformation and taking root in the Great Awakenings of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century North America. The chapter then examines James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* as a *locus classicus* for conversion studies which adopts this conception of conversions as personal, sudden and dramatic events. James's study is found to be overly individualistic and wedded to a dualistic view of the human mind, with undue emphasis on the sudden event; thus an alternative account of conversion is sought. A review of social scientific literature on conversion – with Gooren's *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation* as a guide – allows a more thorough examination of the experience of conversion and we find that conversion is best understood as a process rather than an event which can unfold over a lifetime. This conversion careers approach runs the risk of turning any study of conversion into a study of an entire human lifespan; therefore, a more limited definition of conversion is arrived at which, though not lasting a lifetime, still encompasses several years of a convert's life. It is thus short enough to be a useful and discrete object of study yet long enough to allow the inclusion of longer-term processes and effects which might be missed were we to restrict our focus too narrowly on one moment of conversion.

Given this conception of conversion, the need arises for a philosophical approach which can encompass the broad life experience of a convert, including their bodily interaction with religion and the world. Chapter two thus introduces the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty as a useful resource for our research. It first examines Merleau-Ponty's own views on religion, finding a disillusioned former Catholic who resists theological explanations while remaining open to the experience of wonder and mystery in the face of the world. Thus, while Merleau-Ponty's work should not be read as crypto-theology (as some commentators are wont to do), he provides valuable resources for understanding the human religious response to the world. The rest of the chapter thus outlines some of the main themes in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy which will help to resource our investigation into conversion.

After we have set the scene for our study in chapters one and two, chapter three acts as a pivot, transitioning from contextualisation to constructive philosophical reflection on conversion. While the final two chapters deal with specific elements of conversion – language, ritual and community belonging – in detail, chapter three presents embodiment as a lens through which the rest of the thesis should be understood. Hence, in this chapter, we introduce Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of embodiment, along with more recent applications of his philosophy within cognitive science and an integration of this with Merleau-Ponty's later ontological thinking. While specific conclusions concerning conversion are not yet reached, chapter three is essential in outlining the belief-forming context within which conversions take place. Further, Merleau-Ponty's ontology, especially when combined with recent cognitive science, allows us to move beyond a simple conception of the body influencing the mind and recognise the deep interconnectedness of mind and body in the human being; later on, this conception will be important for analysing how we understand the nature of freedom in the conversion process.

As we move into the final two chapters of the thesis, we will explore in greater detail the effects of language, ritual and community belonging on conversion. These developments should be understood as an elucidation of certain important features of embodiment, the effects of which were presented in more general terms in chapter three. Chapter four, then, concerns the role of expression in conversion. This chapter takes a wide view of expression and explores Merleau-Ponty's writings on behaviour, painting, speech, and language. This chapter argues that, first, expression is a creative act through which thought is accomplished, rather than being a reflection of pre-existing thought; and second, that expression takes place within the context of an already existing language and history, to which speech stands in a dialectic relationship which it both influences and is influenced by. We will also add to Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of language a Wittgensteinian praxeology, correcting Merleau-Ponty's creative bias. We will thus see the influence of expression – where expression includes speech, ritual, clothing, gesture, and so on – in the process of conversion as something which works affectively in the body to accomplish thought and develop new beliefs. The chapter finishes with a discussion of the social aspect of expression and the affectivity of sociality, a theme which is then taken up in the final chapter.

The argument of chapter five is that communities influence human beings affectively and thus can impact conversion. It is broadly split into two sections concerning first ritual and

then the affective need to belong. The section on ritual uses the thought of Merleau-Ponty, Matthew Ratcliffe, and Samuel Todes to explain the affective efficacy of ritual on human behaviour; the section on the affective need to belong engages with affect theory (and in particular Donovan Schaefer's *Religious Affects*) to argue that community belonging is a basic affective driver of human behaviour. Both ritual and the affective need to belong can thus be seen as influential aspects of the conversion process; the chapter concludes by discussing the tension which exists between affect theory and biological reductionism, making some tentative remarks concerning the notion of freedom which will be picked up in the conclusion.

As the thesis reaches its conclusion, we will review what original contributions this research has made to our understanding of conversion. The first contribution is to establish a clear and accurate concept of conversion which stands up to academic scrutiny. This is achieved in two ways. Firstly, by restoring the emphasis on the subjective experience of conversion through the application of the phenomenological method. James's insight was that subjective religious experience is important and can tell us something about religion. In particular, we learn through James that religion is something which is felt by its adherents and that this feeling is an essential aspect of religion. In James we find the resources to overcome any tendency we may encounter to interpret religion as essentially a matter of theologies, institutions, or moral codes.[69] However, James overextended this insight, assuming that subjective religious feeling is the *only* interesting thing about religion, capable of being separated from religious institutions. What we will discover is that feelings and institutions are intimately entwined: subjective feelings give rise to the establishment of institutions, while institutions can engender new religious feelings in others. The phenomenological emphasis on the structures of and relations between conscious experiences enables us to place the Jamesian emphasis on subjective experience within a wider appreciation of religion as an embodied, affective, and social phenomenon. Secondly, this thesis offers a corrective to the dominant stereotype, established by through the influence of North American Protestantism, that conversions are primarily one-off, dramatic events. Instead, this thesis develops a view of conversion as a complex embodied socially situated phenomenon which takes place over a period of months or years. This concept of conversion is empirically and historically accurate and thus should be the basis for future philosophical reflection on conversion.

Thus, the second contribution we will make is a recognition and analysis of conversion as an embodied phenomenon. A conception of the human being as fundamentally a material and embodied subject stands front and centre in this thesis: embodiment is not considered as an accidental feature of human experience but rather as essential to human experience and vital for understanding conversion. Embodiment is the context of human belief formation and without a conception of how the body relates to the mind, we cannot understand the process of conversion. In this thesis, the dual categories of body and mind are challenged

[69] Despite being over a century old, this insight of James bears repeating. As Donovan Schaefer demonstrates, the tendency to view religion as non-affective has persisted right into this century. Donovan Schaefer, *Religious Affects: Animality, Evolution, and Power* (Durham, NC.: Duke University Press, 2015), 1–13.

and found to be incapable of successfully explaining the complex relationship of body, feeling, and belief in conversion. Maurice Merleau-Ponty is presented as a highly fruitful resource for philosophical analysis of conversion and, through an examination and critique of Merleau-Ponty's ideas, we will find philosophical resources for comprehending how conversion processes play out in human bodies from which we might be able to normatively evaluate conversions. This thesis does not aim to offer anything conclusive in the way of normative evaluation; however, it is aware of controversies which exist around conversion experiences. For some, conversions are powerful and life-affirming experiences and even evidence of God's existence; for others, conversions appear to be the result of manipulation or self-deception where the frailties of human reason are exploited for the sake of proselytisation. Given the diversity of conversion experiences across global history and culture, it likely that a more nuanced answer is required than this apparent dichotomy suggests; while I do not seek to offer that answer, I hope that this thesis can philosophically resource debates about conversion and stimulate a nuanced discussion which is sensitive both to the positive experiences reported by many converts and the potential dangers of coercion which also exist. One way in which my thesis does this is by identifying the need for a reconceptualisation of freedom and reason within a philosophical framework of embodiment. If human beings are essentially embodied subjects, then old conceptions of freedom and reason as independent of the irrational and emotional body will clearly be inadequate. It is thus insufficient to condemn a religious practice as coercive or irrational simply because it makes use of human emotion and affectivity. This does not mean that I believe that all embodied religious practices are positive and cannot be coercive; my thesis offers a framework for future research into religious practice, as well as more general debates about the nature of human freedom and rationality.

Finally, this thesis contributes a sustained philosophical analysis of the roles of expression, ritual, and the affective need to belong in the process of religious conversion. If embodiment can explain the context within which human belief formation and change occurs, this analysis of expression, ritual and belonging provides a clearer articulation of how religious practices and communities can engage these fundamental aspects of human embodiment and affectivity to precipitate or contribute to changes in an individual's beliefs, worldview and identity. This is augmented by a theory of belief which is not only non-propositional and dispositional but, crucially, affective. This view is developed out of the theories of Ryle, Merleau-Ponty and Wittgenstein and affects how we understand conversion: conversion is primarily felt. Conversion is to do with belief-change but only when belief-change is understood to be less about rational deliberation and more to do with the visceral and affective processes involved in human expression, action and community. It is thus my contention in thesis that conversion can best be understood through a close examination of how expression, ritual and belonging engage with the affective structures of human embodiment to influence human belief formation.

1. What is Conversion?

A Historical Perspective

> Now as [Saul] was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank. […] So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength.
>
> (Acts 9:3–9, 17–19, *New Revised Standard Version*; cf. 22:6–16; 26:12–18)

This experience of Saul of Tarsus, also called Paul, is the paradigm in Christian thinking about conversion.[70] As a colourful and dramatic experience, well known to Western scholars for whom Christianity has been and to some extent continues to be the dominant social context of their research, this story has influenced numerous theories of conversion, particularly in theology, religious studies and psychology. It remains a powerful archetype which continues to turn up globally in a vast array of conversion narratives.[71] Today, especially in a Western context still influenced by modern North American Protestantism, the conversion of St Paul is read as a personal, private affair which emphasises the sudden and dramatic nature of the experience. Of course, to call Paul's experience in Acts 9 a

[70] The status of Paul's experience on the road to Damascus has been hotly contested within New Testament scholarship. In 1954, Johannes Munck challenged the interpretation which saw Paul as making a decisive break with Christianity and argued that Paul regarded his Christianity as contiguous with Judaism; the Damascus experience is accordingly interpreted not as a conversion from one religion to another but as a prophetic call, akin to the Hebrew Prophets of earlier centuries. This call interpretation was supported by Krister Stendahl and, more recently, J. Albert Harrill. On the other side of the debate is Alan F. Segal, *inter alia*, who maintains that Paul's Christianity was a much more decisive break with his former Judaism, and so Paul is properly called a convert. Johannes Munck, *Paul and the Salvation of Mankind* (London: SCM Press, 1959); Krister Stendahl, 'The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West', *The Harvard Theological Review* 56, no. 3 (1963): 199–215; J. Albert Harrill, *Paul the Apostle: His Life and Legacy in Their Roman Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Alan F. Segal, *Paul the Convert: The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990). For an overview of the contours of this debate, see Paula Fredriksen, 'Paul the "Convert"?', in *The Oxford Handbook of Pauline Studies*, ed. Matthew V. Novenson and R. Barry Matlock (Online: Oxford University Press, 2014). For our purposes, there is no need to bring this debate to a conclusion: the intention here is only to indicate the dominating force exerted by the notion of a Pauline conversion, regardless of whether this notion can accurately be applied to Paul himself. Nevertheless, I would venture that the debate about Paul's status as a convert could benefit from some conceptual clarification which I hope will be provided in this chapter.

[71] Gooren, *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation*, 10.

completely personal and immediate experience, one must pay attention to some parts of the text more than others. Saul's experience is not over until the intervention of another, Ananias, and this only happens a number of days later. Moreover, the story does not end with this experience; rather, it marks the beginning of a whole new life for Paul. Yet, the notion of a sudden and personal experience has much currency in the contemporary Christian understanding of conversion.

This was not always so. The Latin root of the word, *convertere*, means 'to revolve, turn around' or 'head in a different direction'.[72] The same basic meaning translates the Hebrew *shub* and the Greek *strepho* and *epistrepho*. In the New Testament, the two Greek words most commonly used to refer to conversion are *metamelomai* ('to be anxious, regretful') and *metanoia* ('change of mind'), which add an element of regret and repentance to the concept.[73] The Hebrew *shub* is at the root of *teshubah*, a word connected to the emergence of monotheism in Ancient Israel which referred to a 'change of mind and heart, the way of life and the worship of this *one God above and beyond all other gods* and the entrance into the covenant of Israel with JHWH'.[74] This played on the specific sense of *shub* in Hebrew, meaning to come home or return to the point of departure,[75] and implies the return of Israel from apostasy at least as much as it refers to the missiological conversion of foreign peoples to YHWH.[76] Hence, *teshubah*, 'with strong post-exilic overtones', came to mean both the return of the Jews from exile and their renewed commitment to the one God, YHWH. For non-Jews who wanted to join the community of Israel, *teshubah* came to symbolise the return to the ultimate source of all religion. The Hebrew sense of conversion was thus highly communal. For Jews, it was the return of the community of Israel to its land and God; for non-Jews, it was entry into the people of God, including adopting signs of community membership such as circumcision.[77]

This Hebrew sense of return and its communal overtones are the background to the Greek New Testament words *metanoia* and *epistrophe* and their subsequent Latin translations, *conversio* and *confessio*. *Metanoia* and *epistrophe* signify a turning or return – the rejection of old pagan ways and the beginning of a new life in Christ – as well as entry into a new community, symbolised by the rituals of baptism and participation in the Lord's Supper. This was not just a Christian idea: in Christian, Jewish and pagan texts from late antiquity, conversion is presented as an essentially communal process which is only successful if the

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[72] Frank K. Flinn, 'Conversion: Up from Evangelicalism or the Pentecostal and Charismatic Experience', in *Religious Conversion: Contemporary Practices and Controversies*, ed. Christopher Lamb and M. Darrol Bryant (London: Cassell, 1999), 51.
[73] Flinn, 52.
[74] Anton Houtepen, 'Conversion and the Religious Market: A Theological Perspective', *Exchange* 35, no. 1 (2006): 21, emphasis original.
[75] Houtepen, 21.
[76] Christopher J. H. Wright, 'Implications of Conversion in the Old Testament and the New', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 28, no. 1 (2004): 14.
[77] Houtepen, 'Conversion and the Religious Market', 21. As Wright notes, 'for the resident alien, then, conversion - at least according to the ideals of Israelite law - meant complete *inclusion, participation, and equality* within the living community of God's people' (emphasis original). Wright, 'Implications of Conversion in the Old Testament and the New', 18.

convert changes their life and joins a new religious community.[78] This communal element also characterised the growth of the early church, where not individuals but entire households were baptised and mission involved the widening of the old Jewish community to all peoples. The great conversion narrative of the late Roman Empire is Augustine's *Confessions*, a spiritual autobiography in which Augustine retrospectively recognises God's providence in his journey to Christian faith. For Augustine, conversion is an intimately communal affair: his conversion experience in a garden in Milan comes in the dual context of Augustine reading the narratives of past Christian converts, and living in community with Christian friends who encourage him.[79] Following the conversion of Constantine in 312, Christianity increasingly became the dominant culture so the sense of turning away from one's previous life became less important. Rather, the importance of conversion was in the growth of Christian dominance over other religions and the need to save foreign peoples. Thus, in the fifth and sixth centuries we see the earliest instances of forced conversion to Christianity.[80] By the late medieval period Christendom had become so dominant that the conversion experience from paganism to Christianity of early medieval or classical converts was simply not available. *Conversio* in this period referred to entry into monastic living and, later still, the pursuit of perfect holy living.[81] Thus, throughout the middle ages, *conversio* increasingly came to mean devout and religious living for monks and laity alike – conversion was a lifelong task and lived out in community.[82] Early critics of this system were the Mendicant Orders of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries who, uneasy with so close a link between Christianity and culture at large, appealed for a return to the Apostolic life of Jesus and the early church. The idea of the lifelong conversion of the laity through *imitatio Christi* came to prominence through the influence of figures such as Geert Groote and Thomas à Kempis.[83]

It was not until the Reformation of the sixteenth century that conversion began to be seen as more personal, as the reformers promoted a more personal form of Christianity with the individual less dependent on the Church. With a more personal Christianity came the possibility of more individually focused conversion experience.[84] Even so, among the Reformers, the role of the individual in conversion was disputed. For Luther, conversion was not a one-off event but a 'daily struggle' which continued throughout one's life. For Calvin, however, conversion could not interfere with God's absolute sovereignty and so he stressed the 'sudden experience of grace and salvation from sin by God.'[85]

A still stronger focus on personal conversion developed through the Puritan, Pietist and Methodist movements between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries as the older Reformed churches were perceived to be too wedded to the state, just as the Roman

[78] Gallagher, 'Conversion and Community in Late Antiquity'.
[79] Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Chadwick, Henry, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), bk. VIII.
[80] Houtepen, 'Conversion and the Religious Market', 24.
[81] Hindmarsh, *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative*, 23–24.
[82] Houtepen, 'Conversion and the Religious Market', 25.
[83] Houtepen, 25–26.
[84] Gooren, *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation*, 12.
[85] Houtepen, 'Conversion and the Religious Market', 27.

Catholic Church had been in previous centuries. These movements increasingly stressed the importance of 'personal conversion and heartfelt religion' and held that conversion must be felt and incur the moral renewal of the convert.[86] In particular, the series of religious renewals which occurred in the US, starting in the 1730s, played an important role in shifting the locus of conversion firmly towards the personal, private, and sudden.[87] According to Flinn, the first two of these in particular established key patterns for the modern Christian conversion experience. From the Great Awakening of the 1730s and 40s came the pattern of outpourings of the Holy Spirit and the born-again experience; the Second Awakening of the 1820s and 30s saw the emergence of tent meetings and intense emotional experiences of the Spirit, trends which continued through the nineteenth century and into Billy Graham's Crusades in the twentieth.[88] Throughout this period, personal narratives of conversion gained prominence and became central features of revival meetings.[89]

Another product of the American awakenings was the Pentecostal movement, which took off in the US in the early twentieth century.[90] A preaching event in Los Angeles on 9 April 1906 has often been considered the birthplace of Pentecostalism in the US, when several attendees began speaking in tongues, shouting, and praying for three nights; this became the Azusa Street Mission and catalysed the spread of Pentecostal Christianity in the US. These intense Pentecostal experiences of the Spirit were from the beginning associated with conversion.[91] While Azusa Street is often regarded as the Jerusalem of Pentecostalism among Western Pentecostals, as Allan Anderson notes, it was neither the only nor the first Pentecostal revival in modern history to influence contemporary Christianity.[92] The growth of global Pentecostalism, now the majority form of Protestantism in the Global South and boasting hundreds of millions of adherents worldwide,[93] has further mainstreamed the view of conversion as a dramatic, personal event. Conversion has remained an important concept for Pentecostals since its growth has come predominantly through mission and evangelism,

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[86] Houtepen, 27.

[87] Frank Flinn presents a concise history of four periods of religious renewal in the US: the 1730s and 40s, the 1820s and 30s, the 1880s, and today (i.e., the 1990s, contemporary to publication). Flinn, 'Conversion: Up from Evangelicalism', 62–64.

[88] Flinn, 62–63.

[89] Houtepen, 'Conversion and the Religious Market', 28.

[90] Joel Robbins, 'The Globalization of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33 (2004): 119–20.

[91] Flinn, 'Conversion: Up from Evangelicalism', 66.

[92] In 1904–5, Wales, at least 32,000 converted in a revival among Welsh-speaking miners. South India had known revivals since John Christian Arulappan's ministry in Tamilnadu in 1860; another revival began in North-East India in 1905, possibly influenced by the Welsh revival, and the same year an unconnected revival occurred at a mission in Bombay. Pentecostalism in Korea can be traced back to 1907–8 and a convention in Pyongyang, which itself followed a revival among Methodist missionaries in Wosan in 1903. Anderson, *An Introduction to Pentecostalism*, 36–38, 206–10.

[93] Anderson, 3; Robert W. Hefner, 'Introduction: The Unexpected Modern - Gender, Piety, and Politics in the Global Pentecostal Surge', in *Global Pentecostalism in the 21st Century*, ed. Robert W. Hefner (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 1; Robbins, 'The Globalization of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity', 118.

rather than local or familial affiliation.[94] This reflects the movement's roots in the evangelical faith of the Great Awakening, according to which 'people are not born into the evangelical faith but must "voluntarily" choose it on the basis of powerful conversion experiences (often glossed as being "born again").'[95] The Pentecostal conversion experience is dramatic and emotionally intense;[96] Pentecostal converts often use the Pauline experience as a model both of and for their narration of these experiences.[97] Pentecostal conversions are not strictly one-off events. Flinn describes Pentecostal conversion as a two-phase process: first conversion, involving the convert repenting of their sins, followed by baptism in the Holy Spirit, which involves speaking in tongues, miracles and intense emotional experiences.[98] Anderson also notes the distinction in Pentecostal thinking between the moments of conversion/salvation, sanctification, and Spirit baptism (involving speaking in tongues) – although the precise number and arrangement of these works of grace has been contested throughout Pentecostal history.[99] Nevertheless, these are still understood to be extraordinary, dramatic and transformational events – even if there are two or three rather than one.[100] As Anderson notes, Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity is marked by 'the emphasis on divine encounter and the resulting transformation of life',[101] exalting the dramatic Pauline experience. To the extent that there is a recognition of lifelong conversion in global Pentecostalism, it is understood through the lens of sporadic intense encounters with the Holy Spirit, rather than continuous personal growth, and remains a deeply personal and private experience.[102]

Originally a social and lifelong process, conversion has come to mean for many in Western Europe and North America an individual, sudden and dramatic experience. Having surveyed much of this history, Henri Gooren argues that 'the modern individual concept of conversion in Christianity can be traced back to the Second Awakening in the United States.'[103] While the roots of conversion as a more personal affair lie in the sixteenth-century Reformation, it is only by the early nineteenth century that conversion becomes a primarily individual affair.

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[94] Hefner, 'Introduction: The Unexpected Modern', 27–28; Anderson, *An Introduction to Pentecostalism*, 198–221.

[95] Robbins, 'The Globalization of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity', 119–20.

[96] David Martin, 'Pentecostalism: An Alternative Form of Modernity and Modernization?', in *Global Pentecostalism in the 21st Century*, ed. Robert W. Hefner (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 38; Anderson, *An Introduction to Pentecostalism*, 180; Henri Gooren, 'Conversion Narratives', in *Studying Global Pentecostalism: Theories and Methods*, ed. Allan Anderson et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 100.

[97] Gooren, 'Conversion Narratives', 105.

[98] Flinn, 'Conversion: Up from Evangelicalism', 67.

[99] Anderson, *An Introduction to Pentecostalism*, 180–84. Gooren suggests that early Pentecostalism was still influenced by its Wesleyan heritage and thus operated the threefold distinction of conversion-sanctification-Spirit baptism. Later Pentecostals, less wedded to this Wesleyan heritage, collapsed this into two distinct stages, conversion and Spirit baptism. Gooren, 'Conversion Narratives', 99.

[100] As Meyer comments on Ghanaian Pentecostalism, the conversion or 'born again' experience is regularly described 'as a complete change of the inner person, the culmination of true belief.' Meyer, 'Praise the Lord', 94.

[101] Anderson, *An Introduction to Pentecostalism*, 180.

[102] Virginia Lieson Brereton, *From Sin to Salvation: Stories of Women's Conversions, 1800 to the Present* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 57–58; Gooren, 'Conversion Narratives', 96.

[103] Gooren, *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation*, 13–14.

Gooren highlights the turning point by comparing the comments of Jonathan Edwards and Charles Finney, significant figures in the first and second Awakenings, respectively. For Edwards, conversion is communal and centres around families, with salvation coming to entire households; for Finney, conversion is primarily about the individual, who must be morally transformed and feel this change personally.[104] This was when the shift towards a more dramatic notion of conversions as one-off, often emotionally intense, events began. A more individual notion of conversion allows for a more time-limited notion of the conversion experience and the possibility that one can be converted in an instant, 'in the twinkling of an eye'.[105] The emotional intensity characteristic of the Second Awakening, and the Pentecostal movement in particular, further contribute to a focus on more dramatic and intense experiences, rather than lifelong commitment to a community and way of life.

Conversion as an individual, sudden and dramatic experience is thus a concept derived from a culturally and historically particular form of Christianity. If conversion is to be a useful scholarly concept, Gooren argues, 'it has to be carefully distinguished from its original religious – Christian – context and meanings.'[106] The tendency to read Paul's conversion as an individual and sudden conversion experience is the result of the dominance of this Christian concept of conversion in Western thought. Paul's experience of a seeing a sudden light and hearing a voice can easily be read through the lens of a nineteenth-century revival meeting and so this individualistic interpretation has become influential. This series of American religious revivals was also the context within which one of the earliest and most influential psychologists of religion wrote: William James. The Second Awakening was recent history for James and many of his examples of religious experience come from this context. As we evaluate James's contribution to conversion studies, this historical overview will serve as a useful backdrop.

William James

In the academic study of religious conversion, the historical precedent is dominated by William James.[107] He has become a *locus classicus* in the study of conversion and religious experience, one of the earliest scholars to systematically analyse conversion and religious experience psychologically and philosophically, and by far the most influential of his contemporaries.[108] James was an American psychologist with an interest in religion whose career spanned the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The religious awakenings of recent centuries, along with psychological, philosophical and theological reflections upon them, were familiar to James and the birth of Pentecostalism was for him a current event.[109]

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[104] Gooren, 13. See also Flinn, 'Conversion: Up from Evangelicalism', 53; Houtepen, 'Conversion and the Religious Market', 27–28.
[105] *Varieties*, 171.
[106] Gooren, *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation*, 10.
[107] For an excellent account of the history of religious experience from 1740 to 1902 and the psychological explanations that developed alongside them, see Ann Taves, *Fits, Trances, and Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).
[108] For example, Arthur Darby Nock in 1933 describes conversion as a 'deliberate turning' and a 'great change', and cites James in support of this interpretation. A. D. Nock, *Conversion: The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933), 7.
[109] Taves, *Fits, Trances, and Visions*, 269–91, and *passim*.

James's 1901–1902 Edinburgh Gifford Lectures, published in 1902 as *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, has become a classic text on religious experience and conversion, with importance across the fields of philosophy, theology and psychology. Thus, any work on the philosophy of conversion would be incomplete without reference to James's contribution to the field.

The Once-Born and Twice-Born

James's work on conversion centres on a distinction between the 'once-born' and the 'twice-born'.[110] James combines this dichotomy with his distinction between individuals who are 'healthy-minded' and 'sick souls'. These are best understood as two contrasting religious approaches to evil. The healthy-minded, or once-born, individual does not suffer from the presence of evil and James describes an optimistic and sunny disposition. They do not experience any inner turmoil or disunity but rather feel very much at home in the world; their own sin causes them little distress.[111] In contrast, for the sick soul, life is indelibly marked by evil in the world and one's own sin. James offers examples of individuals who are burdened and tormented by their own sin and the inability of the world to offer any meaning or respite. Long extracts from Leo Tolstoy and John Bunyan describe a world evacuated of any joy or meaning in which life itself is experienced as a burden.[112] Although James suggests that one can convert to once-born or twice-born religion, the main focus of his discussion is the twice-born conversion of sick souls. The narrative returns to Tolstoy and Bunyan and describes their recoveries (in James's language, the reunification of their souls) through a renewed dedication to God.[113] James later defines conversion as the phenomenon by which 'religious ideas, previously peripheral in [one's] consciousness, now take a central place' and 'religious aims form the habitual centre of [one's] energy'.[114] Although varied, these conversion experiences typically involve the transfiguration of the world in the eyes of the convert, such that the world appears renewed and restored with a fresh vitality and meaning.[115]

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[110] *Varieties*, 69.

[111] For James, the Catholic sacrament of confession is the quintessential healthy-minded approach to sin, offering quick and easy absolution without the need for inner turmoil or feelings of depravity. More than anything else, this perhaps reflects what Charles Taylor identifies as James's misunderstanding of Catholicism. *Varieties*, 105; Charles Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 23. See also Wayne Proudfoot, 'Pragmatism and "an Unseen Order" in Varieties', in *William James and a Science of Religions: Reexperiencing The Varieties of Religious Experience*, ed. Wayne Proudfoot (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 41.

[112] *Varieties*, 104–31.

[113] *Varieties*, 146–7.

[114] *Varieties*, 155. As Taves notes, James was not entirely content with the view that new religious ideas came merely from the periphery of consciousness, insisting that religious experiences originated not in the margin of consciousness but *beyond* the margin. While many of his contemporaries struggled to follow James into extra-marginal consciousness, this move allowed James to find greater legitimacy in intense mystical experiences which other psychologists would consider pathological, while also facilitating his later metaphysical move towards panpsychism and mystical philosophy, the germ of which is present in the *Varieties*. Taves, *Fits, Trances, and Visions*, 281–83.

[115] *Varieties*, 121.

Although James insists that conversion can be either sudden and dramatic or a gradual process, he is much more interested in sudden and dramatic conversion events. These he regards as 'the most striking and memorable cases',[116] and are the examples which drive his analysis forwards.[117] As Richard Niebuhr notes, the conversion sequences James works with – from healthy-mindedness, to the sick soul, through a dramatic conversion experience, and into saintliness and mysticism – 'conforms to the ideal progression of evangelical religious experience',[118] a fact which David Hollinger argues results in a work 'deeply Protestant in structure, tone, and implicit theology'.[119] While James suggests that different people have different religious needs, advocating that each adopt the religious life to which they are most suited,[120] he clearly regards twice-born religion as the fuller and more spiritual experience.[121] James argues that the sick souls must be listened to 'if we are to touch the psychology of religion at all seriously',[122] that 'healthy-mindedness is inadequate as a philosophical doctrine',[123] and that individuals who have undergone twice-born conversion are psychologically 'the more complete'.[124] While James touches on the phenomenon of healthy-minded conversion, it is the experiences of the twice-born, primarily interpreted as sudden and dramatic, which drive forward James's argument – and also give the *Varieties* its distinctly Protestant flavour.

One Great Partition

The problems with James's *Varieties* are well documented.[125] We have already noted the strong Protestant framework within which James works. As Charles Taylor has observed, James works with a strongly individualistic anthropology which means he struggles to comprehend Catholicism or any conception of religion to which its social, ritual and institutional aspects are more than incidental.[126] Further, although James makes reference to non-Western traditions (particularly Buddhism and Hinduism), these tend to be brief and

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[116] *Varieties*, 169–70.

[117] As Taves notes, James found value in sudden conversion experiences, in contrast to certain of his contemporaries who preferred soberer and more respectable experiences. Taves suggests that James's position might in part be explained by his desire to accommodate his father's own dramatic conversion experience, along with his own ambiguous but impactful mystical experience. Taves, *Fits, Trances, and Visions*, 270–71.

[118] Richard Niebuhr, 'William James on Religious Experience', in *The Cambridge Companion to William James*, ed. Ruth Anna Putnam (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 225.

[119] David A. Hollinger, '"Damned for God's Glory": William James and the Scientific Understanding of Protestant Culture', in *William James and a Science of Religions: Reexperiencing The Varieties of Religious Experience*, ed. Wayne Proudfoot (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 11.

[120] 'For each man to stay in his own experience, whate'er it be, and for others to tolerate him there, is surely best.' *Varieties*, 370.

[121] As Gooren comments, the Pauline experience was for James 'the supreme example'. Gooren, *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation*, 21.

[122] *Varieties*, 117.

[123] *Varieties*, 130.

[124] *Varieties*, 179.

[125] See, for example, Wayne Proudfoot, ed., *William James and a Science of Religions: Reexperiencing The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); Niebuhr, 'William James on Religious Experience'; Nicholas Lash, *Easter in Ordinary: Reflections on Human Experience and the Knowledge of God* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1986); Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today*.

[126] Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today*, 23–25.

largely uninformed comments which again prioritise the inner, private experiences of these traditions.[127] This distortion tends to present Protestant Christianity as the ideal archetype of religion, with Catholic and other non-Christian traditions presented as overly-concerned with notions of doctrine, community, sacrament and ritual.

While we have no need to critique James's *Varieties* in great detail, there is one point we will raise which is pertinent to our study of conversion. The *Varieties* is built on James's identification of 'one great partition' in religion between the institutional and the personal.[128] On one side of this partition is religious traditions, institutions, rituals, and theology; on the other is 'the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine'.[129] Churches, theologies and rituals 'live secondhand upon tradition', while the original founding geniuses of religious movements had experiences unmediated by rituals or institutions.[130] For James, the value of religion is to be found exclusively in personal feeling. This is why he undertakes his investigation into religious experience, which for him is an essentially personal and private phenomenon, characterised by intense emotion and religious feeling which often serve either to confirm and revitalise someone's faith or to be part of a conversion experience. The entire institutional side of religion – which ranges from theological doctrine through to ritual practices – is nothing more than a series of inessential accessories which contribute nothing to what James regarded as the core of religion. James believed that if we could strip away these accessories we would reach the essential core of religion which could then be studied and understood. Hence, in order to understand what is essential to a religion like Christianity, the life and experiences of figures such as Jesus, George Fox, or John Wesley are far more important than the experiences of a contemporary churchgoer.

However, this faces a methodological problem and makes an unwarranted assumption. Methodologically, the original experiences of historical figures such as Jesus are not accessible to us; even a very charitable approach to the historical reliability of the gospels will not give us access to the phenomenological content of Jesus' own experiences. The unwarranted assumption is that contemporary traditionalised and institutional religion is not meaningful. What may appear from the outside to be a very dry church service may well be replete with spiritual significance to the believer. James chose to focus on the first-hand experiences of religious geniuses because he assumed that religious believers simply imitated the religious experiences of their foundational figures. Studying these second-hand experiences would yield at best just a copy of the essence of religion and likely reflect a diminishment of their religious content. James assumes that the religious experiences of ordinary religious believers are merely second-hand religion, an (often poor) attempt to

[127] For example, James makes brief references to the practices of 'the Vedantists', 'the Hindus' and 'the Buddhists', along with various Muslim traditions, although it is not clear that James had anything more than a passing knowledge of these traditions. Even James himself acknowledges that 'we Christians know little of Sufism, for its secrets are disclosed only to those initiated.' *Varieties*, 306—7. See Taylor, 21–25.
[128] *Varieties*, 31.
[129] *Varieties*, 32.
[130] *Varieties*, 32.

copy the religious experiences of the masters. James equates emotional intensity with spiritual significance; yet, even within James's dichotomy of private and institutional religion, it does not follow that the most intense private experiences must be the most significant.[131]

This highlights the fatal flaw in attempting to separate private personal religion from its social and institutional context. The distinction between what is a personal experience and what is an institutional or ritual act is not clear. Formal or ritualised words are often used as part of a believer's private personal communion with God and the cultivation of internal spiritual dispositions is often ritualised, involving elements such as body posture, the repeating of holy words, or various contemplative techniques.[132] Many of James's own examples belie his dichotomy and involve some form of ritual or community practice – Stephen Bradley, for example, had his religious experience the evening after having attended a Methodist revivalist meeting, with friends and preachers extolling the importance of experiencing the power of the Holy Spirit for true religion.[133] Clearly, even within what is for James a quintessential private religious experience, there are crucial ritual and social elements, without which the experience would not have been possible. As Lash argues, the notion that, by studying religious geniuses, James would be able to find the unmediated essence of religion, overlooks the influence of institutions and society that affect even the most radical religious innovator.

> The pioneer is a *product* of the culture and traditions which he or she refashions, often (admittedly) in dramatic and unexpected ways. Without the other traditions, the cultural and linguistic institutions, of the people of Israel, Jesus could not have had his "personal" experience of the mystery he called Father, in the way that he had it, nor could Paul have had *his* "personal" experience of the mystery of Christ.[134]

All experiences are both second-hand and original. Even if some people's experiences seem more original than others', all personal experience involves a reinterpretation of one's own culture and history. James simultaneously overemphasises the originality of the so-called religious genius and underplays the meaningful personal experiences available to those who subscribe to an already established religion. Hence, it is no surprise that, when he came to analyse conversion, James regarded the dramatic, twice-born experience the path to a truer and more fulfilling spirituality.

As Lash has demonstrated, all this follows from James's inability to exorcise a latent Cartesianism from his thinking, despite James's own belief that he had in fact done so.[135] By distinguishing between personal religion and institutional religion, James relies on a

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[131] Of course, James does recognise this issue to a degree and, when circumscribing his topic, proposes that it is through the more extreme examples of religious experience that the essence of religious experience in general can be most clearly seen, which is the reason they form the basis of his investigation. However, all this does is introduce a bias to his research on the side of the more intense experiences, reliant on the assumption that all religious experiences are alike and vary only in intensity. *Varieties*, 42.
[132] Lash, *Easter in Ordinary*, 54.
[133] *Varieties*, 150–3.
[134] Lash, *Easter in Ordinary*, 57, emphasis original.
[135] Lash, 35–36.

Cartesian view of the person, whereby a person's mental or spiritual self sits inside the body and is that within us which undergoes all of our subjective experiences. The notion of unmediated private experiences is only coherent if the mind is sufficiently separated from the body as to make a purely mental experience possible. On top of this, James draws a severe distinction between reason and feeling, whereby feelings are conceived of as private and internal, while thoughts are public and communicable.[136] James focused on the private experiences of individuals because he believed this offered the most direct access to the spiritual experiences of the religious genius. The world of public and institutional religion is the world of thought and reasons, and thus the private feelings of the religious genius will inevitably be lost. Of course, this also implies that the private feelings of individuals cannot be communicated through the documents on which James relies. If private feeling really is private and incommunicable then scholarly study of religious experience is hopeless; if communication is possible, then we should not be so quick to dismiss the public, social and institutional side of religion.

Conversion in the Twenty-First Century

Defining Conversion

Our brief history of the concept of conversion reveals a *historically* fluid term which appears to mean different things at different times and in different places. This culminated with the religious revivals in the US in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries which prompted a shift towards a private, personal conception of conversion, coloured by the sudden and emotionally intense experiences of the Second Awakening and later Pentecostal movement. William James, often regarded as a foundational figure in conversion studies, wrote with this context as recent history and produced a model of conversion heavily influenced by the notion of immediate and private conversion experiences. The dominance of James's *Varieties*, coupled with the privileged position of Protestant Christian culture in Western universities, has given prominence to this conception of conversion – at least in the West.[137] Yet, as we have seen, the dramatic individualistic conception of conversion is not the only one available and emerges as a product of its time. Amid this historical fluidity, it is thus important for our philosophical study that we clarify precisely what we mean by conversion. To do this we will be informed by Henri Gooren's 2010 study of conversion.

Gooren studies religious conversion as a social scientist, seeking to understand what conversion is and how it fits into, affects, and is affected by the lives of individuals and communities. While the purpose of this thesis is philosophical, Gooren's work can help us to clarify precisely what our object of study will be. Gooren surveys the major twentieth-century literature on conversion, discussing thirteen theories from James (1902) to Rodney Stark & Roger Finke (2000).[138] For our purposes, it will not be necessary to recapitulate his

[136] Lash, 60–64.
[137] Gooren has also identified an empirical limitation in contemporary conversion studies, noting that the majority of conversion studies are based on research into Christianity and NRMs. Gooren, *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation*, 41.
[138] Gooren, 19–40.

literature review but rather highlight some key insights Gooren finds in the literature to fill in a description of what we understand by conversion.

The first insight we can take from Gooren is that the sudden dramatic experience is not essential to religious conversion. Such events offer only a very limited window on the phenomenon of conversion which should rather be understood as a long-term, dynamic process. This position was set out extensively by Lewis Rambo in 1993, who proposed a seven-stage model of conversion: context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment, and consequences. This model is not strictly sequential but rather a complex, multifaceted process through which converts can move forwards and backwards.[139] The context stage acknowledges that conversions do not happen in a vacuum but occur within the context of a person's life and thus rooted in and influenced by their social, religious and cultural background. Rambo also expects that the consequences of a conversion will continue to affect a convert long after their conversion experience, commenting that 'people who convert and remain the same are not really on a spiritual path of transformation'.[140] A process-oriented model such as Rambo's allows us to recognise the complex of personal and interpersonal factors which influence conversion, and its open-endedness recognises that conversions have long-term consequences for a person's life. While largely complimentary of Rambo's process model, Gooren suggests that his crisis stage, which 'owes a huge debt to William James',[141] is not supported by empirical evidence.[142] The notion that conversions must be the result of acute personal tension or crisis is attractive probably because James has made it common currency; however, this appears to be more the result of the pathologising tendency which Gooren identifies in psychological studies of conversion than something which is borne out by evidence. Despite this, a process orientation appears to be superior to an event-based approach, even if the crisis aspect of Rambo's process turns out not to be the necessary element he thought it was.

Scholarship in the 1990s often went as far as to argue that the one-off conversion event is not only inessential to conversion but in fact a retroactive narrative reconstruction. For example, Peter Stromberg, who adopts a suspicious hermeneutic towards the phenomenon of Christian conversion experiences, concedes that conversion is effective in transforming the life of a believer but argues that this transformational efficacy lies in the convert's ability to construct and maintain new identities through the telling and retelling of a conversion narrative.[143] Eugene Gallagher similarly argues that all conversion narratives are reconstructions, leaving it impossible to access any original event that might have been experienced by the convert and casting doubt on the existence of any original event at all. Narratives of conversion, Gallagher argues, 'rather than reflections of "raw reality", become

[139] Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 16–18. John Lofland & Rodney Stark also offer a process-oriented model of conversion but their model is more strictly sequential. Lofland & Stark describe their seven stages as a 'funnel', with the conditions of each stage more restrictive than the last. Lofland and Stark, 'Becoming a World-Saver'.
[140] Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 162–63.
[141] Gooren, *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation*, 39.
[142] Gooren, 41.
[143] Stromberg, *Language and Self-Transformation*, 29–30.

constructions of it'.[144] This mirrors Robert Sharf's remarks that there is no 'originary event' behind reports of religious experience, and that it is a mistake to assume that such reports refer to any determinable phenomenal event.[145] This certainly takes the argument too far: to say that there is *no* subjective event behind a conversion experience and that the entire thing is retroactive narrative reconstruction is to fall into the kind of linguistic reductionism which Donovan Schaefer warns against.[146] Even if a degree of reconstruction occurs during narrativisation, conversion narratives are narratives of some subjective experience which provides the material for the narrative reconstruction. However, this does suggest that the one-off conversion event may be far less important than we thought. We should perhaps expect that traditions which put a greater emphasis on dramatic conversion experiences, such as those traditions which emerged out of the series of religious awakenings in eighteenth and nineteenth century North America, would find their converts emphasising dramatic experiences in their narratives.

If we recognise that the sudden dramatic conversion experience is not essential to conversion then we will also reduce the focus on the individual, which is also inherited from James. Historically, conversion has been regarded as an inherently social phenomenon, the individual focus being very much an eighteenth-century Protestant invention. This goes hand in hand with a focus on the dramatic conversion experience: these dramatic experiences are inherently individualistic and studying them as the key moment of conversion inevitably downplays the social context and life history which lies behind the immediate experience. When the scope of conversion is widened to take in the array of social, cultural and institutional factors which also influence a person's conversion and operate within longer timescales than the immediate experience valorised by James, then it becomes impossible to regard conversion as an essentially individual or private affair.[147]

All of this means that Gooren can propose that we follow James and re-establish emphasis on subjective religious experience. This tends to be neglected in more recent process models of conversion, which consider conversion in terms of the factors that affect converts rather than how the process subjectively feels.[148] It also tends to be neglected in Anglo-American philosophy of religion, which treats religious experience as a potential piece of evidence in the debate about God's existence, often overlooking the phenomenal quality of religious experiences.[149] This is not to overturn the process orientation I argued for above but rather to recognise that people involved in such processes experience them subjectively

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[144] Eugene V. Gallagher, *Expectation and Experience: Explaining Religious Conversion* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), 139.
[145] Robert H. Sharf, 'Experience', in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 109–10.
[146] Schaefer, *Religious Affects*, 209.
[147] Gooren, *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation*, 40.
[148] Gooren, 46.
[149] See, for example, Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, revised edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 244–76; Caroline Franks Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989); William P. Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993). For Alston, influenced by James, religious experience is interpreted exclusively as mystical experience; for Swinburne and Davis, the concept of religious experience has a wider jurisdiction but neither are interested in the subjective, phenomenal character of such experiences.

and feel their conversions. When Gooren proposes re-establishing the emphasis on subjective religious experience, he does not mean that we return to James's focus on sudden and dramatic religious experiences but rather religious experience more broadly construed. Once we have stripped out the over-emphasis on private, sudden and dramatic religious experiences, we can, as Gooren suggests, reintroduce a focus on the various subjective feelings an individual has as they engage with religious practices, organisations and ideas throughout their lives.

The second insight from Gooren's review of scholarship is the need to establish a more sophisticated conceptualisation of the activity and passivity of the individual during the conversion process. James Richardson described in 1985 a paradigm shift in conversion studies from a passive to a more active conceptualisation of the convert. As Richardson describes it, the older passive models of conversion cast the convert as a passive subject at the mercy of psychological and social forces. The new, more active paradigm recognises 'a more active subject "working out" one's own conversion'. The active model implies a religious seeker actively looking for spiritual and or religious solutions to their predicament.[150] Five years later, Eugene Gallagher proposed that a satisfactory conversion model would blend active and passive elements, noting how external factors can combine with an individual's own active seeking to produce conversion.[151] Gooren praises Richardson for noting the shift towards a more active model although suggests that his notion is a largely voluntaristic notion of conversion with only a primitive sense of the effects of socialisation. The later rational choice models of conversion,[152] which regard the convert as making a rational cost-benefit analysis of the various options available on the religious market, make a similar mistake by failing to pay proper attention to the effects of the convert's social context.[153] As Gooren concludes, 'a holistic conversion approach acknowledges that each conversion is the result of interaction between the individual and the religious organization and thus necessarily incorporates both active and passive elements as part of a continuum'.[154]

A third insight we will take from Gooren is his conversion careers model. Gooren defines conversion early on as 'a comprehensive personal change of religious worldview and identity'.[155] He then introduces the notion of a conversion career as 'a general heuristic tool

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[150] James T. Richardson, 'The Active vs. Passive Convert: Paradigm Conflict in Conversion/Recruitment Research', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 24, no. 2 (1985): 172. In an earlier article, Gooren argues that Richardson's emphasis on a paradigm shift is somewhat strained, that most scholars have always followed a more active model, and that the passive model is strongest within Christian groups. In his book, published three years later, this criticism had been dropped and Gooren noted that the passive model was especially strong amongst psychologists of religion. Henri Gooren, 'Reassessing Conventional Approaches to Conversion: Towards a New Synthesis', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 46, no. 3 (2007): 346; Gooren, *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation*, 34.

[151] Gallagher, *Expectation and Experience*.

[152] C. David Gartrell and Zane K. Shannon, 'Contacts, Cognition, and Conversion: A Rational Choice Approach', *Review of Religious Research* 27, no. 1 (1985): 32–48; Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

[153] Gooren, *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation*, 35.

[154] Gooren, 40.

[155] Gooren, 3.

to understand conversion all over the world.'[156] Gooren's conversion career model offers a fivefold typology of religious involvement which includes preaffiliation ('the worldview and social context of potential members'), affiliation ('being a formal member of a religious groups […but] membership does not form a central aspect of one's life or identity'), conversion ('a (radical) personal change of religious worldview and identity'), confession ('core member identity… a high level of participation… and a strong "missionary attitude"'), and disaffiliation ('former involvement in an organized religious group'). A person's conversion career describes their passage through different levels of religious participation and affiliation, taking into account a person's various life stages and the various factors which influence religious involvement. A conversion career is not a linear progression but an individual journey of increasing and decreasing levels of religious involvement which can include moves into and out of various religious groups and multiple conversions along the way.[157]

In summary, we can now see the importance of recognising the limitations of a traditional view of conversion which can all too easily influence our scholarship, especially in the context of a Western European university, in a culture historically dominated by Christianity. The sudden, dramatic, Pauline conversion experience is not essential to conversion and even when such an experience does occur it is but one moment in a much longer and more complex process. Any philosophy which focuses on this dramatic moment of conversion will not only restrict research to a limited subset of conversion experiences biased towards modern American Protestantism but will also overemphasise these experiences when they do happen and obscure the effects of socialisation and longer-term psychological, social, cultural and institutional factors. The passivity implied by the Jamesian model is too simplistic but so is excessive voluntarism. The conversion process is a complex interaction between an individual's active seeking and the effects of various psychological, social, cultural, and institutional factors. Conversions are not isolatable events but form part of lifelong conversion careers as individuals move into, out of, and between different modes of religious experience and participation.

However, within a conversion career there can be moments of worldview and identity change, what Gooren refers to as conversion in a narrow sense. As part of a longer process of changing levels of religious affiliation and participation, there can be moments when an individual's worldview and identity is realigned according to the values, beliefs and practices of a group. I have described this as a moment within a longer process but the word moment can be misleading. This should not be taken to imply a sudden or instantaneous event; as Gooren notes, conversions in this more limited sense are still relatively long-term processes and often take many years.[158] We can, however, differentiate conversion in a narrow sense from the much longer conversion careers. Otherwise, our concept of conversion is in danger of stretching to encompass an individual's entire life and, while an individual's life history is an important part of understanding conversion, this will make it much more difficult to

[156] Gooren, 4.
[157] Gooren, 48–51.
[158] Gooren, 137.

understand the specific process of worldview and identity change. Isolating conversion in a narrow sense within the context of a conversion career model such as Gooren's allows us to isolate an experience of significant change for an individual without either collapsing it into a single moment or having so wide a conception of conversion that we cannot distinguish it from an entire life. As Raymond Paloutzian has argued, a conversion can be characterised by the ability to 'identify a time before which the religion was not accepted and after which it was accepted'.[159] Gooren's conversion career model allows us to identify these moments of religious change, acknowledging that these moments can last longer than a single intense experience, without assuming that these moments comprise everything there is to understand about conversion.

For the purposes of this thesis, therefore, conversion in this narrow sense, within the context of a conversion career model, will be what is meant by conversion. Conversion is a process which unfolds over a period of time (often but not always a number of years) and which forms part of lifelong career of moving between different levels of religious participation. It is characterised by change in an individual's worldview and identity, whereby the norms, beliefs, practices, and values of a new religious group come to take a (more) central place in an individual's worldview and identity. In this thesis, references to conversion are to this narrower conception of conversion. When I wish to refer to an individual's lifelong religious progress, I will refer to conversion careers. I will use conversion event to refer to the idea of a sudden, dramatic one-off conversion experience.

Belief

It remains to make a comment on the role of belief in conversion. In 1977, Wilfred Cantwell Smith challenged the widespread view that religion has historically been primarily concerned with belief and argued that 'those who make belief central to the religious life have taken a wrong turning.'[160] Smith traces the development of the meaning of belief in European thought, arguing that the notion of belief as propositional assent is a modern one. Historically, belief in God meant, given the reality of God, trusting and committing oneself to him; today it has become assenting to the existence of God in light of uncertainty.[161] The upshot of Smith's argument is that, if belief understood as assent to propositions is a relatively novel interpretation of the concept, then it cannot be central to religion (and, for our purposes, conversion) since people have been practicing their religion without this understanding for centuries.[162]

For a defence of the importance of belief in religion, we can turn to Kevin Schilbrack. Schilbrack argues that critics of belief generally assume a propositional understanding of belief which is rarely adopted within philosophy. He notes that contemporary philosophical accounts of belief are much more complex and generally mean more than just assent to a

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[159] Raymond F. Paloutzian, 'Psychology of Religious Conversion and Spiritual Transformation', in *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 331.
[160] Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Belief and History* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1977), 37.
[161] Smith, 44.
[162] See also Jonathan Z. Smith, 'Religion, Religions, Religious'; Lopez Jr., 'Belief'.

proposition.[163] This approach sidesteps the debate by accepting that religion is not all about propositional belief and insisting that the issue is not with describing religion as belief-oriented but with our understanding of belief itself. Following Gilbert Ryle,[164] Schilbrack describes belief in dispositional terms as 'a pattern of activities at least some of which are public.'[165] Further, beliefs are also social and developed in community. Attributing beliefs to other people 'presupposes a shared environment': we can infer what other people are believing based on their public displays which take place within a common context.[166] Thus, Schilbrack contends, while groups invariably contain dissent among their members, it is still possible to talk about what the group believes. Dissent is predicated on prior agreement and assumes that there is a group belief to dissent from. Schilbrack describes these group beliefs in 'the collective rather than the distributive sense', indicating that a group belief need not be held equally by its individual members.[167] This reassertion of belief is important because, without beliefs, individuals cannot make judgements or act with agency. Schilbrack takes belief in a minimal sense to be 'holding that something is true': this can be tacit and does not require an individual's conscious assent. Holding something as true is a requirement for agency: when we attribute agency to another, that is, when we suppose that someone is acting according to their own reasons, we presuppose that they, at least in some minimal sense, accept that the world is a certain way and not another, even if this is held implicitly; without this we cannot understand the judgements that they make or the actions which then flow from these judgements. Thus, while a sixteenth-century Christian might not explicitly articulate his belief in the existence of God, we can maintain that he still takes the existence of God to be true, even if this is only tacitly accepted and neither reflected upon nor consciously assented to. We will return to the question of belief in chapter four, where we will provide a much fuller articulation of belief; for now, we are content to note that when we refer to belief, we mean this dispositional, non-propositional sense of belief which, we maintain, is applicable across religious traditions.

The notion of conversion as belief-change has come up in passing but is yet to be critically examined: is belief-change an accurate description of conversion? So far we have argued that conversion should be understood according to Gooren's model, which defines conversion as a change in worldview and identity, rather than a change in belief.[168] We have also argued that religious belief should be understood as primarily non-propositional and dispositional. We have not yet given a precise definition of worldview or identity: Gooren does not explicitly define these terms, only commenting that converts engage in biographical reconstruction and that conversions always require changes in worldview and identity.[169] For a definition of worldview, we can turn to Taves, who suggests that a worldview answers the six "Big Questions" of ontology, cosmology, epistemology, situation,

[163] Schilbrack, *Philosophy and the Study of Religions*, 62.
[164] Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (London: Hutchinson & Co, 1949), 116–53.
[165] Schilbrack, *Philosophy and the Study of Religions*, 63.
[166] Schilbrack, 67, emphasis removed.
[167] Schilbrack, 68.
[168] Gooren, *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation*, 3.
[169] Gooren, 86 for biographical reconstruction, p. 140 for required change.

axiology, and praxeology.[170] These questions can be answered by explicit philosophies or theologies but are more often implicitly answered individually in a taken-for-granted, unreflective kind of way.[171] Taves outlines an evolutionary basis for worldviews, which are developed as ways of understanding the world – these are more complex in humans compared to lower forms of life, but still limited.[172] Taking a lead from Taves, we can suggest that a worldview is an (often implicit) network of major beliefs and attitudes through which a human being makes meaning in the world.

Turning to identity, we must first note that this is a polyphonic term which has a diverse array of sometimes contradictory meanings. The Encyclopedia of Identity captures this interplay of stability and change and explores the ways this is negotiated across different cultures and philosophies. Is one's identity fixed or can it change?[173] Without getting into the particulars of this debate, we will need some sense of dynamism and change in identity if we are to understand conversion: the notion of a fixed identity seems too rigid in the face of ethnographic evidence of conversion. Nevertheless, certain identities – such as race, nationality, or gender – do appear to be at least somewhat fixed and not in total flux. Perhaps a useful distinction might be made between identity as group belonging and identity as meaning making. Group identities can be established by oneself or through the assignation of others and identify a person according to an already-existing group, such as race, gender, nationality, sexual orientation, religion, and so on; there is thus a felt permanence about them.[174] Even group identities which can appear less important, such as a sports team affiliation, are often felt as permanent even though they could be changed at will. In contrast, a meaning making identity is much more personal and established by answering questions such as "who am I? or "how am I related to others?". While group membership will be influential in how an individual answers such questions, this is not exhaustive. Identity on this view is determined individually: while one can be assigned an identity group by another, one cannot be made to understand oneself in those terms.[175] This kind of identity is described by the Encyclopedia of Identity (in reference to religious identity) as 'how a person or group understands, experiences, shapes, and is shaped by the psychological, social, political, and devotional facets of religious belonging or affiliation.'[176]

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[170] Ann Taves, 'From Religious Studies to Worldview Studies', *Religion* 50, no. 1 (2020): 137–38.
[171] Taves, 139–41.
[172] Taves, 142–44.
[173] Ronald Jackson II and Michael A. Hogg, eds., 'Philosophy of Identity', in *Encyclopedia of Identity* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2010).
[174] We should, however, be careful to avoid positing too strong a permanence to these identities: the experiences of, for example, a naturalised foreign citizen or a transgender individual indicates the flexibility of these apparently permanent group identities. We should also note that the assignation of group identities is not necessarily always a positive experience and we should remain alert to the influence of power relations on identity formation.
[175] This is, of course, a simplification: the labels applied by others will affect how someone comes to identify themselves, both positively and negatively. However, a rough distinction can be drawn between the identity groups to which one is assigned (by oneself or others) and the more personal sense that one has of who one is and one's place in the world – even if in reality these two do not operate in isolation.
[176] Ronald Jackson II and Michael A. Hogg, eds., 'Religious Identity', in *Encyclopedia of Identity* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2010).

There is much more to say on the topic of worldview and identity; however, these are workable definitions for our purposes. The two are different but intertwined and play equally important roles in Gooren's conversion careers model; we will thus consider them together for the rest of this thesis, even if strictly speaking they are not the same. What is important for our purposes is that both worldview and identity involve belief, often implicitly. Worldview and identity are often framed as answers to questions ("what is real?", "who am I?", and so on). These questions and their answers are sometimes explicitly articulated by philosophers or theologians; much of the time they remain implicit and assumed. This view of worldview and identity resembles the non-propositional account of belief we developed from Schilbrack. While not identical with belief, worldview and identity also involve non-propositional attitudes or dispositions (taking as true) to a significant extent. Therefore, we can suggest that conversion is to do with belief-change, insofar as it is to do with worldview and identity change. This does not mean that conversion is exclusively belief-change, nor that conversion can fully be explained in terms of belief, and it must be maintained that belief is understood non-propositionally – there is nothing here to suggest that conversion *must* involve propositional belief. However, with these caveats in place, we can hold that, if we follow Gooren in describing conversion as a change in worldview and identity, then it follows that conversion also involves a change in belief.

Thus, this thesis will use belief-change as a shorthand for belief, worldview and identity change, with the understanding that belief is understood non-propositionally and that worldview and identity are not fully explained in terms of belief. For similar reasons, I also include the notion of value within the concept of belief. Again, we must caveat that belief is understood non-propositionally; however, like belief, value involves taking something to be true. A value is held because there is something about it that makes it valuable; things are valued because they contain (or somehow present) values. These are beliefs: they are not propositions but they take something to be true – for example, that life is sacred, murder is wrong, the eucharistic elements contain the presence of Christ, Mecca is holy, and so on. Further, these values are felt – and I will argue in chapter four that beliefs are affective. While the affective intensity of a value might be greater than that of a belief, the affectivity of values is something they share with beliefs (rather than something which distinguishes them from beliefs). There may be ways in which we want to distinguish values and beliefs (the kinds of evidence which inform them, or the degree of normativity, for example). These distinctions are not within the scope of this thesis (although I would venture that beliefs and values are less distinct than might be assumed). For our purposes is it enough to note that values share some core characteristics with beliefs which will make them subject to change in similar ways.[177] Thus, while further research on the specific role of value in religious conversion would be welcome, the focus of this thesis will be worldview and identity

[177] We might want to reverse this relationship to say that, rather than values being belief-like, beliefs are value-like. While formally equivalent, this reversed formulation avoids the sense that values are reducible to beliefs, which is not what I am positing. To say that beliefs are value-like carries the more desirable implication that the similarity of beliefs and values reveals beliefs to be more complex than we thought, rather than values being simpler.

change, glossed as belief-change, with the understanding that many of the processes described and analysed will be transferable to a specific examination of value.

Philosophy of Religion

In contemporary philosophy of religion, there has been limited interest in the phenomenon of conversion. Even within the turn to lived religion which has taken place in the last decade, relatively little has been written on conversion. The most sustained philosophical treatment of conversion in recent years is Mark Wynn's 2013 *Renewing the Senses*. While Wynn is not the only contemporary philosopher to deal with conversion, his analysis is the most sophisticated and so will be the focus of our attention.[178] Wynn develops an existential account of the role of the senses and the sensory world in the spiritual life of a religious believer. In an effort to counter claims that the spiritual or religious life entails a flight from the sensory world towards the spiritual realm,[179] Wynn argues that the spiritual life can engender a transformation in the appearance of the sensory world, such that the spiritually transformed person is able to recognise spiritual truths through its renewed appearance. Wynn uses conversion experiences as a test case for this hypothesis, since they provide a 'fundamental and in principle datable shift in religious outlook', so the phenomenology of the world for a particular individual before and after a conversion can be compared.[180] Rather than functioning to misdirect or distract the mind from spiritual matters, the sensory world as it is experienced by the spiritual convert is infused with a new spiritual salience and feel and can therefore play a unique part in the religious life. This is reflected in the role that the sacraments can play as sensory objects which have spiritual import,[181] or the way that the divine can come to be imaged in other people.[182]

Wynn offers a variety of examples to show how the world can appear renewed or revitalised following a conversion experience. For example, quoting a source from James's *Varieties*: '…everything looked new to me, the people, the fields, the cattle, the trees. I was like a new man in a new world.'[183] Wynn argues that conversions 'are at root changes in emotion, where these changes occur suddenly and independently of rational control, and where they effect a generalized shift in the appearance of the sensory world.'[184] For Wynn, conversions result in changes to an individual's emotional life and the religious concepts with which they operate: both of these changes have the capacity to alter the appearance of the sensory world. A new emotion towards something changes how it appears in the world. After

[178] For additional recent literature, see Ward E. Jones, 'Religious Conversion, Self-Deception, and Pascal's Wager', *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 36, no. 2 (1998): 167–88; Roger A. Ward, *Conversion in American Philosophy: Exploring the Practice of Transformation* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004). Both assume the Jamesian conception of conversion as a sudden, intensely emotional, personal experience, which thereby limits the effectiveness of their arguments. There is not the space to examine this literature in detail here but much of my critique of Wynn can equally be applied.

[179] See Grace Jantzen, *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 263, cited in Mark Wynn, *Renewing the Senses: A Study of the Philosophy and Theology of the Spiritual Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 9.

[180] Wynn, *Renewing the Senses*, 16.

[181] Wynn, 172.

[182] Wynn, 176–79. See, for example, Matthew 25:40.

[183] Wynn, 19.

[184] Wynn, 25.

slipping on a patch of ice, I may develop new emotions towards it – fear, or a wariness of slipping again. In this case, ice will begin to take on a greater salience in my perception, looming large when I see it as a potential hazard and something to avoid.[185] Not just the salience but the phenomenal colour or feel of an object can be transformed by new emotional content. For example, on discovering that the meat I am chewing is in fact my pet rabbit, the meat will not only come to have a greater salience in my perception but I will now experience it as revolting.[186] These non-religious examples show how new emotions – of the kind produced by a conversion experience – can transform the sensory world.

The second way a conversion can renew the appearance of the sensory world is through the adoption of new concepts. Wynn argues that the way something appears in my sensory world can be affected by the concepts I have of it. For example, I might perceive a Gothic church to consist in a multitude of different structures; however, once I know that the church is supposed to image the New Jerusalem, this new concept will allow me to perceive the church as a single gestalt and recognise the New Jerusalem within it. This is not just a different idea I have when looking at the church; rather, the church appears as a unified gestalt in a way that it did not before.[187] The new concept organises my perception differently and so my experience of it changes. It thus follows for Wynn that the adoption of new religious concepts from a conversion experience should have the capacity to alter the appearance of the sensory world.[188] Specifically, the concept of nature as created by God and infused with traces of divine creativity could make the world appear renewed and transformed, reflecting the glory of God.

Wynn's is a compelling account which demonstrates the transformative effect that religious conversion can have on the entire outlook of a believer. Wynn successfully traces a path which shows how changes in an individual's emotions or concepts can lead to phenomenological changes in how the world appears. This is grounded in examples from outside religious discourse, establishing that such phenomenological transformations are not unusual experiences peculiar to religious conversion but are a normal part of perceptual experience. Although Wynn at times overemphasises the sudden or dramatic conversion experience,[189] and we might wonder 'whether some of the reports Wynn relies on – where accurate phenomenology may not have been at the top of the reporters' agendas – can bear the weight he puts on them',[190] his progression from more mundane examples of sensory transformation to those brought about by religious conversion secures the logical and existential possibility of world transformation independently of the reliability of his

[185] Wynn, *Renewing the Senses*. Wynn's example is taken from Peter Goldie, *The Emotions: A Philosophical Exploration* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 59–60.
[186] Wynn, *Renewing the Senses*, 34.
[187] Wynn, 44. The Gothic church example is from Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Architecture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 74–75.
[188] Wynn, *Renewing the Senses*, 48–49.
[189] Although he acknowledges that the transformation of the sensory world can be the result of a more gradual change in one's spiritual outlook, Wynn does focus most of his discussion on more radical conversion experiences. Wynn, 41.
[190] Raymond J. Vanarragon, 'Review of *Renewing the Senses: A Study of the Philosophy and Theology of the Spiritual Senses* by Mark Wynn', *Mind* 124, no. 494 (2015): 698.

witnesses. Wynn's is an argument about the existential and phenomenological import of emotional and conceptual changes for an individual, which he uses to explain the effect of religious or spiritual transformations. Further, we must remember that conversion experiences are for Wynn a test case. While clearly investing heavily in the ability of these reported experiences to indicate the change from a non-religious life to a religious one, Wynn's goal is to understand the effect that the religious life in general can have on how the world can appear to an individual. Wynn is successful in his stated intention to show that 'various doctrinal claims… can be inscribed in, or can "colour", sensory experience, so that the sensory realm itself becomes a medium for reckoning with those claims and allowing oneself to be shaped by them'.[191] In the terms of Plato's *Republic*, the spiritually enlightened person can return to the cave and apprehend new truths in the shadows.[192]

Wynn successfully defends the thesis that a conversion or spiritual transformation can change the appearance of the sensory world. If a conversion involves the acquisition of new emotions or concepts, then it follows that conversion has the capacity to effect world transformation for the convert. Far from a flight from the world, spiritual ascent can infuse new value and meaning into the world. What Wynn does not consider in detail is how these conversion or spiritual transformations come about, with little attention paid to what precipitates a spiritual or conversion experience. There is some discussion of spiritual experiences inspired by nature and the apprehension of value but the sense here is that such experiences come upon the individual who remains relatively passive,[193] although there are some comments suggesting an important role for practice or preparation.[194] In his discussion of sacred spaces, Wynn recognises the physical and bodily aspects of sacred spaces which engage a pilgrim's emotional and kinaesthetic feelings and the bodily practices which might have to be engaged in order to access the sacred space and which can affect how the space is experienced.[195] Nevertheless, even if Wynn recognises that practice can precipitate a spiritual experience, this leaves unanswered the question of *why* practices lead to spiritual or conversion experiences. A related question is how the renewed appearance of the sensory world post-conversion experience is sustained. Without an explanation of how a conversion renews the sensory world, it is difficult to establish how a transformed world is maintained. Indeed, why should we not expect that, as one moves further in time from a transformative experience, the world gradually loses the vibrancy given to it by the experience? Emotions fade and concepts which were once the centre of attention can be displaced by more pressing concerns; if Wynn is suggesting that a conversion experience can radically and forever transform the appearance of the sensory world, he needs to explain the longevity of this transformation.

Wynn attempts to deal with the issue of longevity in his discussion of sacred spaces. He recognises the objection that the experiential transformation precipitated by a sacred space

[191] Wynn, *Renewing the Senses*, 8.
[192] Wynn uses Plato's cave allegory as an illustration of the renewed commitment to the world that can be achieved by spiritual transformation. Wynn, 1–3.
[193] Wynn, 129–65.
[194] Wynn, 140.
[195] Wynn, 75–78.

might be short-lived and fail to produce any lasting change in a pilgrim's sensory experience. In response, Wynn returns to James, noting that 'James' discussion suggests that the experience of religious conversion can effect an enduring change in the appearance of the sensory world' and therefore that, if a pilgrim undergoes some kind of spiritual or conversion experience upon visiting a sacred site, then 'we should at least be open to the possibility that here too the effects of the experience will spill over unto a lasting change in the phenomenology of the believer's experience of the sensory world.'[196] Here we observe Wynn's dependence on James: the sacred site can effect lasting change in a pilgrim's experience of a sensory world because they might undergo a conversion or conversion-like experience at the site of the kind described by James which is capable of transforming the sensory world. James – and his panoply of conversion and religious experience narratives – is called as a witness for the possibility of long-lasting sensory transformation brought about by a conversion or spiritual experience. Yet, as snapshots written by believers at single moments in their lives, it is difficult to see how these accounts can carry the freight Wynn requires of them. When it comes to sensory transformation, the accounts James presents tend to refer to the immediate aftermath of a conversion experience.[197] When it comes to moral transformation, James offers numerous examples of converts who narrate a moral change (such as abstinence from alcohol) which continue "from that day to this".[198] Yet, no such long-term endurance is ever attested for sensory transformation. Further, even if it was, we still cannot say anything about the continuation of sensory transformation after the time that the account was recorded since there is no follow-up to ascertain the long-term effects of conversion.

Additionally, Wynn seems to adopt uncritically these conversion narratives without questioning the phenomenological reliability of these sources. A narrative written long after the conversion event cannot be relied upon to reproduce accurately the phenomenological changes experienced in conversion. There are many difficulties involved in asking someone to recount how they remember the appearance of the world at some previous point in their life, especially when the answer to this question has significant religious import for that person. Memories of previous emotional states (especially when they occurred years in the past) can be unreliable. When these recalled emotional states form part of a decline-rebirth motif in a conversion narrative, we cannot be sure that these memories have not been affected by the need of the conversion narrative for a moment of despair. Thus, Wynn's argument that James's *Varieties* can support the view that conversion experiences are capable of effecting long-term sensory transformation is not well-supported. Without an explanation of how conversion experiences can effect sensory transformation Wynn's account is ill-equipped to suggest how such transformations may be sustained over time.

This shows how important it is to establish a clear definition of conversion before reflecting philosophically on the phenomenon. Wynn does not engage this question of definition in great detail and the closest he gets to a definition of conversion is 'a fundamental and in

[196] Wynn, 79.
[197] For example, 'I felt myself in a new world, and everything about me appeared with a different aspect from what it was wont to do.' *Varieties*, 168.
[198] See, for example, *Varieties*, 209–10, 219, 225–6, and *passim*.

principle datable shift in religious outlook', which suggests a sudden and event-based understanding of the concept.[199] To illustrate this, Wynn then refers to the example of Tolstoy, cited in James, who experienced the world appearing devoid of meaning and then revitalised post-conversion. Yet James cites Tolstoy as an example of gradual conversion, of *lysis* rather than *crisis*.[200] Wynn does not refer to this aspect of Tolstoy's conversion and proceeds to discuss sources which describe sudden and very time-specific conversion events.[201] Despite some ambiguity here, it seems that Wynn understands conversion as a dramatic, one-off event, in the mould of St Paul. A sudden one-off conversion event is also logically required by his argument. Wynn understands the experiences of the accounts from the *Varieties* to involve a renewal of the whole world, where the renewal is understood to be a significant and substantial change: 'where the world had appeared flat and grey in the experience of the religious melancholiac, here is it radiant and beautiful.'[202] This sort of phenomenology does not suggest the kind of gradual conversion process we have found in Gooren. If the world is experienced as renewed and newly radiant, this rather suggests a dramatic conversion experience. Had the conversion taken place gradually over a number of years, the renewal of the sensory world would not appear so dramatically; we would expect the experience of phenomenological change to resemble the gradual turning up of colour and contrast on a television, rather than a sudden switch from black and white to high-definition colour.

In response, it is possible that the conversions Wynn is discussing are sudden experiences which occur within a longer conversion experience – an even narrower construal of conversion than Gooren's conversion narrowly construed (in the terms of this thesis outlined above, a conversion event within a broader conversion experience). On this view, Wynn's dramatic conversion experiences (which can be minutes to hours in duration) can be situated within a longer process of conversion (potentially over multiple years). This is a legitimate move to make, since it is entirely plausible that a longer conversion process might contain sudden or dramatic moments of transformation and that these moments precipitate a sudden transformation of the sensory world. The phenomenology Wynn presents of the effects of such a dramatic moment of conversion is compelling. However, if we follow this line of argument, we should still expect some level of gradual sensory transformation throughout the longer conversion process. Gooren describes the conversion process as 'a process of internalizing the core beliefs and practices' of a new religious group.[203] Given that Wynn regards concept acquisition as one of the factors behind sensory transformation, it follows that gradual belief internalisation ought to generate gradual sensory transformation. Further, Gooren notes 'frequent periods of struggle' in the conversion experience,[204] suggesting a conversion to be a deeply emotional process which, again following Wynn, would suggest some experience of gradual sensory transformation.

[199] Wynn, *Renewing the Senses*, 16.
[200] *Varieties*, 145.
[201] Wynn, *Renewing the Senses*, 17.
[202] Wynn, 20.
[203] Gooren, *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation*, 137.
[204] Gooren, 137.

We should also recognise that this phenomenology of conversion would not provide a phenomenological description of conversion in general but rather be limited to only those conversion experiences which conform to the dramatic one-off model which, given the history of conversion outlined above, we might expect to be predominantly post-eighteenth century Protestant conversions in Europe and North America. Wynn does acknowledge these concerns to some extent, noting that the experiences from James on which he based his argument are 'of a somewhat exotic variety' but he maintains that if these more exotic experiences can renew the sensory world then so can less dramatic religious practices.[205] This is consistent with Wynn using conversion experiences as a test case for his broader thesis that religious or spiritual experiences and practices do not necessarily devalue the material sensory world but can renew and revitalise it and invest it with spiritual value.

In summary, Wynn offers a compelling account of the phenomenological effects of a sudden and dramatic conversion experience, convincingly arguing for the capacity of these events to alter the appearance of the sensory world. However, this focus on sudden events overlooks the effects of long-term conversion processes which can take place over months or years. This is not a critical flaw in Wynn's overall project, which does not seek to advance a specific view on conversion but rather argues for the ability of spiritual or religious experiences to transform the sensory world. Indeed, we might suggest that including a discussion of gradual conversion processes would strengthen Wynn's argument and demonstrate its application beyond his test case of sudden conversion events. While our evaluation of Wynn does not find his project fatally flawed, it does reveal the need for further phenomenological research into conversion. The limitations of Wynn's conception of conversion restrict its applicability to a subset of (mostly modern, Western, Protestant) conversion experiences. Even within this subset, Wynn's focus on one moment in particular means that little attention is paid to the wider and longer-term processes which affect the conversion events he describes. Also, the event focus prevents any enquiry into why conversion experiences cause sensory transformation or how such transformations could be sustained long-term. There is thus a need for a phenomenology of conversion processes which takes into account the long duration of the process and asks how a conversion process is efficacious in bringing about the changes Wynn describes.

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has been to place our study of conversion into its historical and scholarly context, and to apply greater precision to the concept of conversion as our object of research. We have seen the historical progression of the conception of conversion – its Christian origins and semantic journey from a social and lifelong process to a personal and dramatic event. This conceptual shift began in the Reformation but accelerated through the Protestant movements of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century North America. The explosion of global Pentecostalism in the twentieth century, with its emphasis on

[205] Wynn, *Renewing the Senses*, 21. Wynn also here refers to 'the rather special conditions of the conversion experience', confirming our thesis that he assumes a dramatic and one-off model of conversion. We can see too that Wynn is adopting James's methodology of utilising more extreme experiences as a means of understanding commoner occurrences.

conversion experiences and emotional intensity, further cemented this shift. We have also recognised the influence of this history on philosophical reflection on conversion, with particular emphasis on the work of William James in 1902 and Mark Wynn in 2013. We found that the historically influenced personal and event-oriented view of conversion in both left their theories wanting, descriptively inaccurate and explanatorily thin.

Along with this history, we have developed a more precise concept of conversion to serve as our object of study, informed by twentieth-century social scientific research and guided by the work of Henri Gooren. We have adopted Gooren's conversion careers model and within this located the third stage of the model – conversion (or, more precisely, conversion in the narrow sense), the process by which a convert's worldview and identity is reoriented to their new religion – as our object of study. The benefit of this approach is that it is able to capture the longer-term processes which influence and contribute to belief-change; it is neither so narrow as to obscure the effects of such long-term processes nor so broad that the conversion experience gets lost in an overwhelming quantity of data. In contrast to broader conversion careers, which capture a convert's lifelong movement in, out of and between religions, our narrow sense of conversion comprises a timescale short enough capture a meaningful moment of change. If someone spends two years assimilating into a church or regularly meeting with a local imam, gradually changing how they believe, feel, act and speak, it is possible to isolate this as a discrete period in someone's religious life which is especially important, before and after which things are markedly different. Equally, in contrast to a Jamesian/Pauline model of conversion as a brief, one-off event of immediate and momentous transformation, our concept is broad enough to capture the social and psychological influences of a conversion and the effect of personal history (and imagined future) on a convert.

Adopting Wayne Proudfoot's analysis, this allows for both descriptive and explanatory accuracy.[206] In terms of descriptive accuracy, converts do experience changes in their worldview and identity; conversion accounts regularly provide a narrative which can occur over a period of months or years and, even if they locate this narrative within the broader sweep of their lives, this period of conversion is experienced as an especially significant period of time. Hence, our narrower view of conversion avoids conversion experiences being merged with a convert's entire lifespan, with the particularities of shorter-term conversion experiences regarded as irrelevant and lost on the flux of life. At the same time, while achieving descriptive accuracy, our approach also remains explanatorily strong. Reducing conversion to a single event is explanatorily weak: by collapsing conversion into one event, other factors which operate over longer timespans are overlooked, without which a conversion might appear inexplicable or out-of-the-blue. Thus, our approach avoids

[206] Wayne Proudfoot distinguished between descriptive and explanatory reductionism in religious studies. The former involves describing an experience in terms that would be rejected by the subject of the experience; it is distortive and should be avoided. Explanation involves accounting for the causes of an experience; explanations are part of public discourse and so explanatory reduction (explaining an experience in terms that the subject would reject) is legitimate and in fact an important part of scholarly analysis on religion. Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 196–97.

descriptive reduction, whereby the experiences analysed end up being mere inventions of the researcher, while still facilitating strong explanatory power.

How, then, are we to approach the philosophical study of conversion, thus formulated? Already in the introduction, we have proposed a phenomenological method. This is valuable, since it offers the unique ability to explore subjective experience, how something feels, and analyse its form, structure, and relations with other kinds of conscious experience. To narrow the focus further, we can note that the conception of conversion which we have articulated in this chapter will require something more than the analysis of a particular experience or event. Given our comments above that conversion is a process with influences stretching back into a convert's personal history, we need something more than a phenomenology of singular conversion events if the conclusion we reach is to be explanatorily satisfying. Specifically, we need a philosophy that can take in the broader sweep of life, capable of engaging with the effect of social and psychological factors on a convert and their immersion in an already influential world of materiality, biology, society, and language. Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological project sought to understand human embodiment and its immersion in the physical, social and linguistic world. Merleau-Ponty was interested in perception and the human capacity for wonder and mystery yet his approach always sought to understand the human being and its relation to the world and being. Further, Merleau-Ponty's thought has been taken up by scholars across various disciplines, including anthropology, religious studies, and cognitive science. He offers great potential as a rich philosophical resource for this project; for this reason, we will examine Merleau-Ponty's philosophy more closely, along with his views on religion, in the following chapter.

2. Introducing Maurice Merleau-Ponty as a Philosophical Resource for Philosophy of Religion

We finished chapter one with a clearer articulation of the object of study in this thesis, and the suggestion that Maurice Merleau-Ponty's thought might offer resources for a philosophical analysis of conversion. This chapter will expand on the latter point, outlining Merleau-Ponty's philosophy and indicating its potential for understanding conversion. As we saw in the previous chapter, dramatic, one-off conversion events are not the most important aspect of conversion experiences and are not required for a conversion to occur. Thus, focusing on these events will provide an incomplete and one-sided understanding of conversion, biased towards modern Protestantism. Rather, we have followed Henri Gooren's conversion careers model, which regards conversion as a long-term progression through various stages of religious affiliation, located within the context of an individual's personal history. As we suggested at the end of chapter one, a phenomenology of conversion cannot simply be a phenomenology of conversion events but must recognise the situatedness of conversions within broader conversion careers and personal histories. Conversion is a process which takes place over time within bodies, as they navigate and respond to changing material, linguistic and social contexts. Hence, a successful phenomenology of conversion must be able to account for the immersion of the convert in the material, linguistic and social world, and how the convert affects and is affected by their context. We will clearly need a sophisticated philosophy of embodiment, along with a phenomenological hermeneutics which engages with the question of how an individual interprets and responds to their situation. All of this can be provided by Merleau-Ponty, whose philosophy of embodiment and phenomenological hermeneutics seeks to answer exactly the kinds of questions we are asking here. While Merleau-Ponty did not explicitly write about religious conversion, his thought provides a useful framework through which we can analyse these problems.

This chapter begins with an outline of Merleau-Ponty's life and works, offering a sketch of a roadmap to understanding his thought. Many of the themes articulated here will be fleshed out in more detail in the following chapters; they are introduced here in order to offer an overview of Merleau-Ponty, as well as to indicate those aspects of his thought that have led us to turn to him for philosophical inspiration. There then follows an exploration of Merleau-Ponty's own views on religion, along with a review of how Merleau-Ponty has been used in previous literature to study religion and theology. We find in Merleau-Ponty a former Catholic who became highly suspicious of hierarchical religion and its preoccupation with transcendence and absolute being, and yet who never lost his openness to mystery and wonder. Throughout the literature on Merleau-Ponty and religion we find various attempts to co-opt Merleau-Ponty for the service of one theological position or another; I will insist that, rather than finding a crypto-theology in Merleau-Ponty, we can, through Merleau-Ponty's fascination with human perception and openness to the mystery and wonder of the immanent perceptual world, discover philosophical resources for understanding religion and conversion as human phenomena. I will conclude the chapter by expressing the manner in which Merleau-Ponty's thought will be utilised in this thesis. We will not always stick closely to every aspect of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy but rather aim to follow the spirit and style

of Merleau-Ponty's writing while allowing ourselves to be influenced by a wider range of philosophical voices and the input of more recent empirical research. Having accomplished all this, we will be ready to embark on the first major constructive chapter of the thesis and explore the phenomenon of human embodiment and its importance for conversion.

Life and Philosophy

Merleau-Ponty was born in 1908 in Rochefort sur Mer, France. In 1926 he attended the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris to study philosophy, where he met Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. Following his graduation in 1930, Merleau-Ponty proceeded to teach philosophy in *lyceés* before returning to the Ecole Normale in 1935 as a tutor, where he remained until the outbreak of the Second World War. Merleau-Ponty was a leftist thinker: he was influenced by Marxism but never felt compelled to join the French Communist Party and remained a critical friend of French Communism throughout his life.[207] The most influential moment of Merleau-Ponty's intellectual development came in 1939 when he visited the Husserl Archives at the University of Leuven, Belgium, where he came into contact with Husserl's later writings and was convinced of the importance of the *Lebenswelt*.[208]

1942: The Structure of Behaviour

Merleau-Ponty's first major work was *The Structure of Behaviour* [*La structure du comportement*], published in 1942, which sought to address the question of behaviour [*comportement*] in animals. *The Structure of Behaviour* is much more psychological in tone than Merleau-Ponty's later works and demonstrates an extensive interest in (and disappointment with) contemporary psychological theories of animal and human behaviour. Coming before his serious turn towards phenomenology,[209] *The Structure of Behaviour* addresses the question of perception and behaviour by examining contemporary psychological and scientific literature and drawing out their philosophical conclusions. In particular, Merleau-Ponty was keen to demonstrate that the mechanistic approach of contemporary biologists did not accurately interpret the evidence and failed to offer a faithful account of the phenomenon. Reflex theory relied on a conception of behaviour as a mechanism: a sensory stimulus triggers a response in an organism according to predetermined lines of causation, such that similar causes will reliably produce similar effects. When an organism demonstrates some kind of behaviour, this is understood to be the action of a reflex, the operation of a physical mechanism akin to an inorganic system. Yet, Merleau-Ponty notes, when we take animal behaviour out of the laboratory and into the natural world, it is never so clearly defined.

> Thus the same partial stimulus can give rise to variable effects and the same nerve element can function in a qualitatively different manner according to what is

[207] Matthews, *The Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty*, 2–3.
[208] Matthews, 23.
[209] Although it was published in 1942, *The Structure of Behaviour* was completed in 1938, a year before Merleau-Ponty's influential visit to the Husserl Archive in Louvain. Matthews, 5, 23.

> prescribed by the constellation of stimuli and by the elaboration to which it gives rise beyond the discontinuous sensory terminations.[210]

When put into the real world, we observe that the relationship between stimulus and response is a complex one, dependent on a number of variables, including competing stimuli and the bodily position of the organism. In this early work, Merleau-Ponty adopts Gestalt psychology, which regards organisms as structured wholes, as a way of understanding behaviour. Biology and psychology should be topographical, interested in the networks of relations within an organism and between an organism and the world.[211] Behaviour is the action of a whole organism, situated within the world. Animal behaviours 'are not edifices constructed from elementary movements, but gestures gifted with an internal unity.'[212] Yet Gestalt theory is not the end of the story. While it is important to recognise the structural aspects of animal behaviour, this runs the risk of reducing any behavioural or mental phenomena to material processes, where the appearance of consciousness emerges from complex physical structures.[213]

> As long as one sees the physical world as a being which embraces all things and as long as one tries to integrate behaviour into it, one will be driven from mentalism, which maintains the originality of biological and mental structures, only by opposing substance to substance, to a materialism, which maintains the coherence of the physical order only by reducing the two others to it. In reality, matter, life and mind must be understood as three orders of significations.[214]

Gestalt psychology can highlight the shortcomings of a mechanistic view such as reflex theory but it still has a tendency to operate according to a physical-mental dichotomy, reducing what appear to be mental events to complex physical epiphenomena. As long as we are operating within a Cartesian ontological framework,[215] a third category must be posited in order to understand behaviour without reducing it either to physicalism or mentalism. Yet, this does not amount to an appeal to some special feature of organisms that distinguishes them from the inorganic world.

> We are upholding no species of vitalism whatsoever here. We do not mean that the analysis of the living body encounters a limit in irreducible vital forces. We mean only that the reactions of an organism are understandable and predictable only if we conceive of them, not as muscular contractions which unfold in the body, but as acts which are addressed to a certain milieu, present or virtual: the act of taking a bait, of walking towards a goal, of running away from danger.[216]

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[210] *SB*, 31.
[211] *SB*, 10.
[212] *SB*, 130.
[213] As Madison puts it: 'Gestalt psychology remains a prisoner of an objectivistic and causal philosophy in that it holds that forms can be discovered in nature, taken by itself.' Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty*, 4.
[214] *SB*, 137.
[215] As we will see, Merleau-Ponty would later attempt to reconceptualise ontology entirely.
[216] *SB*, 151.

The category of life is not a serious proposal of some irreducible life force but a way of articulating the fact that, when the world is divided between physical and mental existence, organic life does not fit the taxonomy. Life is not a special ontological category; however, animal behaviour can only be understood if we reject mental and physical dualism and approach the behaviour from the perspective of the living organism, a complex psychosomatic whole. Hence stimuli affect the body not by virtue of simple cause and effect but by 'eliciting a global response' which depends on 'the vital significance rather than on the material properties of the stimuli.'[217] An organism's world is already meaningful: stimuli have a significance for the organism and this significance varies according to the internal and external situation of the organism. For all organisms, then, behaviour is intrinsically meaningful. All animals – humans included – inhabit a world of meaning and significance. For humans, this is part of our animality and thus comes before any philosophical reflection.

1945: Phenomenology of Perception

While *The Structure of Behaviour* made an advance on previous psychological theories of behaviour and perception, it was still limited in its capacity to explain human experience. As Madison notes, *The Structure of Behaviour* is not so much a resolution of Merleau-Ponty's philosophical problem as a crystallisation of it, which is the problem 'of the onlooker who participates in the scene he perceives.'[218] This question of perception, of what it means to be a perceiver in the world, motivates much of the rest of Merleau-Ponty's philosophical career and is the principal driving force behind the *Phenomenology of Perception* [*Phénoménologie de la perception*], published in 1945. In his introduction to the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty sets his critical target as the apparently antithetical philosophical approaches of empiricism and intellectualism.[219] Both misrepresent the phenomenon of perception by misconstruing the nature of subjectivity. Empiricism understands perception mechanistically, as a matter of cause and effect, whereby perception is explained fully by the physical and physiological processes of sensation and without reference to its subjective character.[220] It 'begins by situating its object in the world and by treating it as a fragment of extension.'[221] Sensation occurs entirely within the objective world and thus is fully determinate. As a result, perception on the empiricist view is stripped of the kinds of ambiguity we experience in ordinary subjective experience, along with the colour or salience which attaches to our perceptual experience.

> Perception, impoverished in this way, becomes a pure knowledge operation, a progressive recording of qualities and of their most customary development, and the

[217] *SB*, 161.
[218] Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty*, 18.
[219] Madison, 20.
[220] *PhP*, 7–8. See also Monika M. Langer, *Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception: A Guide and Commentary* (Houndmills: The Macmillan Press, 1989), 5.
[221] *PhP*, 7.

> perceiving subject stands before the world in the same way the scientist stands before his experiments.[222]

If empiricism loses sight of the subjectivity of perception, intellectualism absolutises subjectivity.[223] The constituting consciousness of intellectualism is all-powerful and subjectively perceives the world perfectly; as a result, any error in perception must be explained as an error in judgement, rather than any indeterminacy in what is perceived.[224] The difference between empiricism and intellectualism is thus not so great. Both posit an absolute and fully determinate world but while empiricism locates perception within the world as a causally closed mechanism, evacuated of any subjectivity, intellectualism retains subjectivity but extracts the subject from the world altogether, establishing for the perceiving subject a God's-eye-view on the world and rendering the ambiguity and perspectival quality of perception inexplicable.

> We began from a world in itself that acted upon our eyes in order to make itself seen by us; we have arrived now at a consciousness of thought about the world, but the very nature of this world is unchanged. It is still defined by the absolute exteriority of its parts and is merely doubled across its extension by a thought that sustains it. We pass from an absolute objectivity to an absolute subjectivity, but this second idea is worth only as much as the first, and only finds support in contrast to the first, which is to say, through it.[225]

As Madison notes, for Merleau-Ponty, 'empiricism thus renders perception impossible, while intellectualism makes it useless.'[226]

Faced with these two flawed philosophies and still in need of a conceptualisation of perception which recognises the immersion of the perceiver in the world which they perceive, Merleau-Ponty turns to consider the lived body. It is in the lived human body that perception occurs, and it is in the body that those subjective and objective aspects of experience are mediated. As Stephen Priest puts it, 'Merleau-Ponty's originality lies in the idea that subjectivity is physical.'[227] Since we will examine Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of embodiment in much greater detail in chapter three, it will be sufficient here simply to note some key features of Merleau-Ponty's argument in the *Phenomenology of Perception*. For Merleau-Ponty, embodiment overcomes the latent dualism inherent in both empiricism and intellectualism: through careful phenomenological analysis, we discover 'consciousness as incarnate in a body and inhering in a world.'[228] For Merleau-Ponty, the body is not an object in the world but that by which I have a world, 'our means of communicating with it.'[229] It is also the seat of perception which consists in not only sensation but also meaning,[230]

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[222] *PhP*, 25.
[223] Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty*, 19.
[224] *PhP*, 34–38.
[225] *PhP*, 41.
[226] Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty*, 20.
[227] Priest, *Merleau-Ponty*, 57.
[228] Langer, *Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception*, xv.
[229] *PhP*, 95.
[230] *PhP*, 219–20.

expression,[231] and movement.[232] Thus Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of embodiment is also a philosophy of expression which articulates the physicality of thought and overcomes the dualism of thought and word. For Merleau-Ponty, words do not contain meaning but are intrinsically meaningful in themselves and speech is not a reflection of existing thought but a creative act of expression through which thought is accomplished.[233]

1952–1960: From Structuralism to Ontology

On 3rd May 1961, Merleau-Ponty died suddenly of a heart attack, aged 53. Among the papers Merleau-Ponty left behind were two unfinished manuscripts entitled *The Prose of the World* [*Le Prose du monde*] and *The Visible and the Invisible* [*Le Visible et l'invisible*]. While the former was apparently abandoned, with no intention on Merleau-Ponty's part to publish it, the latter was clearly a work in progress which he would have presumably completed and published had he been able. Both were published posthumously, the former in 1969 and the latter, which included an edited selection of over 100 pages of working notes, in 1964. A chapter from *The Prose of the World* entitled 'Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence' ['*Le langage indirect et les voix du silence*'] was published in *Les Temps Modernes* in 1952 and reprinted largely unaltered in *Signs* [*Signes*] in 1960. This essay marks a turn in Merleau-Ponty's thinking towards structuralism, inspired by Merleau-Ponty's (somewhat idiosyncratic)[234] reading of Ferdinand de Saussure. In contrast to his earlier works, 'Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence' considers language as a historical and social structure, rather than just from the perspective of an individual speaker, and recognises the indeterminacy of language which is often 'indirect or allusive'.[235] The essay then expounds a philosophy of history militating against a kind of Hegelianism which posits 'an imaginary spirit of art' that propels a progression from classical to modern.[236] Art, along with literature and politics, is historically situated, taking up and modifying a history which is comprised of the material expressions of humanity, while still transcending any one individual.

Of the works published in Merleau-Ponty's lifetime, the only one which really touches on the ontological vision which began to be developed in *The Visible and the Invisible* is the essay 'Eye and Mind' ['*L'Oeil et l'espirit*'], which was published just before Merleau-Ponty's death in 1961. 'Eye and Mind' is ostensibly an essay about painting, including an extended discussion on Descartes' *Dioptrics* which, to a reader unfamiliar with Merleau-Ponty's later work, can appear unrelated to ontology. However, as Douglas Low notes, by carefully

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[231] *PhP*, 187–95; see also *SNS*, 17.
[232] *PhP*, 242–4.
[233] Langer, *Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception*, xv.
[234] James Schmidt, *Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Between Phenomenology and Structuralism* (London: Macmillan, 1985), 105–11.
[235] *S*, 42–4.
[236] *S*, 65.

reading 'Eye and Mind' along with the rest of Merleau-Ponty's later work, one can begin to decipher his later ontology.[237]

The essay begins with a criticism of modern science which turns things into constructs and operationalises them, losing sight of the 'there is' which precedes scientific enquiry.[238] Painting can access this primordial meaning which is overlooked by science. Hence, 'every theory of painting is metaphysics'[239] – indeed, 'the entire history of painting in the modern period… has a metaphysical significance.'[240] Fundamentally, painting is an embodied practice: 'we cannot imagine how a *mind* could paint. It is by lending his body to the world that the artist changes the world into paintings.'[241] In order to understand this, we must return to an understanding of the body as 'an intertwining of vision and movement.' Movement is fundamental to vision: without the movement of the body or the eyes there would be no visual world. The visible and the motor worlds are both part of the same world, the same Being. This crossover of vision and movement compels us to a particular understanding of vision: that is, if movement is intrinsically intertwined with vision, then vision cannot be a purely mental operation which presents 'before the mind a picture or representation of the world'. The cross-modality of vision and movement hints of an immersion of the seer in the world, a seer who is 'immersed in the visible by his body, itself visible'. Hence, 'my body simultaneously sees and is seen.' It is a 'thing among things… caught in the fabric of the world'.[242] Seeing implies being seen; it is the reverse side of being seen. Space is thus not what Descartes describes in the *Dioptrics*, a 'network of relations between objects such as would be seen by a third party… or by a geometer' but rather 'a space reckoned starting from me as the null point or degree zero of spatiality.' Space is lived from the inside: 'I am immersed in it.'[243] As Low notes, we find in 'Eye and Mind' an articulation of the reversibility thesis which would be expounded more fully in *The Visible and the Invisible*.[244] There is an 'identity-within-difference' in perception,[245] captured through painting, whereby the seer is one with the perceived world – seen as well as seeing – yet distinct enough to be able to perceive it.

The Visible and the Invisible was due to be Merleau-Ponty's major recasting of the ontological framework of Western philosophy, reversing the enduring influence of Descartes's dualism and offering a genuinely novel ontology of flesh which reconceptualised how to think of the relationship between mind and body, subject and object. In the years leading up to his death, Merleau-Ponty began to recognise that, if we are to understand perception and human embodiment, we cannot begin from a basic distinction between self

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[237] Douglas Low, *Merleau-Ponty's Last Vision: A Proposal for the Completion of The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2000), 56. This is, indeed, exactly what Low does, offering a compelling proposal for the completion of *The Visible and the Invisible*.
[238] 'EM', 121–3.
[239] 'EM', 132.
[240] 'EM', 139.
[241] 'EM', 123.
[242] 'EM', 123–5.
[243] 'EM', 138.
[244] Low, *Merleau-Ponty's Last Vision*, 57.
[245] Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, 159.

and world. As a working note from June 1959 puts it, the problems posed in the *Phenomenology of Perception* 'are insoluble because I start there from the "consciousness"-"object" distinction'.[246] A new start is needed which can get behind the distinction between subject and object. The first three chapters of *The Visible and the Invisible* are dominated by a critical response to what Merleau-Ponty refers to as 'high altitude thought'[247] [*le pensée du survol*] in which one's thought 'soars above' the things of the world in an attempt to get a full and complete picture of things.[248] Merleau-Ponty is criticising the ideas of Kant, Bergson, Husserl and Sartre who, in their different ways, privilege the individual constituting consciousness which structures its perception of the world. The problem with this kind of philosophy, in Merleau-Ponty's view, is that the role of constituting the world is given over entirely to a consciousness which takes up a position above the world and intellectualises it. That this consciousness is in fact situated within the world – and thus views the world from a particular perspective, is affected by various embodied processes, and is subject to the ability of the world to affect how it is perceived – is ignored by high altitude thought. The result is a disembodied ego which takes up a God's-eye perspective and constitutes a fully determinate world in its own image.

Merleau-Ponty's positive ontological vision begins to be set out in the fourth chapter, 'The Intertwining – The Chiasm'. Regrettably, Merleau-Ponty was never able to complete this project and so much remains uncertain in his later thought. Nevertheless, some broad themes can be identified and, with reference to Merleau-Ponty's other writings, a broad sketch of Merleau-Ponty's later ontological vision can be made.[249] The ontology which Merleau-Ponty develops in *The Visible and the Invisible* is marked by two significant concepts: the reversibility thesis and the notion of flesh. Both of these concepts continue themes from 'Eye and Mind'. The reversibility thesis involves the idea that there is an intertwining or intermingling of subjectivity and objectivity which allows the incarnation of a perceiving body in the world. According to the reversibility thesis, at the most fundamental level, there is no separation between subject and object, matter and idea, mind and body. The reversibility thesis is the thesis that any act of perception is reversible: if I touch something, I am also touched by it; if I see, I am also seen. Vision involves being part of the visible world – there can be no disembodied or detached observer.

Perception is not a one-way operation, the perceiver representing to themselves an image of the world. Rather, the act of perception is an opening onto the world, creating a dehiscence [*ècart*] or chiasm between perceiver and perceived. There is a 'crisscrossing… of the touching and the tangible' so that in touching I can also be touched, in seeing I can also be seen.[250] The reversal between perceiver and perceived is never fully completed: 'a sort of dehiscence opens my body in two', creating an 'overlapping or encroachment'.[251] This is because perception is an embodied act; perception reveals the subject's immersion in and

[246] *VI*, 200.
[247] *VI*, 69.
[248] *VI*, 30.
[249] See Low's approach to this task, Low, *Merleau-Ponty's Last Vision*, 1–6.
[250] *VI*, 133.
[251] *VI*, 123.

continuity with the world. I can only see if I myself am visible; I can only touch if I myself am tangible. Indeed, seeing *is* being seen; touching *is* being touched. Therefore, a new ontology is required. Perception resists the distinction of subject and object because subject and object are but two sides of the same coin. As a perceiving subject I am also an object – I could not be a subject if I was not also an object. In place of Cartesian ontology of subject and object is Merleau-Ponty's ontology of flesh. Flesh is a category which takes in the world and the human being. It 'is not mind, is not matter, is not substance' but is rather the shared mode of existence assumed by human beings and the world.[252] Flesh precedes the reflective division of the world into subjects and objects or minds and bodies and so human flesh is continuous with the world's flesh – it is 'made of the same stuff'.[253]

Maurice Merleau-Ponty and the Study of Religion

We have sketched the outline of Merleau-Ponty's life, along with the broad contours of his thought as it developed throughout his lifetime. Much has been condensed here and we will expand on these themes in later chapters. What remains for us now is to articulate Merleau-Ponty's positions on religion. Since this thesis seeks to employ Merleau-Ponty as a philosophical resource for a philosophical reconceptualisation of religious conversion, it would do to first outline Merleau-Ponty's own thinking on religion, as well as review previous attempts to utilise Merleau-Ponty in the study of religion. This chapter will thus proceed by outlining Merleau-Ponty's view of religion and reviewing the relevant literature, before concluding by articulating the way in which Merleau-Ponty will be put to use in this thesis.[254]

When it comes to philosophy of religion, Maurice Merleau-Ponty is an intriguing figure. Often counted among the atheists of French existentialism, his own feelings about religion were far more nuanced and ambivalent. In addition, his basically atheist philosophy has at various times been taken up by theistic and theological causes. The deep sense of mystery and wonder at the world which, despite its atheism, permeates Merleau-Ponty's philosophy has led many to wonder whether an implicit theology can be found in his work. My contention in this chapter is that such projects are ill-founded and yet Merleau-Ponty can be a valuable resource for the philosophy of religion. My position is that, despite its openness to mystery, Merleau-Ponty's philosophy remains strictly anti-transcendent and his steadfastness on this position prevents most attempts to theologise his work from getting off the ground. Merleau-Ponty's importance, I maintain, can be found not in any theological reinterpretation of his philosophy but in the application of his phenomenology and particularly his ontology to understanding human religiosity. That is to say, I argue that, while Merleau-Ponty's philosophy must remain strictly neutral with regards to theological questions, it has the capacity to help us understand how and why humans have religious and spiritual beliefs and practices. Merleau-Ponty's contribution to philosophy of religion is thus closer to philosophical anthropology than theology, providing an account of the human

[252] *VI*, 139.
[253] 'EM', 125.
[254] The following contains an adapted and extended version of a paper of mine published in the journal *Religious Studies*. It is reproduced in an adapted form here with permission from Cambridge University Press. Jack Williams, 'Maurice Merleau-Ponty and the Philosophy of Religion', *Religious Studies* online (2020): 1–22.

condition which can explain the human proclivity for religion. The rest of this chapter will thus focus on Merleau-Ponty's own views on philosophy of religion and his interpreters.

Merleau-Ponty on Religion

Merleau-Ponty had a complex relationship with religion in his own lifetime. Raised a Catholic, he continued to attend Mass during his time as a student at the École Normale Supérieure. However, by the end of the 1930s, he had left the Church in protest over its response to socialist politics.[255] Merleau-Ponty was a socialist Catholic and felt his faith compelled him in this direction; however, he became increasingly disenchanted by the Church's lacklustre commitment to social justice and the plight of the poor. In his essay, 'Faith and Good Faith', Merleau-Ponty recalls a key event in his departure from the Church, where he recounts the autobiographical story of a 'young Catholic who was led "to the Left" by the demands of his faith.' He was appalled to hear a group of monks refuse to condemn Engelbert Dollfuss's shelling of working-class districts of Vienna.

> In the middle of lunch he was astonished to hear that, after all, the Dollfuss government was the established power, that it had the right to a police force since it was the proper government, and that Catholics, as Catholics, had nothing against it, although as citizens they were free to censure it. In later life the young man never forgot this moment. He turned to the Father… who had first voiced these opinions and told him simply that this justified the workers' opinion of the Catholics: in social questions they can never fully be counted on.[256]

Merleau-Ponty never forgot this conversation and, despite his later ambivalence on matters of God or the divine, he retained a hostility to hierarchical religion and in particular the Catholic Church. Indeed, in 'Faith and Good Faith', Merleau-Ponty criticises those Catholics who criticise the Church's historic sins but maintain that this position simply compels the Catholic to hold even truer to Christian morality in the future. For Merleau-Ponty, all this amounts to is 'plead[ing] guilty for the past and innocent for the future', obscuring the systematic reactionary conservatism inherent in the Catholic Church.[257]

In this essay, Merleau-Ponty distinguishes between interior and exterior faith, the former consisting of the inner experience of God and the latter involving the incarnation of God in the world. Interior faith, Merleau-Ponty argues, allows for a private faith and a quietist ethic: 'if God exists, then perfection has already been achieved outside this world; since perfection cannot be increased, there is, strictly speaking, nothing to do.'[258] This all changes with the incarnation: 'God has been externalised' and now 'man's main road to God was no longer contemplation but the commentary and interruption of that ambiguous message whose energy is never exhausted.' Incarnated Christianity is a religion of the body: parables do not just present meaning but carry it themselves; sacraments do not just 'evoke the idea of God' but are 'the vehicle of His presence and action'; finally, 'the soul is so little to be

[255] Matthews, *The Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty*, 3.
[256] *SNS*, 172.
[257] *SNS*, 173.
[258] *SNS*, 174.

separated from the body that it will carry a radiant double of its temporal body into eternity.'[259] This is the fulfilment of Christianity which Merleau-Ponty calls the religion of the Spirit – in contrast to the religion of the Father – in which 'God is no longer in Heaven but in human society and communication, whenever men come together in His name.' Yet, 'Catholicism arrests and freezes this development of religion': Trinitarian theology is an antidialectic movement which inhibits the progress of the Christian religion. This creates a tension within Catholicism such that, 'when it remains true to the Incarnation, it can be revolutionary, but the religion of the Father is conservative.'[260] Merleau-Ponty concludes the section by criticising the position of Catholics (and, by extension, any religious believers) in the political sphere, insisting that their faith prevents them from committing fully to a cause: 'He is a poor conservative and an unsafe bet as a revolutionary.'[261] Much of Merleau-Ponty's criticism of religion is less concerned with the philosophy of religion than with its social, political and ethical implications. The problem of evil deeply influenced Merleau-Ponty's thinking on religion: he considered theodicy to have made no progress since Leibniz,[262] and followed Maritain's assertion that the saint must be an atheist with respect to God as Creator given the extent of evil and injustice in the world.[263]

While Merleau-Ponty reserved his sharpest criticism for the political and social role of religion, he also challenged the philosophical ground for classical theistic belief. Merleau-Ponty consistently challenges notions of an absolute and objective deity, along with the structured hierarchies of the Church, and yet is equally uncomfortable in closing down the question of religion altogether.[264] His philosophical attack on the idea of an absolute God comes in 'The Metaphysical in Man', in which he argues for an unsystematic metaphysics based on the contingency of human experience and knowledge which does not suppose 'an absolute observer in whom all points of view are summed up'.[265] This has damaging consequences for most religions and their 'positing of an absolute thinker of the world.'[266] This is not just a narrow attack on religion but the logical conclusion of Merleau-Ponty's wider philosophy. Merleau-Ponty's arguments in the *Phenomenology of Perception* that perception is embodied and perspectival make the notion of a God's-eye-view – and thus any being who occupies such a viewpoint – nonsensical.[267] Merleau-Ponty's lifelong attack on totalising thought, which reaches its climax in his critique of *la pensée de survol* [high-altitude thinking] in *The Visible and the Invisible*, seems incompatible with the religious idea

[259] *SNS*, 174–5.
[260] *SNS*, 177.
[261] *SNS*, 178.
[262] *SNS*, 96.
[263] *PrP*, 47.
[264] He calls antitheism 'an inverted theology' which 'holds locked up within itself the very theology which it is attacking'. *PrP*, 43.
[265] *SNS*, 93.
[266] *SNS*, 96.
[267] *PhP*, 211; see also *VI*, 77—78. Daniel Berman has developed Merleau-Ponty's reasoning to argue that the notion of omniscience is incoherent. Berman follows Merleau-Ponty's aesthetic philosophy, which argues that understanding an artwork requires occupying a specific, limited perspective, to argue that aesthetic knowledge is closed off to a being with an aperspectival viewpoint, and thus for the incoherence of omniscience. Michael P. Berman, *Merleau-Ponty and God: Hallowing the Hollow* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017), 39–56.

of a God who sits above the world, adopting the perspectiveless position of the absolute consciousness which Merleau-Ponty spent so much effort challenging. Thus, Merleau-Ponty argues, in the end all theology becomes anthropology. There is an ambiguity in religion by which 'we never know if it is God who sustains men in their human being or if it is the inverse, since in order to know his existence it is necessary to pass through ours, and this is not an optional detour'.[268] The problem for religion is that any knowledge of God must be human knowledge of God. Thus, even if we could attain knowledge of this necessary and absolute being, this knowledge must pass through our contingency.[269]

> There is nothing one can say about this hidden God inaccessible to speculation whose affirmation lies in the shadowy regions of faith, and in the end He would appear to be a postulate of human life rather than the most certain of beings.[270]

When the contingencies of human knowledge confront the necessary and absolute being of God, the insight we receive is not into religious mysteries but rather into the human condition, such that, 'perhaps in the end the religion of God-made-man arrives by an unavoidable dialectic at an anthropology and not a theology.'[271] None of this means that religious consciousness is of no interest to philosophy; indeed, Merleau-Ponty writes in *In Praise of Philosophy* that the ideas of eternity or necessary being 'appear prosaic to [the philosopher] in comparison with this constant manifesting of religious phenomena through all the stages of world history'.[272] Similarly, in 'Faith and Good Faith', Merleau-Ponty speaks admiringly of Christianity as the religion of the Spirit, in which 'God is no longer in Heaven but in human society and communication'.[273] The transcendence sought by human beings might not be found in an absolute infinite being but this does not mean that the whole enterprise should be jettisoned. Rather, God can be found in the collective human spirit. Our ideas about God might tell us more about human existence than divine being, yet this does not make them unimportant. The persistence of religious thought reveals an openness to transcendence at the base of human experience and a primeval attitude of wonder towards the world.

Despite his critique of traditional religion, Merleau-Ponty nevertheless retained a deep sense of wonder which permeates his philosophical writings. In the preface to the *Phenomenology of Perception*, he described phenomenology as 'a "wonder" before the world'.[274]

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[268] *PrP*, 26.
[269] William Luijpen notes that Merleau-Ponty's notion of contingency differs from that employed by most metaphysicians and theologians. Merleau-Ponty is concerned with an 'anthropological sense of contingency', according to which contingency is the proper mode of being for subjectivity. The intrusion of necessity would transform the free contingent subject into a thing – like Sartre's paperknife. This conception may not be recognised by metaphysicians or theologians who would consider contingency metaphysically and regard both the human subject and the paperknife to be contingent and thus requiring a necessary grounding. William A. Luijpen, *Phenomenology and Atheism* (Pittsburgh: Duquesene University Press, 1964), 308–9.
[270] *SNS*, 176.
[271] *SNS*, 76.
[272] *PrP*, 45.
[273] *SNS*, 177.
[274] *PhP*, lxxvii.

> The world and reason are not problems; and though we might call them mysterious, this mystery is essential to them, there can be no question of dissolving it through some "solution", it is beneath the level of solutions.[275]

The first task of philosophy is not to find solutions but to 'see the world anew', to recapture humanity's basic enchantment with the perceived world. The phenomenologist's task is like that of the writer or artist, it demands 'the same kind of attention and wonder' to capture the sense of the world.[276] While we might describe this attitude of wonder as religious or religiously inspired, Merleau-Ponty's sense of wonder never transcends the perceived world or opens the door for theological reflection. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty presents this philosophical wonder as antithetical to theology: 'Theology makes use of philosophical wonder only for the purpose of motivating an affirmation which ends it.'[277] When theology uses wonder as a route to God, the wonder is lost along the way. Once God is invoked as the explanation for the world, the world is no longer mysterious. The contemporary atheist or humanist does not oppose religion by offering alternative, atheist explanations of the world; rather, atheism and humanism recognise the inexplicable contingency of the world.[278] Merleau-Ponty insists on the contingency of the world not as a precursor to some cosmological argument but as a basic fact of the world. We must remember, however, that this is neither the world of objectivism and scientism nor of the absolute constituting consciousness. This is the world of phenomenology: that is, the perceived world, as seen from the limited, human perspective which is made meaningful by the act of perception. Contingency, then, is neither a source of nihilistic despair nor the preamble to theology. It rather expresses the limited perspective of human beings who do not understand the world but stand before it in wonder. For them, perception is a miracle. This contingency and thus this sense of wonder is swept away by theological thinking, undercutting the religious instinct in human beings. In doing so, religion becomes an objectivising and absolutising force which separates humans from the wonder of the world.

> But the return to an explanatory theology and the compulsive reaffirmation of the *Ens realissimum* drag back all the consequences of a massive transcendence that religious reflection was trying to escape. Once again the Church, its sacred depository, its unverifiable secret beyond the visible, separates itself from actual society. Once more the Heaven of principles and the earth of doubt are sundered.[279]

In a sense, Merleau-Ponty's thoughts on religion come full circle. Religion takes wonder – a basically religious instinct – and derives an absolute, objective God. The world is no longer a source of wonder but something to be explained; meaning is no longer found in the world but in God, the explanation of the world. This explanatory religion thus separates itself from the world and finds its meaning in God, causing exactly the kind of social ambivalence and political unreliability we found at the beginning of this section.

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[275] *PhP*, lxxxv.
[276] *PhP*, lxxxv.
[277] *PrP*, 44.
[278] *S*, 151, 240–41.
[279] *S*, 242.

Literature on Merleau-Ponty and Religion

Early Literature

While Merleau-Ponty had a complex relationship with religion, there is relatively little literature which deals with the possible implications of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy for theology or the philosophy of religion. Most of this literature has been written in the last decade, although there is a small body of work from the 1960s and 70s. The majority of this older literature takes an orthodox Christian perspective and attempts either to defend religion from some of Merleau-Ponty's criticisms,[280] or alternatively to find theological resources in Merleau-Ponty.[281] The only writer from this period which takes a different approach is John Bannan, who challenges the theologising tendency of Merleau-Ponty's other interpreters.[282] For example, Régis Jolivet engages with Merleau-Ponty's concern that explanatory theology robs the world of its wonder and mystery by arguing that the solutions offered by religion need not supress philosophical wonder and that the apophatic affirmation of God as mystery can keep the phenomenological mystery alive within a theological framework.[283] There is perhaps some value in this argument, since Merleau-Ponty's objection is to the objectivising explanatory God of rationalistic religion; however, Merleau-Ponty's philosophy would caution us against over-confidence in our religious explanations. In any case, it is likely that Merleau-Ponty would find this theological move unnecessary, since for him the mystery of the world requires no explanation. Even with an apophatic and mysterious God, philosophical wonder has shifted from the world to God and, if not robbing the world of its mystery, then certainly diminishes it in the face of the infinite mystery of God.

Atherton Lowry and Frans Vandenbussche go further than this by not only rebutting Merleau-Ponty's criticisms of religion but arguing that a latent theology exists in Merleau-Ponty's own work. Lowry adopts Merleau-Ponty's affirmation of the world's contingency and uses this to develop a form of cosmological argument for God's existence. 'Once we recognize the radical contingency of any finite thing's "to be"', Lowry argues, 'then we are under way to affirming God's existence.'[284] Vandenbussche goes further than this, arguing that Merleau-Ponty's rejection of God should be understood as only the rejection of 'the God of rationalism'[285] and finding that 'the living God' is neither rejected nor even known by the philosopher.[286] This leaves open the possibility of knowing God apophatically, which Vandenbussche believes remained a live option in what he regards as the second period of Merleau-Ponty's thought, his 'openness to being'.[287] Thus, while Lowry argues that Merleau-

[280] Régis Jolivet, 'The Problem of God in the Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty', *Philosophy Today* 7, no. 2 (1963): 150–64; Luijpen, *Phenomenology and Atheism*, 292–337.
[281] Frans Vandenbussche, 'The Problem of God in the Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty', *International Philosophical Quarterly* 7, no. 1 (1967): 45–67; Atherton Lowry, 'Merleau-Ponty and the Absence of God', *Philosophy Today* 22, no. 2 (1978): 119–26.
[282] John F. Bannan, 'Merleau-Ponty on God', *International Philosophical Quarterly* 6, no. 3 (1966): 341–65.
[283] Jolivet, 'The Problem of God in the Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty', 158–60.
[284] Lowry, 'Merleau-Ponty and the Absence of God', 123.
[285] Vandenbussche, 'The Problem of God in the Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty', 58.
[286] Vandenbussche, 61.
[287] Vandenbussche, 64–67.

Ponty's philosophy of contingency logically entails an affirmation of God which Merleau-Ponty failed to recognise, Vandenbussche suggests that Merleau-Ponty's thought was in fact heading in a theological direction but was prematurely halted by his untimely death.

These arguments, however, do not align with Merleau-Ponty's own writing. Take, for example, the following extract from the introduction to *Signs*, written in the last years of Merleau-Ponty's life.

> Everything rests upon the insurpassable richness, the miraculous multiplication of perceptual being, which gives the same things the power to be things for more than one perceiver, and makes some of the things – human and animal bodies – have not only hidden faces but an "other side," a perceiving side, *whose significance is based upon what is perceptible to me*. […] Everything depends, that is, upon the fact that our glances are no "acts of consciousness," each of which claims an invariable priority, but openings of our flesh which are immediately filled with the universal flesh of the world.[288]

Despite the religious feeling of this passage – with its talk of miracles and 'insurpassable riches' – Merleau-Ponty remains firmly grounded in the perceptual world. The riches are of 'perceptual being' and 'the universal flesh of the world'. In 1991, Dominique Janicaud praised Merleau-Ponty for remaining faithful to the phenomenological method, which 'presupposes nothing other than an untiring desire for elucidation of that which most hides itself away in experience'.[289] That which exceeds human perception is not to be found in transcendence but in 'the depth of the world'.[290] This is mirrored by Berman, who notes that for Merleau-Ponty 'there is an excess to the world. The world as surplus outruns, overflows, and overspills perceptual experience per se.'[291] This is where Merleau-Ponty differs from later thinkers such as Jean-Luc Marion, for whom excess is the sign of a transcendent phenomenon.[292] What interpreters such as Lowry and Vandenbussche misunderstand is that Merleau-Ponty does not regard the world's contingency to be a fact of the objective world which requires grounding in necessary being; rather, the world is the perceptual world and its contingency is a phenomenological fact deriving from the limited perspective inherent in human perception. Phenomenology for Merleau-Ponty enables us to perceive the depth of the world.[293] Contingency and excess are found in the world's depth which is a function of human perception; such a phenomenology has no need for a theological development and Merleau-Ponty showed no inclinations of moving in this direction.

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[288] *S*, 16, emphasis original.
[289] Janicaud, 'The Theological Turn of French Phenomenology', 27.
[290] Janicaud, 27.
[291] Berman, *Merleau-Ponty and God*, 2.
[292] See, for example, Jean-Luc Marion, 'The Saturated Phenomenon', in *Phenomenology and the 'Theological Turn': The French Debate*, by Dominique Janicaud et al., trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 176–216; Marion, *Being Given*; Jean-Luc Marion, *Givenness and Revelation*, trans. Stephen E. Lewis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).
[293] See Merleau-Ponty's criticism of Descartes's *Dioptrics* and discussion of depth perception in 'EM', 130–39.

Contemporary Literature

After a hiatus in scholarly work on Merleau-Ponty and religion, the past decade has seen a number of philosophers and theologians rediscover Merleau-Ponty as a resource for theology and philosophy of religion. One example is Christopher Ben Simpson's *Merleau-Ponty and Theology*, a work which seeks to draw parallels between theology (which is limited predominantly to Christian patristics) and Merleau-Ponty's philosophy.[294] Simpson's book is split into two parts, the first outlining the key points of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, with the second presenting potential sites of interaction between the Church Fathers and Merleau-Ponty where Simpson perceives apparent similarities between the two. While he claims that his work is a 'theological appropriation of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy',[295] there is disappointingly little dialogue between Merleau-Ponty and the theological traditions upon which Simpson draws. For example, Simpson draws parallels between Merleau-Ponty's insistence on the importance of embodiment and Christian emphases on the body, such as the doctrines of the incarnation and bodily resurrection. However, despite Merleau-Ponty's appropriation of some Christian terms, none of this amounts to very much for theology. Simpson notes that the 'doctrine of the Incarnation announces the union of the Triune God and the physical in a human body',[296] and that 'the Incarnation is also intended to bring about the salvation of human beings.'[297] Yet, Merleau-Ponty specifically rejects Trinitarian theology in 'Faith and Good Faith' as an antidialectical theology which freezes the progress of religion.[298] And while Merleau-Ponty does recognise a salvific movement in incarnational Christianity, this is far from an orthodox understanding of the notion. For Merleau-Ponty, salvation is achieved on Earth, through political action and human cooperation which requires the rejection of religious dogma and hierarchy. Thus, while Simpson correctly identifies certain religious themes in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, it is not clear that these can bear the weight of comparison to which he subjects them.

An alternative approach to using Merleau-Ponty's philosophy in theological discourse can be found in James K. A. Smith's *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works*.[299] This is the second volume in Smith's *Cultural Liturgies* series in which he envisions a new approach to Christian education and formation which is based on a recognition of the fact that human formation is primarily an aesthetic, affective, bodily process, rather than being intellectualist and doctrinal.[300] In this volume, Smith engages the thought of Merleau-Ponty and Pierre Bourdieu to offer a philosophical grounding for his practical, liturgical and pedagogic suggestions. Smith targets what he calls an intellectualist anthropology, highly influential in the contemporary church, which asserts that Christian education and discipleship is primarily a task of educating the Christian to understand certain truths and adopt a

[294] Christopher Ben Simpson, *Merleau-Ponty and Theology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).
[295] Simpson, 91.
[296] Simpson, 123.
[297] Simpson, 125.
[298] *SNS*, 177.
[299] James K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013).
[300] James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 24–27.

particular worldview.[301] Without diminishing the importance of the intellect in education, Smith contends that placing the intellect as the primary site of Christian formation neglects to 'consider the significance of our non- and pre-intellectual orientation to the world'.[302] For Smith, human beings are primarily shaped by stories, and stories affect human beings at a pre-conscious, bodily level.[303] Hence, there is a descriptive and a normative task in Smith's work: descriptively, Smith is arguing that human beings are driven by affective bodily influences, delivered through narrative; normatively, Smith argues that an effective Christian pedagogy (whether in Christian educational institutions or churches) ought to recognise the importance of embodying narrative in Christian formation. Rather than seeking theological resources in Merleau-Ponty, Smith applies Merleau-Ponty's anthropology to develop a Christian pedagogy. This is good as far as it goes, although it cannot be said that Smith engages Merleau-Ponty deeply on a philosophical level. For Smith, the specifics of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy are less important than its ability to support Smith's thesis that the body is important in human thought and learning, and Smith does not develop these ideas philosophically. This is not Smith's purpose so does not detract significantly from his work; however, if we want to see how Merleau-Ponty's work can be integrated with philosophical and theological thought about religion we will need to look elsewhere.

Recent publications by Orion Edgar and Michael Berman can shed light on the ways in which Merleau-Ponty's philosophy can fruitfully be employed in theological reasoning. Although the two scholars appear to be unaware of each other, they represent two sides of a debate regarding the use of Merleau-Ponty in theology. Edgar's *Things Seen and Unseen: The Logic of Incarnation in Merleau-Ponty's Metaphysics of Flesh* is a highly successful approach to utilising Merleau-Pontian philosophical resources for the benefit of theology.[304] Edgar marries the incarnational logic of Merleau-Ponty's notion of flesh and the depth of the perceptual world with a theology of immanent participation to offer an account of a transcendent God who can be known by humans through the logic of the incarnation. For Edgar, the immanent depth of phenomenology discovered by Merleau-Ponty opens the door to the transcendent.

> Philosophy begins in immanence, but it cannot remain there; immanence cannot be made complete. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, I have shown, ultimately "reaches beyond" itself to an ontology, because phenomenological appearance is constituted by an ontological "depth" against which it will always come up. As we make this ontology explicit, we find that it in turn points outside of the domain of ontology towards that of metaphysics.[305]

At first glance this appears very close to Vandenbussche's argument that the logical conclusion of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is theology. As we have said, this kind of

[301] Smith, 27–28.
[302] Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 13.
[303] Smith, 13–14.
[304] Orion Edgar, *Things Seen and Unseen: The Logic of Incarnation in Merleau-Ponty's Metaphysics of Flesh* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 2016).
[305] Edgar, 235–36.

argument runs directly against the grain of Merleau-Ponty's own writing, for whom the idea of finding transcendence in immanence was deeply paradoxical.[306] There are even points at which Edgar appears to argue that Merleau-Ponty's atheism was simply due to his unfamiliarity with any theology beyond neo-scholasticism, and that had his theological horizons been broader he would have accepted religious faith. In delivering an account of God as subsistent existence who makes his transcendence known from the depth of existence, Edgar argues that 'Merleau-Ponty's ontology, and his critique of Christianity, cry out for such an account, but, having not discovered it, he remained an atheist.'[307]

This conclusion, like Vandenbussche's, should be resisted for the reasons outlined above but this is not the only viable reading of Edgar's work. In the introduction, Edgar argues that his intention is to 'show how Merleau-Ponty's philosophy justifies a logic that is consonant with Christian faith'.[308] This is a very different project: rather than seeking to uncover a latent theology within Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, the intention is to use philosophical resources in Merleau-Ponty to develop and better understand Christian theology.

> While Merleau-Ponty's position *does not* imply an approval of all the contents of Christian belief and experience; perhaps it would be right to say that Christian theology *does* imply an ontology that is something like the fleshly ontology we have developed here.[309]

This kind of project is much more viable. The direction of travel is one-way: Merleau-Ponty was not a Christian and his philosophy in no way necessitates Christian belief; nevertheless, his philosophy can offer valuable insights for Christian theology, such that one could argue that a Christian theology which takes seriously the incarnation requires a Merleau-Pontian ontology and metaphysics – or something like it. Used in this way, with the understanding that one is always interpreting and adapting Merleau-Ponty when taking his thought in theological directions, his philosophy can be a valuable resource to theology.

In contrast to Edgar, Michael Berman's *Merleau-Ponty and God: Hallowing the Hollow* develops a Merleau-Pontian inspired theology of the absence of God, a work which takes much more seriously Merleau-Ponty's atheism and engages more deeply with his philosophical understanding of wonder and mystery. Berman's is a rare example of Jewish theological engagement with Merleau-Ponty and if Berman is not an atheist, then he certainly rejects the God of classical theism and develops unique and compelling critiques of omnipotence and theodicy by examining the consequences of Merleau-Ponty's thought.[310] For example, in his chapter on the love of God, Berman asks us to consider the idea of an apathetic God, which 'certainly would provide a solution to the problem of evil, for the traditional predication of omnibenevolence could be dropped.'[311] Berman opens his book by comparing religious faith with Merleau-Ponty's conception of perceptual faith. While there

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[306] *SNS*, 96. See also Bannan, 'Merleau-Ponty on God', 349.
[307] Edgar, *Things Seen and Unseen*, 248.
[308] Edgar, 6.
[309] Edgar, 242–43, emphasis original.
[310] For omnipotence, see Berman, *Merleau-Ponty and God*, 39–56; for theodicy, see Berman, 113–30.
[311] Berman, *Merleau-Ponty and God*, 36.

are similarities, Berman argues that, like religious faith, perceptual faith involves an openness to the world and interrogation of perception; however, 'unlike religious faith, perceptual faith does not expect to receive a final or absolute answer'.[312] Hence, perceptual faith has the capacity to correct the tendency of thought towards absolutism or *la pensée de survol*, in contrast to the objectivism of religious faith. By recognising religious faith's grounding in perceptual faith, it is possible to achieve a religious faith which is open and can shift according to the movements of society and history. This leaves us with 'a picture that does not do away with faith, but rather illustrates that fecund *Gestalt* out of which it grows.'[313] Berman recognises that this kind of faith, which 'taken to its extreme is a reflection of human institution', has the potential to morph into a kind of anthropology which might make theologians uneasy. Yet Berman offers reassurance: when we move into the realm of the inexpressible mysteries, biology, anthropology and theology converge as methods of interrogating human experience.[314] This may offer little comfort to the orthodox theologian, for whom the affirmation of a transcendent God is a priority; however, Berman's intention is not to reassure orthodoxy but rather to explore the richness of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy for resourcing a negative theology of God's absence, immanent mystery and human co-operation.

Berman's achievement is to find theological meaning in Merleau-Ponty without appealing to transcendent or absolute being. Berman is deeply influenced by Martin Buber's *I and Thou* yet, unlike Buber, finds no need to appeal to the transcendent other. Berman adopts Buber's description of the meaningful encounter with the other which enables the emergence of I-Thou relationships. These encounters are meaningful because they take place within a life and world which is already intrinsically meaningful and, while Buber would validate this meaningfulness in the transcendent I-Thou encounter with God, 'Merleau-Ponty, however, does not need to appeal "beyond" our experiences and perceptual faith in this world to an ultimately eternal You, because this world and our engagements with it are more than enough to demonstrate how intimately our lives are bound to the generation of meaning.'[315] Faith, for Berman, is to be placed in the fecund meaningfulness of the perceived world, which overruns and exceeds our perceptual capabilities and offers the possibility of hope. Hallowing the hollow, therefore, means securing the meaning of the world by avoiding explanations and objective answers, instead seeking sacredness and meaning as it appears to us in the perceptual world.

> Far from being a nihilistic claim, to hallow the hollow is to faithfully adhere to perception, for through this we cannot but judge the world with a positive valence in a manner very much like the reflective judgements of Kant.[316]

This conclusion is certainly compatible with Merleau-Ponty's thought, capturing as it does the spirit of philosophical wonder which so arrested Merleau-Ponty without thereby

[312] Berman, 5.
[313] Berman, 21.
[314] Berman, 21.
[315] Berman, 254.
[316] Berman, 154–55.

overreaching the capacities of reason by establishing some transcendent existence beyond the world. However, Berman's thesis is built upon Merleau-Ponty's notion of perceptual faith and we might want to question just how much optimism this idea can support. According to Merleau-Ponty, meaning comes from perception: as his various works on painting show, perception is intrinsically meaningful.[317] Thus, the lifeworld is intrinsically meaningful because it is the perceived world. Added to this, Merleau-Ponty notes the wonder with which we ought to approach the world, which is derived from the world's excessive capacity to outstrip our perception. This does seem to provide some cause for optimism: the world is always more than we perceive, there is always more to perceive – and so more meaning to be found. However, in his chapter on the problem of evil, Berman notes Merleau-Ponty's acknowledgement of the contingency of goodness in the world, that 'there is no necessity in the sense of metaphysical necessity for progress per se.' The implication is that, 'even if things improve, there is always the possibility that it could all come crashing down or that we will suffer some unforeseen catastrophe. This is the cynical edge one can expect of an existentialist, which need not be fatalistic, but is realistic and pragmatic.'[318] Merleau-Ponty does find cause for optimism but only in a limited sense.

> Progress is not necessary with a metaphysical necessity; we can only say that experience will very likely end up by eliminating false solutions and working its way out of impasses. But at what price, by how many detours? We cannot even exclude the possibility that humanity, like a sentence which does not succeed in drawing to a close, will suffer shipwreck on its way.[319]

Hope, for Merleau-Ponty, is found in human co-operation and society.[320] Yet, with no metaphysical guide, this hope is strictly contingent – a phenomenological hope of probability, rather than the theological hope of certainty. If by optimism, Berman simply means the continued possibility of finding meaning in the world, then Merleau-Ponty's philosophy certainly can be called optimistic: an atheist existentialism need not be nihilistic. However, in the absence of a guiding absolute, any hope we discover must be tempered by the pragmatism of a French philosopher writing in the years following the Second World War.

This comparison of Edgar and Berman illustrates some of the opportunities and pitfalls of employing Merleau-Ponty in philosophical theology. Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on the perceived world offers a route to finding sacredness through phenomenal engagement with the world, without setting up an absolute transcendent divinity beforehand. Whereas Edgar finds an immanent incarnated divinity, Berman discovered a wondrous and hallowed absence in the depth of the world. This illustrates the fecundity of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy and, while there may appear to be a considerable distance between the two positions, the attention given to Merleau-Ponty's careful phenomenology and the wonder

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[317] See, for example, *SNS*, 15–17; *PhP*, 238–9.
[318] Berman, *Merleau-Ponty and God*, 123.
[319] *S*, 239.
[320] This perhaps reflects Merleau-Ponty's claim that 'God is no longer in Heaven but in human society and communication'. *SNS*, 177.

and mystery he finds in perception reveals the two works to be much closer than first imagined. In adjudicating the issue, we might indeed find that the mystery inherent in both positions – and within Merleau-Ponty's own phenomenology – requires us to postpone an answer indefinitely. This is perhaps no bad thing since, as Merleau-Ponty would agree, finding a solution to the world robs it of the mystery which was the source of the original religious instinct. Doubtless, however, is that attention to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology will lead us to find an endless fecundity in the perceptual world which, if taken seriously, ought to be a source of endless wonder and mystery. This offers opportunities for positive and negative theologies alike; Merleau-Ponty should not be made to adjudicate between these positions but will hold both accountable to the centrality of perception and the tendency of philosophy towards the absolute.

A similar debate can be found in *Merleau-Ponty at the Limits of Art, Religion, and Perception* between Richard Kearney and Joseph O'Leary. Kearney argues that Merleau-Ponty's notion of flesh is a sacramental philosophy which 'relocat[es] logos to the moment of sacred transcendence in the immanence of nature', thereby 'restoring logos to the flesh of the world'.[321] O'Leary responds by reaffirming Merleau-Ponty's resistance to transcendent and absolute answers to the mystery of the world, arguing that the problem with taking Merleau-Ponty's apparent sacramentality as religious is that 'it is often a religion without God'.[322] This mirrors the above debate between Edgar and Berman, and O'Leary seems to be right here: while one certainly can find religious concepts in Merleau-Ponty, and his thought can be a fertile source for theological reflection, this does not amount to finding any significant theology in Merleau-Ponty himself.

At this juncture it is worth making a brief comment on the relationship between philosophy and theology. Much of the literature I have discussed which deploys Merleau-Ponty's philosophy theologically can be classified as philosophical theology. That is, these works use philosophical methods and resources to reach theological conclusions. My criticism of these projects is strictly philosophical. More precisely, I challenge the notion that such theological conclusions can be reached using the philosophical resources of Merleau-Ponty alone. It may well be that Merleau-Ponty's theology can resource various theological reflections. I take no issue with this position and it is neither unusual nor inappropriate for theologians to appropriate philosophers in this way. My purpose here is to argue against the view that any kind of theology is already implicitly present in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy; theological use of Merleau-Ponty is legitimate but we must recognise that it involves the augmentation of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy with theological methods.

Conclusion

Having surveyed Merleau-Ponty's life and works, outlined his views on religion, and surveyed literature which employs Merleau-Ponty's philosophy in religious or theological

[321] Richard Kearney, 'Merleau-Ponty and the Sacramentality of the Flesh', in *Merleau-Ponty at the Limits of Art, Religion, and Perception*, ed. Kascha Semonovitch and Neal DeRoo (London: Continuum, 2010), 158.
[322] Joseph S. O'Leary, 'Merleau-Ponty and Modernist Sacrificial Poetics: A Response to Richard Kearney', in *Merleau-Ponty at the Limits of Art, Religion, and Perception*, ed. Kascha Semonovitch and Neal DeRoo (London: Continuum, 2010), 177.

contexts, we can now outline how Merleau-Ponty's philosophy will be deployed in this thesis. As we discussed in the introduction, this thesis does not ask theological questions but rather brackets metaphysical and theological considerations. We are therefore not seeking theological answers in Merleau-Ponty. However, we are inspired by Merleau-Ponty's sense of wonder, both at the perceptual world and at the human capacity for religion. Wonder in the face of the world was, for Merleau-Ponty, not a reason to theologise but precisely a reason *not* to theologise. Merleau-Ponty is at best ambivalent on questions of theology and, while a careful appropriation of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy for theology is possible, Merleau-Ponty's insistence of the mystery of the perceptual world prevents any attempts to adjudicate between theological positions. Yet, while questions of theology 'appear prosaic' to Merleau-Ponty, the 'constant manifesting of religious phenomena throughout world history' does not.[323] While Merleau-Ponty can appear unimpressed with the great theological questions of the existence and nature of God, he finds the religious consciousness fascinating. Whatever our views on religion, he believes, we ought to find it remarkable that religions and spiritual practices emerge throughout history and across diverse human cultures. This extends an alternative question for philosophy of religion: what is it about human beings which leads them to think religiously and develop spiritual practices and beliefs over and again throughout human history? My contention in this thesis is that Merleau-Ponty's philosophy can help explain this human proclivity for religion and, in particular, why and how humans come to experience religious conversions – without thereby reducing the phenomena either to psychologism or theologism.

In order to pursue this task, it will be necessary to go beyond Merleau-Ponty's own thinking and writings. However, I propose that, even so, we can remain faithful to the spirit and style of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy. Hence, while our conclusions may in the end depart from the views Merleau-Ponty expressed in his lifetime, we may nevertheless maintain that our approach continues a line of thought and a style of thinking begun by Merleau-Ponty, which he would at least have recognised. If we are to be faithful to the spirit and style of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, we must ask what comprises this spirit and style. I suggest three points that will allow us to trace a line of continuity between Merleau-Ponty and this thesis.

First, Merleau-Ponty proceeds according to a method of careful phenomenology. He pays careful attention to the description and analysis of the contents and structure of phenomenal experience and sought always to understand this phenomenologically. Merleau-Ponty rightly recognised that the question of whether or not anything exists beyond the phenomena is not a question which can be answered by phenomenology. Thus, in this thesis we shall pay careful attention to phenomenological experience – both of human experience in general and conversions in particular – and bracket metaphysical and theological questions. The result of this careful phenomenology is a focus on the immanence of the world and our immersion in it. Perception was the driving force behind Merleau-Ponty's life's work. Perception reveals a human perceiver immersed in and at one with the world. We cannot understand human experience until we realise that we are material subjects in a physical world, with bodies that condition and enable our perception

[323] *PrP*, 45.

and experience. To understand perception and ourselves, we must understand the body. For Merleau-Ponty, this was never a reductionism: his critique of empiricism and scientism warned against a view of language or society as *nothing more* than physical processes. Yet, Merleau-Ponty maintained that we cannot understand these phenomena if we do not understand that they are embodied. Thus, this thesis does not suggest that conversion is simply a product of physical or physiological processes, nor that the linguistic and social factors work as closed causal systems to create conversions. We recognise language and community as important and efficacious phenomena in their own right, irreducible to physical processes, while maintaining that they are also embodied phenomena. While avoiding the pitfalls of reductionism, we also hold that a disembodied conception of language and society will inevitably be misleading.

Second, Merleau-Ponty paid attention to the natural and social sciences of his day. Unusual among phenomenologists, Merleau-Ponty engaged extensively with fields such as biology, psychology, linguistics, and child development. This does not mean that he accepted everything he read: Merleau-Ponty kept a critical distance from these other disciplines, exploring their philosophical implications and critiquing those theories which rested on or created philosophically indefensible positions. Nevertheless, he recognised that engaging with the careful studies into perception or human experience from other disciplines would benefit phenomenology. Merleau-Ponty offers a model for cross-disciplinary work in philosophy. Remaining dedicated to his philosophical project, he explored how findings in other disciplines might contribute to our philosophical understanding, while also unearthing the philosophical assumptions that lay beneath and sometimes misled other fields of study. We can continue this attention to contemporary natural and social science. Social scientific research into conversion has already helped identify our object of study. More than this, Merleau-Ponty's work has been adapted and deployed in contemporary anthropology and cognitive science and we will explore some of theses approaches in the following chapters. While it remains important to keep a critical distance from these disciplines, our phenomenological research can also benefit from the valuable insights offered into human experience.

Third, Merleau-Ponty makes regular use of historical thinkers as conversation partners, whom he repeats, responds to, and adapts. As Kascha Semonovitch and Neal DeRoo argue, Merleau-Ponty was content to take philosophers, writers and artists beyond their native territory and redeploy them for his own purposes. While this 'ventriloquism' has been criticised by others, Semonovitch and DeRoo argue that such an approach is in fact consistent with Merleau-Ponty's own meta-philosophy. For Merleau-Ponty, philosophy is never finished: it 'can begin endlessly because it is a creative act, an act of expression.'[324] Insight from the past can be redeployed and made to speak to present concerns. Indeed, it is from Merleau-Ponty himself that we learn the essential situatedness of all acts of expression. Philosophy is a product of its time and culture which speaks to contemporary issues, so to transplant a philosophy from one time and place into another without

[324] Kascha Semonovitch and Neal DeRoo, 'Introduction', in *Merleau-Ponty at the Limits of Art, Religion, and Perception*, ed. Kascha Semonovitch and Neal DeRoo (London: Continuum, 2010), 8.

alteration is impossible. Still, the ways and styles of thinking that we find in historical philosophers can be picked up and developed, suited to our own context, and utilised to answer the questions and problems of our own situation. Hence, we may use Merleau-Ponty's thought to answer our questions about religious conversion even if we recognise that Merleau-Ponty never concerned himself with the question of conversion. It is consistent with Merleau-Ponty's own style of philosophy to adapt philosophies of the past to respond to present issues. It is in this spirit, then, that we begin our analysis of conversion with an investigation into embodiment.

3. Embodiment: The Belief-Forming Context of Conversion

With a clearly defined object of study and our key philosophical resource introduced, we are now ready to embark upon a constructive phenomenological analysis of religious conversion. To do this, we will begin with an analysis of embodiment. Conversions are clearly embodied experiences. Even if our study was restricted to dramatic one-off conversion events, the role of the body in such experiences cannot be denied. William James, even while strictly distinguishing between personal and institutional religion, still recognised the place of the body in conversion events. For example, one of James's case studies is a young man named Stephen Bradley who experienced a dramatic conversion event after attending a Methodist revival meeting in 1829. Bradley reported that he 'trembled involuntarily', that his 'heart increased in its beating', and that the experience made him 'groan like a person in distress'.[325] This is clearly a visceral, embodied experience for which the response of the body is essential. A disembodied soul could not have had Bradley's experience and the *Varieties* is full of similar such examples.[326] If we expand our view to conversion experiences more broadly, we find that the fact of their embodiment remains an essential aspect. By situating conversion within broader conversion careers, Gooren draws attention to the importance of the perhaps less visceral but no less embodied elements of conversion experience which are mediated through the body. Even if this wider view of conversion includes experiences which appear to be less visceral that Bradley's, a long-term conversion process – which can include joining a religious community, reading religious texts, participating in religious rituals, expressing new religious ideas, and attending religious places of worship – involves various ways of engaging with a new religion through the body. Whether it involves moments of intense ecstasy or quiet contemplation, religion is experienced through the body. For these reasons, we begin our phenomenological analysis of religious conversion with an analysis of embodiment.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty is the obvious starting point for this analysis, so we will begin this chapter by expanding on some of our comments from chapter two and critically analysing Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of embodiment. We will develop an account of the human being as essentially embodied and of human subjectivity as essentially material, where corporeity is the necessary condition for perception. We will then explore the development in recent decades which has seen Merleau-Ponty become an important resource for cognitive scientists seeking to develop a view of human cognition as embodied, embedded, enactive, and extended (known as 4e cognitive science).[327] This research fruitfully complements Merleau-Ponty's philosophy by examining the ways in which embodiment shapes human experience and perception in closer detail, with reference to empirical experiments. Finally, we will explore the later ontological development of Merleau-Ponty's thought, especially as it relates to the question of embodiment, which I will argue is essential if we are to avoid our philosophy of embodiment collapsing into the kind of mind-body dualism Merleau-Ponty sought to overcome. This will set up chapters four and five,

[325] *Varieties*, 151–2.
[326] *Varieties*, 157, 171–73, 177, 195, 199, and *passim*.
[327] For more on 4e cognition, see Albert Newen, Shaun Gallagher, and Leon De Bruin, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of 4E Cognition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

which will elucidate certain aspects of embodiment which are particularly important for conversion.

We will not yet in this thesis articulate any theory or model of conversion; the intention here is rather to outline the embodied belief-forming context within which conversions take place. Embodiment is a defining characteristic of being human which enables, shapes, and limits every human experience. Therefore, this chapter will start by taking a step back from conversion in order to explore the phenomenology of embodiment in more general terms, before returning to some specific questions about conversion. This will give us the conceptual tools with which to understand what it means for something like conversion to take place in the body – and to protect us from the kinds of materialist or psychological reductionism which often accompanies such ideas. Thus, this chapter should be read as providing theoretical groundwork for the more detailed analyses of expression and community in the following chapters.

The Cartesian Legacy

Any philosophy of embodiment, especially in the Western philosophical tradition, must engage with the question of how the relationship between mind and body ought to be described. This will inevitably involve dealing with the legacy of René Descartes. While Descartes is best known for his substance dualism which has deeply influenced Western thought, far more significant has been the notion that mind and body can be conceived of separately and therefore that they are in some way distinct. The influence of this idea has extended beyond its original dualist context and is still influential today; to see why Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of embodiment is so important and how strongly it breaks with the Western philosophical tradition, we must briefly go back and consider the influence of Descartes.

The traditional view of Descartes is that he is a substance dualist. Using the sceptical method of the *Meditations*, which involves doubting every claim to knowledge I might make and then examining the clear and distinct ideas I find myself to have, Descartes determined that mind and body are two distinct substances,[328] where a substance is understood to be 'a thing which exists in such a way that it needs no other thing [except God] in order to exist.'[329] Because I can have a clear and distinct idea of myself as a thinking thing on the one hand, and of my body on the other, it follows for Descartes that 'it is certain that I am really distinct from my body and can exist without it'.[330] It is important, therefore, that mind and body are conceptually separable: if they can be thought of separately then they are distinct ideas and therefore can exist without one another.

Yet, Cartesian dualism is no naïve idea of a ghost in the machine. Experiences such as pain, hunger and thirst indicate that 'I am not merely present in my body as a sailor is present in a ship, but that I am very closely joined and, as it were, intermingled with it, so that I and the

[328] *Principles*, 1.48.
[329] *Principles*, 1.51.
[330] *Meditations*, 54.

body form a unit.'[331] Descartes is aware (perhaps more so than subsequent interpretations of his thought) of the close interrelationship between soul and body, which he tries to understand in terms of what he calls a 'true substantial union'.[332] As Descartes replies to one of the objections to the *Meditations*, 'human beings… possess both thought and a body… [which] happens as a result of a thinking thing's being combined with a corporeal thing'.[333] For Descartes, while mind (or soul) and body are distinct, they are not completely divorced: although the two are distinct substances, the uniqueness of the human being lies in the fact that it is the creature in which God has miraculously decreed that mind and body are united. However, while it is true that Descartes recognised the complex relationship between mind and body in the human being, the concepts of mind and body are still separated in his thought.

> It is true that I may have (or, to anticipate, that I certainly have) a body that is very closely joined to me. But nevertheless, on the one hand I have a clear and distinct idea of myself, in so far as I am simply a thinking, non-extended thing; and on the other hand I have a distinct idea of body, in so far as this is simply an extended, non-thinking thing. And accordingly, it is certain that I am really distinct from my body, and can exist without it.[334]

Substantial union does not take away from the conceptual separation performed on the notions of mind and body. Indeed, it is notable that Descartes regarded the union of mind and body in human beings as a miracle, explicable only as divinely ordained.[335]

However we interpret Descartes's writing on the relationship between mind and body, the abiding idea is that mind and body can be separated. The influence of Descartes on Western thought is therefore not the separation of mind and body but their separability. The thought that, at the most basic level, mind and body are distinct – whatever subsequent reflection is applied in order to account for their apparent interdependence – leaves philosophy with two distinct and ultimately irreconcilable categories of being. The dichotomous categories of *res cogitans* and *res extensa* have created a working assumption in Western philosophy that mental things and physical things are fundamentally different. Even philosophies which ostensibly reject this distinction still accept this distinction between matter and mind. A materialist who believes that the mind is nothing more than physical structures and the relations between them is still working within the framework of *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, with the caveat that there is nothing in reality which falls into the category of *res cogitans*, and that what is commonly referred to as mind is a complicated but ultimately naturally explicable part of extended reality. Mental properties are from the outset

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[331] *Meditations*, 56.
[332] *Letters*, 130–36.
[333] *Meditations*, 115.
[334] *Meditations*, 54.
[335] Desmond Clarke has argued that we should be careful in portraying Descartes as a strong substance dualist, particularly because he never reached a full and consistent articulation of the concept of substance. Nevertheless, it remains the case that Descartes insists on the basic separability of, and therefore distinction between, soul and body. Desmond M. Clarke, *Descartes's Theory of Mind* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), 207–17.

excluded from materialist philosophy because the underlying ontology remains unchallenged. If we are properly to understand human experience, it will not be enough to reformulate the relationship between mind and body; rather, a new way of thinking which supersedes the distinction of *res cogitans* and *res extensa* is needed. This was Merleau-Ponty's project and it eventually ended up with the development of a new ontological vision; however, the seeds for this were sown in his earlier work. After rejecting empirical psychology's interpretation of animal behaviour in *The Structure of Behaviour*, Merleau-Ponty embarked upon a phenomenological analysis of perception which reveals that the human body does not fit neatly into the dichotomy of *res cogitans* and *res extensa*.

Phenomenology

When Descartes retreated from the things in the world to search for certainty, he discovered the certainty of the self-consciousness which accompanies thinking. However, if this self-consciousness is to be certain, it cannot be just the sum of my psychological experiences because these are experiences of the things in the world which are mediated and uncertain. To be protected from Cartesian doubt, the conscious self must exist outside of the objective world and its temporal constraints – it must be an eternal consciousness which constitutes the world. Thus, argues Merleau-Ponty, 'the *Cogito* ultimately leads me to coincide with God.'[336] Descartes' search for absolute certainty terminates in an absolute consciousness.[337] In contrast, for the temporal, situated subjects that we are, perception is perspectival: the appearance of one side of an object is simultaneously the occlusion of its reverse. To achieve absolute certainty – for the things of the world to be absolutely evident – then, 'rather than being myself, I must become a pure knower of myself, and the world must cease to exist around me in order to become a pure object in front of me.' Absolute truth is only attainable to a subject which has 'ceased being situated.'[338] As Monika Langer notes, the problem with Descartes' cogito is that, for Descartes, perception is an essentially intellectual process whereby those ideas which have the requisite clarity and distinction to form the indubitable basis of our knowledge are based on an act of judgement.[339] While the Cartesian cogito leaves us adrift of the world, Merleau-Ponty argues that subjectivity can be resituated by recognising that Descartes's cogito is based on a prior, prereflective 'tacit cogito' which is an awareness of the self by the self before it begins to think objectively.[340] The tacit cogito takes place before the self thinks of itself as distinct from the objective world and so cannot rise up to become an eternal constituting consciousness. Rather, within the tacit cogito we find that 'the world [is] inseparable from perspectives upon the world' and so we recognise 'subjectivity as inherence in the world.'[341] The Cartesian cogito separates the mind from the world, wrenching it from its situated perspective and into an eternal and fully determinate realm, while objectifying the world – and with it, the body – in the process.

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[336] *PhP*, 392.
[337] Langer, *Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception*, 120.
[338] *PhP*, 416.
[339] Langer, *Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception*, 118.
[340] *PhP*, 426.
[341] *PhP*, 427.

> Universality and the world are at the core of individuality and of the subject. We will never understand this as long as we turn the world into an ob-ject; but we will understand it immediately if the world is the *field* of our experience, and if we are nothing but a perspective upon the world…[342]

If we are to understand human subjectivity and free ourselves from dualist thinking, we must recognise that our subjectivity is entirely defined by its being a limited perspective on the world which exists for us not as a collection of objects but as an open and indeterminate field of potentiality. Perspective is the defining feature of perception and is not adequately accounted for by either empiricism or intellectualism. Perception is for Merleau-Ponty a key example of the interdependence of subjectivity and physicality. In perception, subjectivity meets physicality in such a way that the two cannot be disentangled.

The acosmic constituting consciousness of intellectualism cannot account for perspective because it is not situated in the world. Perception is dependent on the body and its position in the physical world; the fact that our perspective changes as our body moves shows that the body must be included in any account of perception we develop. Phenomenologically – even when we have bracketed out all our preconceptions and assumptions that can be doubted – we find that we cannot perceive something without physically positioning our bodies in such a way that we can see it. These actions often go unnoticed, since our attention is on the act of looking rather than the physical action which must be performed to successfully look at something; nevertheless, whether it is moving the eyes, standing on tiptoes, or walking to a different part of the room, perception requires us to physically move our bodies. The mind which perceives, therefore, is dependent on the physicality of the body, without which perception would be impossible. Indeed, even if we could imagine a disembodied mind which could receive sensory information, it is difficult to see how perspectival perception would be possible. A disembodied mind would either be rooted to one spot,[343] or else occupy a universal view from nowhere, from which nothing is concealed and all perspectives of all objects are seen simultaneously.

Empiricism, on the other hand, seems, *prima facie*, able to grasp perspective since it must recognise the fact that perception always takes place from a particular point of view. However, this fails to do justice to the phenomenon of perception because perception involves the ability to see aspects or sides of an object that are currently obscured from view.

> If there is for me a cube with six equal faces and if I can indeed meet up with the object, this is not because I constitute it from within, but rather because through perceptual experience I plunge into the thickness of the world. […] When I see [the sides of the cube], one after the other and according to perspectival appearance, I do not construct the idea of a geometrical plan that would account for these perspectives; rather, the cube is already there in front of me and unveils itself

[342] *PhP*, 428.

[343] That is, if we imagine some complex brain-in-a-vat scenario in which the mind is hooked up to some kind of static camera. Even in this scenario, the semblance of perception available to the mind is still dependent on physical apparatus of the camera set-up and its physical location in the world.

> through them. I have no need of taking an objective view of my own movement and of bringing it into the account in order to reconstitute the true form of the object behind its appearance. The account is already settled, the new appearance has already entered into composition with the lived movement and is offered as the appearance of a cube.[344]

It is crucial to note here that Merleau-Ponty's account of perception is not the empiricist view that the conscious subject compiles the series of perspectival sensations they have received to constitute a full understanding of an object. Rather, Merleau-Ponty argues precisely the opposite: despite the fact that perception is perspectival, the perceiving subject sees the whole cube. This is not an act of judgement that the back of the cube is probably there, or the expectation that I will see the other sides of the cube if I go to the other side; rather, in one act of perception, all six sides of the cube are present to me. Clearly, this does not mean that all six sides are *visibly* present to me. Yet neither is it the case that two or three sides are presented to me and I am left to judge whether the other side of the cube is likely to be there. If I perceive objects as structured wholes (gestalts) rather than individual parts, then my perception of the cube must be a perception of the whole cube and not just one perspective on it.[345] An empiricist outlook would imply that we can only perceive that which stimulates our senses and the idea of perceiving the back of a cube is nonsense to empiricist ears. Yet the phenomenon of perspective itself indicates the inadequacy of empiricism. To an empiricist there can be no relation between two different sensations since sensations themselves are not meaningful. Thus, if I look at a cube from two different angles, there is nothing in either of these sensations to relate them to one another. This means that nothing would permit me to determine two sensations as two different perspectives on the same cube. Indeed, even if empiricism wants to maintain that the two sensations are unrelated and then later brought into a perspective relation, they cannot. If there really is no meaning in either sensation, then there is nothing that would suggest to the judgement that these two sensations ought to be considered as candidates for being two perspectives on the same cube. Why are one sensation of a cube and one of a sphere not considered as contenders for being two perspectives on one object? If the empiricist wants to hold that the judgement recognises some similarity in the two cube perspectives, then they admit that there is some meaning in each, beyond the sensation itself, which recognises these two as similar. Perspective can no more be explained by empiricism alone than by intellectualism alone. Hence perspective, and perception as a whole, requires that we overcome the naïve distinction between subject and object and

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[344] *PhP*, 211.

[345] This does not mean that I will never be wrong: the cube I perceive could actually be a cube façade, for example. Yet Merleau-Ponty notes that, even if a perceptual appearance breaks up, 'it will do so only for having been so well replaced by another that there remains no trace of it'. The possibility of error is not cause for wholesale doubt; indeed, when we do discover that our perception is wrong, we are not left with a blank hole where the old perception was but rather we find that, in recognising the error of the old perception, a new complete perception immediately takes its place. Merleau-Ponty's claim is a phenomenological one, rather than an epistemological one. The claim that we perceive the whole object in one act of perception is not the claim that we perceive absolutely correctly all of the time; rather, it is the claim that our experience of perception is of perceiving objects in their totality rather than receiving a bundle of sensory data and then combining them into a judgement about what is there. *VI*, 41.

allow for the possibility of a physical subject. Recognising the primacy of perception does not mean 'reducing human knowledge to sensation'.[346] Perception means much more than this and operates at the interface between subjectivity and physicality: this interface is the body.

Having exposed the flaws of empiricist and intellectualist accounts of the body and subjectivity, Merleau-Ponty opens the way to describe his new conception of physical subjectivity. He summarises this new account of bodily subjectivity in 'The Primacy of Perception': 'This subject, which takes a point of view, is my body as the field of perception and action'.[347] My body has a unique permanence for me, such that it 'defies exploration and always appears to me from the same angle'.[348] Unlike external objects, I always perceive my body from one particular perspective and do not have the ability to circumnavigate my body; this limits the possible views of my body available to me. Further, my body conditions my perception of other objects. Rather than being another object in the world which I perceive, I perceive *with* my body. The body should be regarded 'no longer as an object of the world but rather as our means of communicating with it.'[349] This does not mean that a limited objectification of my body is impossible yet, 'insofar as it sees or touches the world, my body can be neither seen nor touched.'[350]

We do not conceive of the body's causality in the same way we do other objects. If I have a pain in my foot, I do not think that I have a pain and that my foot must be the cause of this unpleasant sensation; rather, I perceive that my foot itself is in pain, and that the pain is located in my foot. I feel this pain subjectively, with my foot as part of my subjectivity. In the same way, I do not move my body in the way that I move other objects. To move a chair, I must push or pull it, such that there is a causal chain running from me to the object. Conversely, to move my arm, I simply move my arm. There is an 'originality of movements that I execute with my body' which is not present in other objects.[351] My body is coextensive with my subjectivity so that I can, in a sense, move my body from the "inside". This experience of causality is different to what I experience with objects: I experience the object as a distinct causal entity which I can affect and which can affect me in return. My body, on the other hand, is the means by which I interact with the world: it is in and through the body that I affect the world and am affected by it.

Just as traditional, Cartesian-influenced philosophy regards the body as an object, it also views subjectivity as something which must be mental rather than physical. To say that subjectivity is physical is to say that the body is intentionally directed towards the world as the locus of my projects. It means that consciousness, which perceives and interacts with the world and projects itself towards new ways of being, must be embodied in order to experience subjective being. Far from being distinct from the extended, physical world,

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[346] 'PP', 209.
[347] 'PP', 200.
[348] *PhP*, 93.
[349] *PhP*, 95.
[350] *PhP*, 94.
[351] *PhP*, 96.

phenomenological analysis shows subjectivity to be dependent on physicality, such that we can say that subjectivity *is* physical.

Our physical subjectivity is experienced through the 'body schema' [le *schéma corporel*], a 'global awareness of my posture in the inter-sensory world'. Yet this awareness is not simply spatial, it is 'a posture towards a certain task, actual or possible', a 'situational spatiality'.[352] Through the body schema I experience being-in-the-world: my body is 'polarized by its tasks [and] *exists toward* them… [and] is, in the end, a manner of expressing that my body is in and toward the world.'[353] Our subjectivity, both as that which perceives the world and that which projects itself into new futures, is bodily.

> The patient bitten by a mosquito need not look for the point of the bite; he finds it immediately, because it is not for him a matter of situating it in relation to axes of coordinates in objective space, but rather of reaching with his phenomenal hand a certain painful place on his phenomenal body. Between the hand as a power for scratching and the point of the bite as a place to be scratched, a lived relation is given in the natural system of one's own body. The operation takes place wholly within the order of the phenomenal, it does not pass through the objective world.[354]

Movement is intentionally defined. When I pick up a glass, I do not consciously move my arm towards the glass, open my hand, move it into position, then close my fingers, exerting the correct amount of pressure to hold the glass without breaking or dropping it. Rather, I pick up the glass in one fluid movement. Merleau-Ponty refers to this as the movement of the 'phenomenal body': phenomenologically, I do not experience the specific movements of my forearm, wrist, hand, and fingers (never mind the operation of muscles, ligaments, nerves and neurones).[355] If I objectify the experience then I can describe the movement of my hand in this way, but my phenomenological experience is simply of me picking up the glass. I know exactly how to move my hand, the exact shape for my fingers to take, and the exact amount of pressure necessary – all this is expressed through motor intentionality which does not touch abstract thinking. Intentionality is traditionally ascribed to the domain of subjectivity. Only a conscious mind, it is thought, can define a project in the world based on its prior beliefs and desires. Yet Merleau-Ponty demonstrates that intentionality resides in the body. His mosquito example is particularly pertinent: when scratching a mosquito bite, it is unusual that I would think through my action beforehand; the action is instinctive, and yet still exhibits subjective intentionality. When I choose to act, I do not need to translate my conscious project into physical instructions for my body. My body implicitly knows how to pick up a glass or scratch a bite without having to work out which muscles to move or neurones to fire. A subjectivity that was not physical would be incapable of any action in the world. Further, a non-physical subjectivity would be incapable even of projecting potential actions into the world or planning future movements, since this depends on an implicit awareness of my body's position and abilities. I cannot decide to

[352] *PhP*, 101–2.
[353] *PhP*, 103, emphasis original.
[354] *PhP*, 108.
[355] *PhP*, 108.

climb a mountain – or judge that a mountain is climbable – without my body, since this judgement depends on certain facts about my body.

How persuasive is this? Stephen Priest has challenged Merleau-Ponty, mainly on the grounds that, 'from no description of a human body, no matter how detailed and complete, does it logically follow that I am that body.'[356] Priest sustains this argument by arguing that 'it is in any case logically possible that I am not my body because disembodied experience may be described in a way that is free from contradiction.'[357] This is in fact the same reasoning Descartes offers when he argues for the separability of mind and body. The fact that Descartes had clear and distinct ideas of soul and body was enough for him to conclude that 'they are capable of being separated, at least by God'.[358] In fact, Priest misunderstands Merleau-Ponty's position. Priest's criticism starts from the position of an objective description of a body, from which he argues we could not logically deduce our own subjectivity. This is exactly Merleau-Ponty's point: our subjectivity is not a logical consequence of an objectivised view of our body and when we objectivise it in this way we will lose sight of our subjectivity. For Merleau-Ponty, our primary engagement with the body is as the means by which we perceive and have a world. We do not first acquire an objective description of our bodies but rather we begin from the perspective of embodied subjectivity. The objectification of the body is an intellectual development which rests on our prior prereflective identification with it.

Priest develops his argument by imagining the separation of mind and body.

> Imagine this: the position of the source of my visual field does not change but its content does. My own body appears within my visual field, perhaps walking away from me at first and then stopping to face me. Should the position of the source of my visual field alter it never appears to me that I am looking out of my body.[359]
>
> …imagine the phenomenal field just as it is except without the appearance of one's own body within it. One experiences the contents one would experience if one's body did not exist. If I were essentially my body it would not be possible to imagine this.[360]

This is really the outworking of Priest's initial point: if subjective experience and identity cannot be deduced from the description of a body, then it follows that mind and body are conceptually separable. Equally, if mind and body can be conceptually separated (through imagining one without the other), then I cannot claim that I am essentially my body. This relies on the premise that, if two things can be separated in the imagination, then they are really distinct. It is not clear that this is the case and Priest offers no explanation as to why this conceptual separability entails a distinction in reality. By way of comparison, we might consider the concepts of matter and form. These are distinct concepts and I can consider

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[356] Priest, *Merleau-Ponty*, 232.
[357] Priest, 233.
[358] *Meditations*, 61.
[359] Priest, *Merleau-Ponty*, 60.
[360] Priest, 233.

them in isolation from one another (pure geometry on the one hand, and a conception of formless matter on the other). Yet, just because we can imagine these concepts apart from each other, it does not follow that it therefore must be possible for the two to be separated. Just because we can separate them in the imagination does not mean that they could ever be separated in reality. The same can be said for mind and body. We have distinct concepts for mind and body because we do experience these as distinct aspects of our experience. The fact that we have the intellectual capacity to extend this conceptual distinction to absolute separation does not mean that this must be an actual possibility.

Priest uses thought experiments in the same way that Descartes uses God: to imagine apparent possibilities that could never be experienced.[361] Priest imagines the possibility of a mind without a body, yet it is unclear what this would be like. When we imagine a disembodied mind we always end up implicitly supposing an imaginary body along with it. When I imagine my visual field changing independently from my body as Priest suggests, this visual field still includes the perception of depth, colour, movement, focus, and so on. The way we see is conditioned by our eyes: various interocular movements determine what is in and out of focus and are responsible for saccades (very rapid unobserved movements of the eye which allow a human to build up a visual image of the scene before them); the physiology of the eye affects the perception of colour and can be responsible for conditions such as colour blindness and tetrachromacy. Also, it is odd that Priest's imaginative exercises always concern the experience of visual fields. Does he also imagine that these disembodied experiences would include the perception of temperature, sound or smell? If not, then these imagined disembodied experiences cannot in fact be described as simply our normal experience, minus the appearance of our bodies – the loss of the body, even in the imagination, impoverishes our perceptual experience. If Priest does imagine the continuation of these non-visual sensations, then it is even more difficult to see how these could be experienced without a body. Smell, for example, involves the detection of chemicals in the air by receptors in the nose and can be enhanced by bodily movements such as sniffing;[362] without this physicality, it is unclear how a disembodied mind would perceive smell. Even more pertinently, the perception of temperature is directly connected to the prior temperature of the body;[363] without a body to perceive temperature, it is unclear how a disembodied consciousness would perceive ambient temperature.

It might be argued that the separation of mind and body is not just a logical possibility but something that we actually experience. Descartes discusses the scepticism inaugurated by the experience of dreaming, while Priest insists that we cannot ignore out of body experiences.[364] However, in both of these cases, despite the apparent disappearance of the body, human embodiment is implied in the experience. As discussed above, it is much

[361] See Descartes's claim that mind and body can be separated, 'at least by God'. *Meditations*, 61.
[362] For a discussion of the phenomenology of smell, see Louise Richardson, 'Sniffing and Smelling', *Philosophical Studies* 162, no. 2 (2013): 401–19.
[363] This can be demonstrated by a simple experiment. Place the left hand in a bowl of cold water and the right hand in a bowl of hot water. After a few minutes, place both hands a third bowl of lukewarm water. The left hand will perceive the water to be hot while the right hand will perceive the water to be cold, despite the objective temperature experienced by both hands being the same.
[364] Priest, *Merleau-Ponty*, 60, 85.

harder to image a disembodied experience than it might first appear since so much of our experience is enabled and structured by the physical state of our body and its response to the world. While it is true that a dream experience is not connected to any physical reality in the way that waking experience is, dreams are still structured by embodiment, such that they imply the presence of a body. In a dream, one experiences depth, colour, movement, and so on – as well as sounds, and potentially smells and temperature. These experiences, while not necessarily involving the body's sense organs, are still structured according to the way the brain receives information from the body. Dream experience is still perspectival and appears as if the dreaming subject has eyes. We might suggest (in a Humean fashion) that the human brain cannot invent entirely novel perceptions or ways of seeing but must draw upon memories of previous experiences. Something similar can be said with regard to out of body experiences, often the result of observable brain activity rather than the mind literally escaping the bounds of the body, which again involve experiences that are structured according to embodiment.

At the end of all this, it remains the case that we can imagine the separation of mind and body; indeed, Priest has shown that we can imagine a disembodied point of view – even if, on reflection, it turns out to be rather unlike our own (the perspective of a spiritual, angelic or divine agent, perhaps).[365] Yet Priest's contention with Merleau-Ponty is not the claim that a disembodied perspective is possible or can be imagined; rather, Priest challenges Merleau-Ponty on the claim that 'I am essentially my body'.[366] When it comes to possible human experience, we find that the notion of disembodied experience turns out to be impossible. As noted above, Priest privileges the sense of sight and the visual field; when human experience is considered primarily as visual, the idea of disembodied experience seems much more plausible. Yet Merleau-Ponty is at least as interested in the sense of touch as he is sight, and often describes sight as a kind of visual palpating of the world.[367] Unlike sight, the phenomenon of touch makes the denigration of the body much more difficult.

> In visual experience, which pushes objectification further than tactile experience, we can at least at first glance flatter ourselves that we constitute the world, because it presents a spectacle spread out before us at a distance and it gives us the illusion of being immediately present everywhere and of being situated nowhere. Tactile experience, however, adheres to the surface of our body; we cannot spread it out before ourselves and it does not fully become an object. Correlatively, as the subject of touch, I cannot flatter myself as being everywhere and nowhere, here I cannot forget that it is through my body that I go toward the world, tactile experience is accomplished "out in front" of me, and is not centered in me. It is not me who touches, but rather my body.[368]

[365] Even so, this notion of disembodied experience will have its own limitations, not least the problem of perspective. Daniel Berman develops this into a successful critique of God's omniscience in Berman, *Merleau-Ponty and God*, 39–56.
[366] Priest, *Merleau-Ponty*, 232.
[367] This description of sight as visible palpation occurs especially in *The Visible and the Invisible*, for example: 'The look, we said, envelops, palpates, espouses the visible things.' *VI*, 133.
[368] *PhP*, 330.

A disembodied experience that was fully human would have to include the sense of touch, which is a specifically embodied sensation. We can take this even further if we consider the sense of proprioception, the perception one has of the location and movement of one's own body. This is as much a part of human experience as visual or tactile perception and, even further than the sense of touch, implies the embodiment of the subject. We could say much more on this topic but, given space constraints, we will move on, content with the conclusion that the human is an embodied physical subject.

Cognitive Science

As we discussed in chapter two, Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is characterised by his interest in contemporary psychology and empirical science. Both the *Structure of Behaviour* and *The Phenomenology of Perception* contain long extracts discussing research in biology, psychology, child development, and similar disciplines. For Merleau-Ponty, this was not in tension with his philosophical research. Embodiment and the intertwining of subjectivity and objectivity mean that our philosophical research will be affected by discoveries made concerning the psychology and physiology of the human body and brain. For example, we know that physical damage to the brain can alter the structure of perception.

> A lesion, even localized, can determine structural disorders which concern the whole of behaviour, and analogous structural disorders can be provoked by lesions situated in different regions of the cortex.[369]

Cognitive science can both teach and learn from phenomenology and in recent years, there has been interest in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy from the field of cognitive science.[370] Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of embodiment has both contributed to and been affected by research in this field. We will focus on the work of Shaun Gallagher, a philosopher who has used insights from Merleau-Ponty and experimental psychology to develop an account of the way the body shapes human experience. Gallagher presents the case of a man named Ian Waterman (often IW in the literature). As a result of illness, IW suffered major damage to fibres below his neck.

> As a result he has no sense of touch and no proprioception below the neck. Ian is still capable of movement as he experiences hot, cold, pain, and muscle fatigue, but he has no proprioceptive sense of posture or limb location. […] If I ask Ian to sit, close his eyes, and point to his knee, he has some difficulty. If, in this situation, I move either his knee or his arm, he is unable to point to his knee since, without vision or proprioception, he does not know where either his knee or his hand are located. He would assume that they were in exactly the same location as when he last saw them and he would move his hand so as to point to where he remembers his knee to have

[369] *SB*, 62. For some examples of the kind of global behavioural and perceptual changes that can be brought about by brain lesisions, see Antonio Damasio, *Descartes' Error*, revised edition (London: Vintage Books, 2006), 3–19, 34–51.

[370] See, for example, Francisco J. Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* (Cambridge, MA.: The MIT Press, 1993); Shaun Gallagher, *How the Body Shapes the Mind* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005); Evan Thompson, *Mind in Life: Biology, Phenomenology, and the Sciences of Mind* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2007).

> been. […] His movement requires constant visual and mental concentration. In darkness he is unable to control movement; when he walks he cannot daydream but must concentrate on his movement constantly.[371]

The case of IW demonstrates the importance of the body schema. Gallagher argues that IW's problems are caused by the fact that he 'has lost major aspects of his body schema' and 'is forced to compensate for that loss by depending on his body image in a way that normal subjects do not', such as his dependence on vision in maintaining posture.[372]

This concept of body schema is a key concept which Gallagher finds in Merleau-Ponty; his work offers a more thorough definition and explication of its function in human experience. Gallagher distinguishes the body schema from the body image. The body image is 'a system of perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs pertaining to one's own body', whereas a body schema is 'a system of sensory-motor capacities that function without awareness or the necessity of perceptual monitoring'.[373] Both the body image and the body schema affect human experience; however, the body schema operates entirely below conscious awareness. The capacity for the body image to affect human experience is well known (as is evident in various kinds of body dysmorphia such as anorexia, in which a false body image affects how a person perceives their body and their subsequent behaviour); Gallagher's intention is to show the importance of the body schema. The body schema does not refer to a merely 'recessive or marginal awareness' of one's own body. Such awarenesses are still conscious states, however hidden or marginal, which have one's own body as the object. Rather, Gallagher is concerned with the way in which human experiences are 'shaped or structured *prenoetically* by the fact that they are embodied'.[374]

As an example, Gallagher considers the experience of eyestrain during reading. Eyestrain is experienced gradually 'as a series of changes in the things and states of affairs around me'.

> Gradually the perceived environment begins to revise itself; the text seems more difficult, the lighting seems too dim, the body shifts itself closer to the desk, etc. The eyes that have been reading have been anonymous eyes, doing their work without my reflective awareness of them. I was not conscious of my eyes at all. Now, however, my attention is directed to my eyes. They suddenly emerge out of prenoetic anonymity and become explicitly owned. My pain now becomes a present concern, and my body in general gets in the way of my reading comprehension.[375]

In this passage, there is a shift from the body schema to the body image: something which was operating anonymously and unconsciously eventually reaches conscious awareness. However, before I am consciously aware of it, my eyestrain is still shaping and structuring my perception. As my eyes become strained, I do not develop new beliefs or attitudes towards myself or the text. Rather, the text seems to be more difficult to understand

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[371] Gallagher, *How the Body Shapes the Mind*, 43–44.
[372] Gallagher, 44.
[373] Gallagher, 24.
[374] Gallagher, 2, emphasis original.
[375] Gallagher, 33.

because of a physiological change in my body. This will affect the opinions I will form about the text, whether I am likely to want to read it again, and how I will describe it to other people. In fact, the physiology of my body can prenoetically shape my experience in a myriad of ways. These prenoetic factors – internal bodily changes such as heart rate, blood pressure, blood sugar levels, fatigue, and so on – can alter how I perceive and act towards the world.[376] These examples show how something of which we are utterly unaware structures and affects our perception of the world. An objective fact about our bodies (such as blood pressure, which can be objectively and scientifically measured) has a phenomenological – and subjective – effect. It is not just our perception which is affected by these prenoetic factors but our behaviour too, since perception is shot through with the possibility of potential projects. Eyestrain does not just affect how the text appears to me, but also constrains my available projects by making the text more difficult to read. Further, these examples reveal the importance of the body in its entirety: it is not only the brain or nervous system that structures our experience, but bodily functions such as digestion, the respiratory system and various homeostatic functions, as well as the environmental conditions with which these systems interact.

> How I experience the world depends, in some degree, on how hot or how cold it is in my part of the world, and how my body is reacting to environmental temperature. How I experience the world depends, to some extent, on how much food I have in my stomach, and on certain hormonal levels existing in different parts of my body, and so forth. These are not only objective, physical facts; they are facticities to which my body reacts and with which it copes. Much of the reacting and coping may be describable in terms of neurophysiological functions, but neither the fact of the matter, not the facticity of embodiment, is fully reducible to or identical with the firing of neurones.[377]

My emotional, affective, cognitive and practical responses to the world depend on the world and how my body is reacting to it. This is more than a simple colouring or biasing of perception; rather, these physiological functions are 'at least partly constitutive of perceptual experience and [create] a bodily framework within which perception and cognition [operate].'[378]

This is important because the body schema and prenoetics do not just affect perception but also how humans experience meaning, as well as how they behave and express themselves. As Merleau-Ponty demonstrates in essays such as 'Cézanne's Doubt', perception is meaningful.[379] This can be most clearly observed in the work of painters, whose art is to pay close attention to the contents of perception, but is true of all human perception. Perception does not involve the atomistic reception of visual sensations which are later interpreted; rather, we see things as meaningful wholes. A visual scene is perceived as a whole, its elements meaningfully related to each other. The body schema and prenoetic

[376] Gallagher, 149.
[377] Gallagher, 151.
[378] Gallagher, 151.
[379] We will expand on this idea in chapter four.

factors are capable of precipitating a global shift in the perception of meaning, influencing future belief and behaviour. As *The Structure of Behaviour* shows, behavioural responses are not reflex responses to objective stimuli, but organism-wide reactions to meaningful experiences. Thus, if I begin to perceive the world in a new way, then I will start to behave and express myself differently too. This goes beyond just responding differently according to how I feel; rather, whole behavioural and expressive projects can be opened up or closed down to me, depending on my perception of meaning. For example, if I perceive a mountain, I might perceive it as climbable or not. This in part depends on certain facts about my embodiment as well as facts about the mountain itself: both the height of the mountain and my own physical strength will affect whether or not I perceive the mountain to be climbable. However, Gallagher's work shows that the body schema will also affect how I perceive the mountain. If I have high levels of adrenaline in my bloodstream, I am more likely to perceive the mountain to be climbable, all other things being equal. The same person approaching the same mountain even a couple of hours later could have a significantly different perceptual experience, without any objective change in the physical properties of the mountain or the body's physical capabilities. As we begin to consider the phenomenon of religious conversion, then, the role of the body schema and the effect of prenoetic factors will be important in understanding how it is people come to adopt new religious practices and worldviews.

Religious Conversion

What can this discussion teach us about conversion? At the start of this chapter, I said that the intention here is not yet to articulate a theory or model of conversion but rather to describe the embodied belief-forming context within which conversions occur. If human beings are essentially embodied – if human subjectivity is a corporeal and physical subjectivity – then we will only fully understand religious conversion once we understand the embodied situation of human subjectivity. This is the case because embodiment affects all human experience; it is especially important in the case of religious conversion because of the deep significance of the body in religious practices. By clarifying how human beings relate to the world in general, we will be able to consider with greater clarity what happens when these relations are transformed in the process of conversion.[380]

The key phenomenological insight from Merleau-Ponty is that the body is not an object in the world, but rather is that by which we have a world at all. The body discloses the world and structures it through perception. Perception is a physical phenomenon which involves the operation of physical organs and is altered by the act of physically moving one's body. There is a transcendental element to this – the body is the necessary condition for the subject to have a world – and yet it would be misleading to call Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of the body transcendental. Whereas transcendental philosophies posit a transcendental ego, a constituting consciousness which structures experience, the transcendental element in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy – the body – does not constitute the world. Merleau-Ponty's

[380] Thomas Csordas has similarly used Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of embodiment in his analysis of charismatic faith healing. Thomas J. Csordas, *The Sacred Self: A Cultural Phenomenology of Charismatic Healing* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1994).

body, while a necessary condition for the appearance of the world, is not in full control. This is because, as well as disclosing the world, the body is itself *in* and *of* the world. The body is a part of the world it discloses and thus its disclosure of the world is affected by material changes in it.[381] In Merleau-Ponty's view, previous philosophers such as Descartes, Kant and Husserl disembodied consciousness, releasing the soul or mind from the body and setting it up in an elevated position from which it constitutes the world. Yet, as we have seen, a disembodied consciousness is perspectiveless and so blind. To perceive, consciousness must be 'installed in the midst of the visible'.[382] As a result, perception – if it is to be perception – is materially affected. This is precisely what perspective is, the subjective experience of physical and material locatedness.

The upshot is that, given this phenomenological insight, we should expect to see that changes in religious practice or in one's bodily state will affect how an individual experiences the world. Such changes will affect how the world looks to me and what meaning I perceive it to have. This point might appear trivial but it is important in advancing our understanding of conversion from the Jamesian paradigm. While James recognises the involvement of the body in religious experiences, there is no sense in his *Varieties* that the body contributes anything to the experience. While, as Taves notes, James recognised the influence of natural forces on conversion experiences, these were exclusively natural *psychological* forces.[383] For James religious conversion has its origins in the extra-marginal field of consciousness, while the body passively undergoes these religious experiences. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology teaches us not only that religious experiences and conversions will occur within the body but that the body and its material situation will play a crucial role in determining whether and when a conversion will happen and what form it will take. Because the body is not an absolute constituting consciousness but a material subject which can be affected by material changes in the world, the occurrence and character of a conversion experience is thus affected by the material conditions of the world and the body.

Recent developments in cognitive science can add some specificity (as well as some empirical evidence) to the framework outlined by Merleau-Ponty. Shaun Gallagher's research illustrates precisely how material changes within the body can affect perception. Unconscious, prenoetic factors about our bodies shape how our perception is structured, and thus what we come to feel, think, and believe. This is a direct continuation of Merleau-Ponty's own thought: Merleau-Ponty recognised that a physical change in the brain (such as a cerebral lesion) can radically alter perception; Gallagher's work continues this line of thought but with recourse to a wider array of examples and more sophisticated tools of analysis. When it comes to religious experience, we can conclude that these kinds of prenoetic factors will influence the character of such experiences. These prenoetic factors can be directly related to religious practice (such as a piece of religious music which raises one's heart rate), or contingent bodily states that affect one's reception of a religious ritual (such as having high fatigue when attending a religious service). The belief-forming context

[381] Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, 146–48.
[382] *VI*, 134.
[383] Taves, *Fits, Trances, and Visions*, 280–81.

of religious conversion is therefore an embodied context in which unconscious physiological states and processes can alter how we feel, think and believe. This means that conversion is, at least to some extent, a physiological process and that an adequate theory of conversion will recognise an important role played by the unconscious physiology of the convert.

At this point, we run the risk of material reductionism. If the body is such an important part of the conversion experience, and if prenoetic factors are so powerful, then is conversion not simply reduced to a physical process over which the convert has little or no control? If so, conversion becomes a thoughtless, animal response to the material circumstances of one's body and milieu. Any sense of freedom in the conversion process is lost, replaced with the irresistible force of the body. Even if we modify this position to mitigate the causal force of the body and argue that prenoetics are not all-powerful drivers of human behaviour but just one influence among many, we do not avoid reductionism. So long as prenoetics are a relevant factor at all, it is possible that unconscious bodily processes play the decisive role in determining whether someone converts. If it is possible that a convert would not have converted were their hormone levels different, then conversion will always be reducible to its material causes, even if other non-material causes are at play. The reason embodiment can appear to be so problematic for understanding conversion (and for conceptualising freedom in general) is that our ordinary Cartesian ontological framework puts objective and subjective causes into competition. When mind and body are separable, then every material influence on my action detracts from my own influence. This means that, once we recognise the material influences on conversion, it appears to rob the experience of its authenticity. In order to resolve this, we will need to find a different way of talking about minds and bodies. Merleau-Ponty's and Gallagher's writings already illuminate a very deep continuity between mind and body which problematises any distinction between the two. The complex interactions between mind and body indicate that we can no longer simply declare that these two separate things are somehow joined together, even very closely; rather, the intermingling of mental and physical processes and slippage between one and the other implies that completely different ontological categories are required. For this reason, we will conclude this chapter with a discussion of Merleau-Ponty's ontology.

Ontology

As Merleau-Ponty's thought developed, he came to see his early philosophical approach as inherently limited. This is most clearly captured in a working note of 1959, in which Merleau-Ponty insists that the problem of the *Phenomenology of Perception* is that it starts 'from the "consciousness"-"object" distinction'. This is problematic because, from this position, 'one will never understand that a given fact of the "objective" order (a given cerebral lesion) could entail a given disturbance of the relation with the world — a massive disturbance, which seems to prove that the whole "consciousness" is a function of the objective body'.[384] Despite the important advances made in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, it could still not overcome some basic problems of dualist philosophy. The capacity of objective facts to impact an individual's phenomenal world in such a dramatic way seems to imply that, whatever phenomenological account we provide, perception

[384] *VI*, 200.

appears ultimately to be dependent on and a function of the objective world.[385] To overcome this problem, Merleau-Ponty suggests that we need to recognise that describing an event as objective is simply 'a way of expressing and noting an event of the order of brute or wild being which, ontologically, is primary'.[386] Calling an event objective and contrasting it to its subjective effects is nothing more than a way of expressing an event which, at a more ontologically primary level, does not exhibit this distinction between objectivity and subjectivity; this is the idea which will be developed throughout *The Visible and the Invisible*.

We have seen already the need to overcome the Cartesian division between mind and body; this is apparent both as a result of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and as a result of our reflection upon the phenomenon of religious conversion. Merleau-Ponty begins to do this in his earlier work, and his opposition to dualism is apparent in the *Phenomenology of Perception*; however, it is not until his later work that an alternative ontological vision to Cartesianism is proposed. Although Merleau-Ponty's earlier work sought to recast some of the traditional Cartesian terms, such as mind, body, subjectivity and objectivity, this could never go far enough, in part because these words still implicitly assume a Cartesian ontology that is difficult to shake off. Merleau-Ponty insisted on the fundamental ambiguity of mind and body, subject and object, in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, indicating the need to overcome the sharp dichotomies presumed by Cartesian terminology and noting that 'ambiguity is essential to human existence'.[387] However, a project such as this will always be hamstrung by the fact that it is trying to develop a new understanding within an old framework. Ultimately, if we are to overcome the massive force of Cartesian thinking, we will need new ontological categories which are free from Cartesian associations. This was the project of *The Visible and the Invisible*. For the purposes of this chapter, two key elements of Merleau-Ponty's ontology need to be developed: the reversibility thesis and the concept of flesh. As my argument unfolds in the following two chapters, these ideas will be developed and added to; for now, given that our purpose is to establish an understanding of the embodied context within which conversion phenomena can take place, these two themes will suffice.

The Reversibility Thesis

Merleau-Ponty is dissatisfied with Cartesian categories, whether they are cached out in dualist or monist terms. The reversibility thesis is Merleau-Ponty's way of resisting the monist impulse without submitting to a dualist framework. This notion of reversibility contains a number of ideas, including the interwovenness of matter and idea or subject and object, the incarnation of the perceiving body in the world which it perceives, and the chiasm or crisscrossing that occurs between subjectivity and objectivity as a result of the ontologically primordial intertwining. As Dillon puts it, 'matter is pregnant with form: their intertwining is real, their conceptual separation ideal.'[388] The theme of reversibility occurs at

[385] In other words, despite the complexity of the phenomenology offered in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, the book does not have the tools to oppose a physicalist epiphenomenal theory of mind.
[386] *VI*, 200.
[387] *PhP*, 172; see also pp. 59, 98, 204.
[388] Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, 156.

various points throughout *The Visible and the Invisible* but is taken up explicitly in the fourth chapter called, 'The Intertwining – The Chiasm'. Whereas the preceding three chapters focus more on critiquing the philosophy of Kant, Husserl and Sartre, the fourth chapter moves towards the more explicit articulation of Merleau-Ponty's ontological vision.

As Dillon notes, the 'notion of reversibility is modelled on the phenomenon of touch',[389] and Merleau-Ponty begins with an analysis of double sensations – that is, the experience of touching my right hand with my left hand while my left hand is touching something else. In the *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty opposed Sartre's view that the body-as-object and the body-as-subject constitute two entirely separate orders of reality. On Sartre's analysis, there is no difference between someone touching their own body and touching someone else's. Merleau-Ponty insists on the irreducible ambiguity of the situation, in which the touched hand alternates between touching and being touched. This idea foreshadows what Merleau-Ponty would later call reversibility, and the phenomenon of double touch is the starting point for the development of this idea.[390] In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty describes the phenomenon of double sensation as a 'crisscrossing… of the touching and the tangible'. This experience is only possible because 'my hand, while it is felt from within, is also accessible from without, itself tangible for my other hand', which happens 'if it takes its place among the things it touches, is in a sense one of them, opens finally upon a tangible being of which it is also a part'. In other words, double touch is possible only if the hand that is touching is at the same time part of the tangible world which it touches, and therefore open to being touched itself. Further, for double sensations to be possible, it is necessary that the two hands are part of the same body without merging completely into one. The touching experience of each hand (as it were, the feeling of touching from the inside) is possible only because the two hands are part of the same body: my left hand, which I touch with my right hand, can also be experienced as touching something else because the sensations are 'recorded on the same map'. Yet, at the same time, there is not a complete coincidence between my two hands – otherwise I would just experience one single hand. There is some differentiation between my two hands which are at the same time part of the same experiencing body; this is why in the *Phenomenology* the phenomenon of double sensation is ambiguous, since I am both and at the same time subject and object.[391] This is what Dillon refers to as the fundamental 'identity-within-difference' which is crucial to Merleau-Ponty's ontology.[392] The phenomenon of double sensation offers the first example of an experience in which the perceiver and the perceived are neither entirely distinct nor coincide completely with one another. There is an intertwining of subjectivity and objectivity which cannot be reduced to one or the other: subject and object are reversible and any separation of the two is an abstraction. This identity-within-difference will become a critical part of Merleau-Ponty's analysis of perception which will in turn underpin his ontology of flesh.

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[389] Dillon, 159.
[390] Dillon, 158.
[391] *VI*, 133.
[392] Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, 159.

From the phenomenon of double touch, we can now move onto the phenomenon of touching objects in the world. For Merleau-Ponty, much of the same analysis applies: just as my two hands are part of one body, so there is a continuity between my body and the world, without which I would be unable to touch it. As Dillon puts it, 'I can touch worldly things precisely because I am myself a worldly thing.' There is reversibility here: 'for me to touch the table, I must be touched by the table.'[393] At the same time, I do not coincide with the table; there is a distinction between me and the worldly things which allows my contact with them to be perception, rather than identity. Dillon points out that there is an asymmetry here: 'I cannot experience the table touching me in the same way the hand touched can take up the role of touching'.[394] From the perspective of consciousness there certainly is an asymmetry here; when we discuss the reversibility thesis as it relates to the notion of flesh, we shall see that this asymmetry is a necessary part of Merleau-Ponty's ontology.

From touch we move to visibility by way of the synesthesia of the senses. The fields of vision and of touch are not hermetically sealed worlds but part of one perceptual world.

> We must habituate ourselves to think that every visible is cut out of the tangible, every tactile being in some manner promised to visibility, and there is encroachment, infringement, not only between the touched and the touching, but also between the tangible and the visible, which is encrusted in it, as, conversely, the tangible itself is not a nothingness of visibility, is not without visual existence.[395]

Again, it is the body which plays the role of uniting these two perceptual fields. 'Since the same body sees and touches, visible and tangible belong to the same world.'[396] Merleau-Ponty supports this by pointing to the overlap between touch and sight: the things I see exist in tactile space and the things I touch are available to vision. And yet again, the two fields do not coincide completely: 'the two maps are complete, and yet they do not merge into one.'[397] Here again is the identity-within-difference which allows the communication between touch and vision without collapsing one of the senses into the other. This synesthesia of touch and vision means that the reversibility necessary for touch (i.e., I must be tangible in order to touch something) can be extended to vision: 'he who looks must not himself be foreign to the world that he looks at.'[398]

> It suffices for us for the moment to note that he who sees cannot possess the visible unless he is possessed by it, unless he *is of it*, unless, by principle, according to what is required by the articulation of the look with the thinks, he is one of the visibles, capable, by a singular reversal, of seeing them – he who is one of them.[399]

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[393] Dillon, 159.
[394] Dillon, 159.
[395] *VI*, 134.
[396] *VI*, 134.
[397] *VI*, 134.
[398] *VI*, 134.
[399] *VI*, 134–5, emphasis original.

The reversibility thesis – to touch I must be tangible; to see I must be visible – means that, in order to perceive, I must be a part of the world which I am perceiving. It is not enough for the perceiver to be *in* the world, they must be *of* it; as Merleau-Ponty puts it in 'Eye and Mind', they must be 'made of the same stuff' as the world they are perceiving.[400]

This is why consciousness-centric philosophies of perception do not work: however successful they might be at putting the subject *in* the body or the world, the focus on consciousness means that the subject will never be *of* the world and there will always be an alienation between the perceiver and the world which makes perceptual contact between them impossible. For consciousness-centric philosophies, the separation of subject and world creates an insurmountable distance which renders perception impossible. Merleau-Ponty counters this not by flattening the difference between the perceiver and the world, which would reduce the phenomenology of perception to nothing more than the effect of objective facts, but by creating a different kind of distance between the world and the perceiver.

> We understand then why we see the things themselves, in their places, where they are, according to their being which is indeed more than their being-perceived – and why at the same time we are separated from them by all the thickness of the look and of the body; it is that this distance is not the contrary of this proximity, it is deeply consonant with it, it is synonymous with it. It is that the thickness of flesh between the seer and the thing is constitutive for the thing of its visibility as for the seer of his corporeity; it is not an obstacle between them, it is their means of communication. It is for the same reason that I am at the heart of the visible and that I am far from it: because it has thickness and is thereby naturally destined to be seen by a body.[401]

There is a distance between the perceiver and the world, but it is not the distance that obtains between mind and body. Rather, it is a distance *within* the world which enables, rather than prevents, perception. The veil of appearances which is set up by the distinction between mind and body (and remains present in the translation of stimuli into qualia) does not exist for Merleau-Ponty's ontology. Without any distance between the perceiver and the world there is no perception, since the perceiver and the world simply merge into one – any knowledge of the world is in the form of self-knowledge, rather than perception. Yet Merleau-Ponty creates this difference without severing the perceiver from the world: the distance is the body which has thickness. This thickness simultaneously enables perception and prevents the perceiver from merging into the world. Hence, the body is not an obstacle to the individual's contact with the world, as is traditionally supposed, but the very means by which such contact is possible. Thus we see the importance of Dillon's notion of 'identity-within-difference': I am not the world I see, but I am of it. The identity allows contact with the world while the difference means that there is someone for the world to appear to;

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[400] 'EM', 125.
[401] *VI*, 135.

both this identity and this difference are my body, which is my means of contact with the world.

Flesh

So far, the ontological question has remained unanswered. The reversibility thesis tells us that to see is to be visible and that this requires a kind of 'identity-within-difference' to be possible. This led us to Merleau-Ponty's presentation of the body as that which simultaneously separates us from and puts us in touch with the world, and thus as the means by which we perceive. The question that remains is, how is it that the body can perform this function? Merleau-Ponty answers this by reference to the body as a 'two-dimensional being'.[402] He offers various ways of describing this and is not fully content with any, probably owing to the manuscript's incompletion. What he is trying to get at, however, is the body's 'double belongingness to the order of "object" and to the order of "subject"'.[403]

> If [the body] touches [the things] and sees them, this is only because, being of their family, itself visible and tangible, it *uses its own being as a means to participate in theirs*, because each of the two beings is an archetype for the other, *because the body belongs to the order of the things* as the world is universal flesh.[404]

There is a commonality between the being of the body and the being of the world which allows the body to touch and see the world – and, as the reversibility thesis has shown, allows the body to be touched and seen itself. This deep continuity between the perceiving body and the world is a departure from previous philosophies which would either separate the body from the world, or let the body fully coincide with the world and evacuate its phenomenal experience.

> We have to reject the age-old assumptions that put the body in the world and the seer in the body, or, conversely, the world and the body in the seer as in a box. Where are we to put the limit between the body and the world, since the world is flesh? Where in the body are we to put the seer, since evidently there is in the body only "shadows stuffed with organs", that is, more of the visible? The world seen is not "in" my body, and my body is not "in" the visible world ultimately: as flesh applied to a flesh, the world neither surrounds nor is surrounded by it. A participation in and kinship with the visible, the vision neither envelops nor is enveloped by it definitively.[405]

We see in this passage Merleau-Ponty rejecting realist and idealist ontologies. Contra realism, we cannot put the seer in the body, as if the world is ontologically prior to the seer and somehow distinct from the one who perceives. This could be cashed out in dualist terms, where a distinct perceiving soul is put into the body, or in materialist terms, where perception somehow arises from the organs of the body which are simply more of the

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[402] *VI*, 136.
[403] *VI*, 138.
[404] *VI*, 137, my emphasis.
[405] *VI*, 138.

visible and bear no relation to the phenomenon of perception. Contra idealism, we cannot put the world in the seer, as if the world belongs to some all-encompassing constituting consciousness where ontological primacy belongs exclusively to consciousness, with the physical world somehow contained within it (this criticism would apply from Berkeley through to Kant and even Husserl). Both of these approaches are undone by the blurred limits between the world, the body, and the seer. As we have seen, all three of these terms are interrelated and mutually interactive, to the extent that it is impossible to clearly delineate their boundaries. Further, the reason that Merleau-Ponty emphasises the idea of putting the seer in the world, or vice versa, is that containment goes both ways. Both idealism and realism are correct to some degree but this fact means that neither one nor the other alone can adequately articulate the human relationship with the world. The idealist insight is that the world is to an extent in the seer, insofar as the world is my world, given to me through perception. It is to a degree internally and privately experienced and, to an extent, my consciousness does constitute my world. My world does not look entirely the same as your world.[406] The realist insight is that I am also in the world, insofar as it is not just my world. As well as being able to see the world, I am also seen. My consciousness constitutes what I see, but it does not have full constitutive power; the world retains the prerogative in affecting what I see. While my world does not look the same as your world, neither does it look wildly different; it is based on something that is external to and shared by both of us. Ultimately, Merleau-Ponty argues that our understanding of seer and world cannot simply be of one within the other: my relationship with the world is a 'kinship' or 'participation'; I and the world are mutually enveloping, flowing into one another without ever completely coinciding.

This ontology of flesh allows a new kind of relationship between the seer and the visible. I look and feel myself looked at; this is only possible because seer and visible are of one flesh, with 'reciprocal insertion and intertwining of one in the other'.[407] This flesh 'is not matter, is not mind, is not substance.'[408] Rather Merleau-Ponty applies the term 'element' to flesh, calling flesh an '"element" of Being', a 'general thing, midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea' which 'brings a style of being'.[409] Flesh is not mind or matter but the way in which the Being of the world is, the way in which the world expresses its visibility and invisibility, the way in which the world sees and is seen. Merleau-Ponty later reaffirms that flesh 'is not matter' but is 'the coiling over of the visible upon the seeing body, of the tangible upon the touching body'.[410] This coiling over becomes apparent in the act of perception (and especially so in the case of double sensations), which Merleau-Ponty describes as 'the fold, this central cavity of the visible which is my vision'.[411]

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[406] Nevertheless, if we both observe a landscape together, we observe the same landscape. If I point out a feature to you, I do not attempt to communicate something from my world into yours; rather, I draw attention to something which appears in our shared world. *PhP*, 428.
[407] *VI*, 138.
[408] *VI*, 139.
[409] *VI*, 139.
[410] *VI*, 146.
[411] *VI*, 146.

What does this metaphor of folding or coiling over mean? A key motivation for *The Visible and the Invisible* is the need to overcome an ego- or consciousness-centric philosophy. The problem with most reflections on perception, as Merleau-Ponty himself found after writing the *Phenomenology of Perception*, is that it is all too easy to place the ego at the centre of events and develop a philosophy of the perceiving ego. Whatever one's anti-dualist intentions, reflecting on the ego already distinguishes the seer from the visible and answers the question before it is asked – a sleight of hand is performed such that, so long as one reflects on perception as it is experienced by the perceiver, there can be no escaping dualism. To overcome this, Merleau-Ponty insists on the anonymity of perception, which is made possible by the ontology of flesh. Anonymity is prefigured in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, where Merleau-Ponty writes that, when I reflect upon my own consciousness, 'I catch sight of an anonymous flow', a phenomenal experience which my body undergoes before an individual consciousness and subjectivity is carved out.[412] Earlier in the book, he writes that 'if I wanted to express perceptual experience with precision, I would have to say that *one* perceives in me, and not that I perceive.'[413] Although there is still an element of individuation here in the 'one' who perceives, the sense is that a true and 'precise' account of perception must recognise that my sense of consciousness and selfhood seems to arise *after* my primary perceptual experience. My body is perceiving the world before it establishes an individual subject who can be distinguished from the world: there is an anonymous prereflective experience. *The Visible and the Invisible* engages with the ontological implications of this phenomenological observation. Merleau-Ponty does not ask how it is that I see, but 'starting from the body, I ask how it makes itself a seer'.[414] The question has been reoriented away from the egocentric phenomenological concern about how the subject perceives and towards the question of how this body can *become* something which can see, and which will eventually experience itself as being a subject. This is where we see the significance of the flesh: flesh, which is the 'general manner of being' of the world – and of which I and the world are one – is 'the formative medium of the object and the subject'.[415] Flesh precedes subject and object because it is that from which subject and object are later formed; flesh stands as ontologically prior to and enabling of the individuation of the subject in the world. This is because flesh 'is not the atom of being, the hard in itself that resides in a unique place and moment'. Flesh is not just matter, not just the *en-soi* of the world – flesh is that intertwining between subject and object, between *pour-soi* and *en-soi*, which makes perception possible. Subject and object can relate to each other not because they find some way of joining together or bridging the distance between them, but because subject and object emerge from flesh, the ontologically prior element which is both and at the same time subject and object.

This explains the asymmetrical reversibility of the phenomenon of touching objects in the world which we saw Dillon raise above. As Dillon noted, there is reversibility both in double touch and in my experience of touching an object such as a table, 'but I cannot experience

[412] *PhP*, 458.
[413] *PhP*, 223, emphasis original.
[414] *VI*, 146.
[415] *VI*, 147.

the table touching me in the same way the hand touched can take up the role of touching.'[416] The simple answer to this asymmetry is that there is symmetrical reversibility in the case of double touch because the two hands are part of the same body; in the case of my touching the table, the reversibility is asymmetrical because the table is not part of my body – I have more access to my body than I do the table. However, this only appears to be the case because reflecting on the reversibility of touching objects in the world is already too egocentric. There is a still a differentiation between my self and the world. As we have seen, Merleau-Ponty's primary ontology is anonymous; that is, flesh is ontologically prior to individuated subjects and so the ontological basis of subjective perception is the anonymous perception of the flesh. From the perspective of flesh, this reversibility is not asymmetric; the asymmetry appears to us because we are already individuated subjects when we reflect upon the phenomenon of touch.

At this point, Merleau-Ponty returns to the notion of reversibility, this time noting the fact that the reversal is never fully realised.

> It is time to emphasize that it is a reversibility always imminent and never realized in fact. My left hand is always on the verge of touching my right hand touching the things, but I never reach coincidence; the coincidence eclipses at the moment of realization, and one of two things always occurs: either my right hand really passes over to the rank of touched, but then its hold on the world is interrupted; or it retains its hold on the world, but then I do not really touch *it* – my right hand touching, I palpate with my left hand only its outer covering.[417]

Yet this inability to fully coincide, to touch my right hand touching, 'is not a failure… precisely because my two hands are part of the same body'.[418] The reversibility can never be completed and I always experience a dehiscence or separation [*un écart*] between the touching and the touched but this is not a failure of reversibility. The 'hiatus… is not an ontological void… it is spanned by the total being of my body, and by that of the world'.[419] I can touch the world because I and the world are of one flesh; there is a continuity between us which allows contact. However, perception is created by the folding back or coiling over of flesh upon itself so that flesh can perceive itself. This creates a thickness, and therefore a distance, which is the perceiving body – but this thickness and distance is a thickness *of flesh*; it is a thickness and distance which allows the subject to perceive the world and is the starting point for the individuation of the subject. The creation of this thickness is necessary because complete coincidence is not perception. Perception requires there to be some distance between the seer and the visible as, without this, the seer just *is* the visible and perception becomes nothing more than self-knowledge. Yet, perception also requires the seer to be the same as the visible; as we have seen, if there is no common identity between seer and visible then perception becomes impossible. The notion of flesh and its coiling over upon itself is Merleau-Ponty's way of overcoming this apparent paradox of perception. It is

[416] Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, 159.
[417] *VI*, 147–8.
[418] *VI*, 148.
[419] *VI*, 148.

also important to note that perception at the level of the flesh is anonymous. The folding over of the flesh does not entail the instantiation of conscious subjects – a fact of which Merleau-Ponty was implicitly aware in the *Phenomenology of Perception* and which we can recognise by attending to prereflective perceptual experience – it is only an ontological prerequisite for reflective conscious subjects. At the level of the flesh, one should say "the world sees itself" before "I see the world".

Before moving on, it is worth briefly dealing with one potential objection to Merleau-Ponty's ontology, that a physicalist philosophy coupled with a supervenience theory of consciousness appears to overcome the traditional problems of dualism and other forms of physicalism without the need to embark on a new ontological project – thus rendering Merleau-Ponty's ontology obsolete.[420] We may offer a brief response here. Supervenience philosophies of mind still privilege internal experience, consciousness and subjectivity, contrasting these experiences with external, non-mental, bodily experience. The emergent mind, while supervening on physiological structures and functioning entirely within the physical realm, remains a private internal experience, accessible only to the experiencing ego. Hence, supervenience still delivers a dualist philosophy of mind, according to which the mental is meaningfully distinct from the physical. This problem does not exist for Merleau-Ponty, not because he reduces mental events to physical events but because he rejects the division of physical and mental explanations. For Merleau-Ponty, physical events in perceiving beings are intrinsically mental events. This is not because there is a second-order mental explanation that can be applied to certain physical phenomena but rather because physicality and mentality are so deeply intertwined as to make the separating out of the two a fool's errand. Supervenience recognises that consciousness is a function of the brain but it remains an in-body or in-brain philosophy of mind. This means that there is no capacity for the conscious subject to extend beyond the brain: experiences described by Merleau-Ponty wherein the human body incorporates equipment into its body schema, such as a worker's tool or a cane used by a blind person to navigate the world, remain unexplained by supervenience.[421]

Consequently, supervenience philosophies undervalue the body and thus over-privilege reason and logic: according to supervenience, human-like consciousness could plausibly emerge from a computer without a body, provided that its hardware could replicate the structures and neuronal connections of a human brain.[422] Human consciousness requires a body: not only is the body an essential component in human sense perception, the body itself affects how the world is perceived. The corporeity of perception is left unaccounted for by supervenience theories. If the mind emerges from the structure of the brain, this does not help us to understand why physical and chemical changes in my body and the external world affect how I experience the world. Supervenience alone, therefore, cannot

[420] For an example of the kind of supervenient philosophy to which I refer, see John Haugeland, 'Weak Supervenience', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 19, no. 1 (1982): 93–103.
[421] *PhP*, 114.
[422] It is notable that John Haugeland's example of supervenience concerns a chess-playing computer. On this view mind is still brain- and consciousness-centric and centred on mental processes which are reasoned and logical. Haugeland, 'Weak Supervenience', 101.

fully account for conscious human experience.[423] Merleau-Ponty's ontology of flesh provides a framework for understanding human embodiment because it asserts the basic continuity between mind, brain, body, and world. Whereas supervenience involves the emergence of mind from brain structures, the ontology of flesh involves the coiling over of the flesh of the world to form the body. The mind is never separated from the body and remains continuous with the world and so the deep intertwining of mind and body is comprehensible. [424]

To summarise, Merleau-Ponty's notion of flesh shows that, at one and the same time, we are the same as and different from the world and this identity-within-difference enables perception. The identity and the difference between me and the world are both functions of the world's flesh, yet we should point out here that the identity is the more primary term. It is only within the sameness of the world that the flesh can fold back or coil over upon itself, creating the thickness of the body and thus the difference between the perceiver and the world. This sameness must be the primary term – and thus ontologically primordial – since difference alone could never perceive. Douglas Low calls this idea 'nonreciprocal reversibility'.[425] As we saw above, the reversibility between myself and the world is asymmetrical; this is because the primary term – that is, the term with ontological priority – is the flesh.

Ontology and Cognitive Science

Before we finish this section on ontology, it is worth noting some important insights from the field of cognitive science which could have an important bearing on these questions of ontology. In this final section, I will consider Evan Thompson's multidisciplinary work, *Mind in Life*, to explore the role that contemporary cognitive science can play in the development of a philosophy of embodiment. My argument will be that, while Thompson successfully deploys Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological insights into human subjectivity and the human experience of embodiment, Merleau-Ponty's ontological input is largely absent from this consideration, and that this presents the opportunity for a further mutually enriching interaction between the two. While Thompson uses Merleau-Ponty's earlier philosophy to great effect, there remains the prospect of a more sophisticated engagement with Merleau-Ponty's work which would take into account Merleau-Ponty's ontology. This would provide Thompson with a language to discuss the relationship between mind and life which is free from Cartesian assumptions and would provide backing to Merleau-Ponty's ontological project from cognitive science.

Before we explore this possibility, we shall briefly survey how Thompson does use Merleau-Ponty in his work. Thompson employs resources from Merleau-Ponty as part of his project

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[423] Similarly, Varela, Thompson and Rosch have commented that such theories overemphasise the representation of rational states and cannot adequately account for or model the importance of inchoate background knowledge in many everyday cognitive tasks. Varela, Thompson, and Rosch, *The Embodied Mind*, 147–48.

[424] The preceding two paragraphs are adapted from my article, Williams, 'Maurice Merleau-Ponty and the Philosophy of Religion'.

[425] Low, *Merleau-Ponty's Last Vision*, 80. Strictly speaking, this quotation concerns the relationship between language and perception but it applies equally well to the relationship between identity and difference in the ontology of flesh.

to understand how consciousness can emerge from apparently non-conscious biological matter, the so-called 'hard problem of consciousness',[426] by combining insights from cognitive science and phenomenology. For Thompson, cognitive science must adopt the methodology of careful phenomenological examination of subjective experience, given the fact that 'experience is not an epiphenomenal side issue, but central to any understanding of the mind'.[427] Thompson uses Merleau-Ponty's thought in two major ways. The first is to help present a phenomenological understanding of the experience and structure of human subjectivity and is mostly derived from the *Phenomenology of Perception*; the second is as philosophical resource to help explain how conscious structures can develop out of non-conscious structures and this predominantly involves ideas from *The Structure of Behaviour*. For example, Thompson uses Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological investigations into the habit body,[428] the subjective experience of time,[429] and the role of embodied subjectivity in constituting bodily self-consciousness,[430] in most cases quoting extensively from the *Phenomenology of Perception*. He also argues for the need to 'envision a different kind of approach to matter, life, and mind'[431] on the basis of analysis in *The Structure of Behaviour* and, following a discussion of the neurology of sensorimotor cycles in animals, notes that Merleau-Ponty reached this conclusion himself in *The Structure of Behaviour*, quoting from the work at length.[432]

As the above comments demonstrate, Thompson's employment of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is largely limited to his earlier work. My contention is that Thompson's work would benefit from input from Merleau-Ponty's ontology; since we have covered Merleau-Ponty's ontology extensively above, I will now outline the key features of Thompson's argument. Thompson's argument is based on the concept of autopoiesis, which is a defining characteristic of life. Autopoiesis is a process of ongoing self-production in which a system creates and maintains itself as an individual identity through its own internal processes of production. Autopoiesis is observed in cellular life as the self-organisational process by which 'a cell continuously produces itself as a spatially bounded system, distinct from its medium or milieu.'[433] This is life as defined from the perspective of an individual organism (as opposed to life as defined according to a species' place in a wider ecological system or evolutionary history). There are three necessary conditions for describing a system as autopoietic. First, it must have a semipermeable membrane, a boundary which allows the system to maintain its integrity as a discrete being while enabling exchanges with its environment. Second, the components of the system must be created by a reaction network within the boundary of the system. And third, these two processes must be interdependent, with the boundary components produced from the internal network and the internal

[426] Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 7, quoting D. J. Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind: In Search of a Fundamental Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), and T. Nagel, 'What Is It Like to Be a Bat?', *Philosophical Review* 83 (1974): 435–50.
[427] Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 13.
[428] Thompson, 32–33.
[429] Thompson, 312–28.
[430] Thompson, 244–52.
[431] Thompson, 66–87, quotation from p. 87.
[432] Thompson, 47–48.
[433] Thompson, 92.

network enabled by the conditions created by the boundary.[434] Accordingly, a cell should be regarded as an autopoietic system.

> …a cell stands out of a molecular soup by creating boundaries that set it apart from what it is not. Metabolic processes within the cell determine these boundaries, but the metabolic processes themselves are made possible by these very boundaries. In this way the cell emerges as a figure out of a chemical background. Should this process of self-production be interrupted, the cellular components no longer form a spatially individuated whole and they gradually diffuse back into a molecular soup.[435]

In summary, an autopoietic system can be described as

> …a peculiar circular interdependency between an interconnected web of self-regenerating processes and the self-production of a boundary, such that the whole system persists in continuous self-production as a spatially distinct individual.[436]

The production of a semipermeable boundary means that nutrients or materials required for the reactions can be taken in while maintaining the integrity of the system and preventing diffusion of the reactive components into the background. These very processes are the ones which create and sustain the boundary which makes the processes possible, and so a relation of interdependence between the two ensues. Hence an autopoietic system is a self-producing and self-sustaining system. Any living system must be autopoietic.

The second key concept for Thompson, and the second necessary feature of life, is cognition. Cognition here does not have the connotations of thought or consciousness as it might in other contexts but rather interactions in which 'sensory responses guide action and action has consequences for subsequent sensory stimulation, subject to the constraint that the system maintain its viability.' Cognition is the flexible responsiveness of an organism to its environment, such that it adapts its responses according to the sensory stimuli it receives, and these responses affect what and how future stimuli are received. Cognition can occur in all organisms, such as 'a bacterium's ability to sense the concentration of sucrose in its immediate environment and move itself accordingly'.[437] The bacterium can sense stimuli in the environment (in this example, the concentration of sucrose), respond to a stimulus (swimming up the sucrose concentration gradient) and this action affects future stimulus reception (the bacterium can how sense a higher concentration of sucrose).

Cognition is thus part of what it means to be alive. Thompson also describes this notion as 'sense-making', a capability which relies on 'adaptivity'. Adaptivity is defined as 'a special way of being tolerant to challenges by actively monitoring perturbations and compensating for them in relation to the autopoietic identity taken as an internal norm'.[438] Hence we see the emergence of meaning for an organism: because an autopoietic system is self-producing and self-maintaining, the preservation of the system's distinct identity and integrity

[434] Thompson, 103.
[435] Thompson, 99.
[436] Thompson, 101.
[437] Thompson, 125.
[438] Thompson, 148.

becomes a meaningful norm according to which it acts. An autopoietic system will act purposively, the end of which is the preservation of the system. Accordingly, a physical system can exhibit meaning and this meaning need not come from the outside but can emerge from the autopoietic system itself. Thompson takes Kant's arguments that life involves the creation of 'purposes' (i.e., in Thompson's language, 'sense-making') but argues that the modern scientific understanding of autopoiesis means that we need not accept Kant's conclusion that purpose (and thus life) must be supplied by a non-natural cause.[439] Meaning can arise naturally from living autopoietic systems without external non-natural input. However, while meaning is no longer located in the non-natural or transcendental realm, it is firmly rooted in the realm of *life*. Living beings can create meaning in a way that non-living matter cannot – although the meanings created are still deeply connected with their material foundations. Thompson again considers the example of a bacterium.

> There is no food significance in sucrose except when bacteria migrate up-gradient and metabolize sucrose molecules, thereby enhancing their autopoiesis. The food significance of sucrose is certainly not unrelated to the physics and chemistry of the situation; it depends on sucrose being able to form a gradient, traverse a cell membrane, and so on. But physics and chemistry alone do not suffice to reveal this significance. For that the perspective of the autopoietic cell is needed.[440]

Adaptivity combined with the autopoietic activities of a cell mean that the physico-chemical properties of a sucrose molecule become meaningful for the cell, such that the cell will act purposively according to this meaning – a meaning which arises through the joint operation of the sucrose molecule's physical properties and the autopoietic purpose of the cell to self-produce and self-sustain.

What all of this demonstrates for Thompson is that life must be autopoietic and cognitive. As we have mentioned, this cognition is not yet consciousness; however, Thompson argues that the minimal cognition present in minimal forms of life such as single-celled organisms is the basis for more advanced forms of cognition in higher forms of life.[441] Life, then, can be said to involve two things. First, a living being must distinguish itself from its background environment or milieu. Part of the process of autopoiesis is the establishment of the autopoietic system as an individual system which stands apart from the environment from which it has emerged – this is why it is important that a boundary is created which is able to contain reactive processes necessary for the autopoietic system. Unlike non-living matter, in which there can be no clear distinction of individuals, life occurs and biology begins when an individuated system, such as a cell, emerges from this non-living matter, with clear boundaries regarding what is within and outwith it. Second, this individuated autopoietic system must be capable of sense-making: it must be able to sense and respond to the world, and these responses must be meaningful according to the purposes of the autopoietic system. The system now has a point of view – and with this, purposes and norms – which

[439] Thompson, 129–40.
[440] Thompson, 154.
[441] Thompson, 162. Thompson will later show how the minimal cognition present in single-celled organisms can become the sentience which we find in animal life, p. 221.

relies on the individuating process that results from the emergence of an autopoietic system. Therefore, according to Thompson, the basis of the human mind is single-celled life. Thompson goes on to outline this further in the rest of his book, and there is not the space here to recapitulate his entire argument; however, the main idea is that the processes involved in higher forms of life and cognition are the same as those which work in more basic forms of life, such that there is a fluidity between the notions of mind and life. The analysis of autopoiesis and cells illustrates that mind is primitively working at the cellular level, which is why the strict separation of mind and body is untenable.

Having outlined the key features of Thompson's argument, let us consider how it relates to Merleau-Ponty's ontology. My contention here is that, by exploring the relationship between Thompson's work and Merleau-Ponty's ontology, we can add substance to Merleau-Ponty's position. This will fill the gap left in Thompson's own use of Merleau-Ponty and demonstrate that there is even more continuity between their ideas than Thompson realised. A gloss on the argument I am about to make is that the emergence of autopoietic systems which Thompson describes could explain on a biological level what Merleau-Ponty means when he refers to the coiling over of the flesh. Let us examine this idea in more detail.

As we have seen, an autopoietic system emerges from a background milieu which is physical. The process of becoming or emerging as an autopoietic system is that by which the system becomes a distinguishable individual. It is also the process which enables the possibility of cognition and perception: once an autopoietic system is established as a discrete individual, the system can begin to sense and respond to stimuli according to purposes that are meaningful according to the self-preservation of the system. Strong parallels between the emergence of autopoietic systems and the coiling over of the flesh can be observed. Neither of these ideas engage in any kind of dualist thought: both autopoiesis and the flesh involve a background environment which is continuous with the wider physical world. Just as the perceiver created in the coiling over of the flesh is *of* the flesh, so an autopoietic system not only emerges from a physico-chemical background but *is of* it. The materials which made up the background make up the autopoietic system, and it is these very materials which *continue* to make it up, as the autopoietic system sustains and repairs itself using the materials of the environment. There is no harsh distinction between the autopoietic system and its milieu: the requirement that the membrane of an autopoietic system is semipermeable indicates that there is fluidity between the system and its environment. The emergence of an autopoietic system from its milieu is, then, highly comparable to Merleau-Ponty's notion of the coiling over of flesh to create a perceiver.

Further, the individual which emerges out of its milieu in both Thompson and Merleau-Ponty has needs and can create meanings which were not present in the background from which it is made. When an autopoietic system emerges, it is this very process of emerging as an autopoietic system which distinguishes it as an individual against its background milieu and it is also this process which makes possible cognition or perception. For Thompson, the emergence of the autopoietic system creates an individual system which has needs apart from its background environment. While it does not make sense to ask what is good for a

chemical solution, we can ask what is good for a bacterium which exists within the solution since there are certain things which will help or hinder its self-productive processes. Further, we can observe the bacterium acting according to these purposes, such as swimming up a sucrose concentration gradient. Meaning is created when an autopoietic system emerges as an individual; this meaning is required for a cell's cognition, since cognition involves sensing and responding to stimuli according to the norms of the cell's self-preservation. For Merleau-Ponty, it is the thickness created by the coiling of flesh which enables the possibility of meaningful perception. This idea of Merleau-Ponty's is remarkably close to Thompson's view that an autopoietic system emerges from a physico-chemical background, creating an individuated system which can become capable of sensing and responding to stimuli from the environment. This system is, for Thompson, a cell – we might propose that the emergence of a cell out of its physico-chemical background is the simplest and most basic instance of the world's flesh coiling over itself to create a thickness capable of perception and cognition.

It is clear, therefore, that there are deep parallels between Merleau-Ponty's ontology and the theory of autopoiesis. But what benefit is there in developing these parallels? One significant benefit is that it could offer an answer to some of the imprecisions in Merleau-Ponty's ontology. One of the most obscure parts of Merleau-Ponty's ontology is the notion of the flesh coiling over upon itself to create a perceiving body. While Merleau-Ponty is clear about the ontological significance of this idea and its importance in guaranteeing the possibility of perception, he is much more vague concerning what this process actually consists in. One danger of reading Merleau-Ponty's description of the coiling over of the flesh is that it seems to suggest the sudden creation of perceiving humans (or at least animals), as if the non-perceiving world coils over upon itself and jumps suddenly from no perception to perception. Thompson's analysis of autopoietic systems offers the possibility of a gradual coiling over of the flesh, beginning in single-celled organisms and developing into more complex forms of cognition and perception, eventually generating sentience and consciousness. This gradual process can help us to make better sense of Merleau-Ponty's claim that the world begins to perceive itself through the coiling over of the flesh – especially when we consider Merleau-Ponty's claim that perception begins in anonymity. When we can only consider human and animal perceivers, the process by which the non-perceiving world might be able to coil over upon itself and being to perceive seems quite obscure, however much the ontology of perception seems to require this. At the level of a single cell, however, we can see much more clearly how an autopoietic system can emerge from its background material environment, become a distinct individual, and begin to sense and respond to the world according to the newly generated meaningful purposes of the cell. We might say that the emergence of an autopoietic system – the generation of a semipermeable boundary and the establishment of a reactive network within it – is the process by which the flesh of the world coils over upon itself and begins to perceive. This primitive perception would be, as Merleau-Ponty describes, anonymous, without a conscious sense of self. This primitive perception is rooted in the material reality of the world (as we saw with the sucrose molecule), so this perception really is *of* the world, and the individuation achieved by the generation of a boundary creates the thickness of the

flesh which enables the distance required for perception. This will become more complex as it develops into animal and human perception, such that we would probably want to postulate the possibility of different thicknesses in different bodies: a human body is ontologically thicker, and thus can perceive more complexly, than a single cell.

Ontology and Conversion

What is the benefit of this ontological discussion? How does it help us better to understand embodiment, and what does it contribute to our discussion of religious conversion? It is possible that a phenomenology of embodiment can work within a Cartesian framework. Indeed, even Descartes himself developed a form of embodied philosophy through the notion of substantial union. It might seem as if all we need in order to understand conversion is the recognition that the body affects the mind, which is something that we can learn from Descartes. However, a philosophy of embodiment from within a Cartesian ontology is ultimately unintelligible: as Merleau-Ponty demonstrated in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, we must choose between insisting on the fundamental ambiguity of mind and body or a reduction to either empiricist or intellectualist ways of thinking. Ultimately, the *Phenomenology* raises the problem of embodiment without resolving it. Cartesian categories of mind and body, subject and object, which Merleau-Ponty used in the *Phenomenology of Perception* are inadequate. This is what motivated the shift in Merleau-Ponty's later thought towards ontology. Only a new ontological framework which does not begin from the perspective of the conscious subject can hope to resolve the distortions implicit in Cartesian ontology. Phenomenology from a Cartesian perspective is dualistic before it gets going. The implicit dualism of most of modern Western philosophy assumes that perception requires a perceiving subject, someone to whom the perceived world appears. This means that phenomenological analysis is performed from the perspective of the perceiving subject and phenomenology becomes an analysis of the phenomena which appear to the perceiving ego. When phenomenology is performed within a Cartesian ontology, the subjective ego is smuggled into philosophy from the start and it will thus seem obvious that the subjective perspective is the most basic one with which we interact with the world.

These philosophical considerations were enough to motivate Merleau-Ponty's transition to ontology; for us, the distorting effect that Cartesian ontology has on understanding religious conversion makes the case even more persuasive. The separability of mind and body assumed by Cartesianism implies that bodily influences on the mind are somehow foreign influences. Even if a very close relation between mind and body is posited, so long as the two are conceived of as separable, then the conception of a mind which is unaffected by the body is a coherent one. This notion of pure consciousness, which is the seat of authenticity, rationality, and liberty, can only be polluted by bodily effects. Thus, a Cartesian framework has three undesirable consequences for a study of conversion which can only be overcome by Merleau-Ponty's reconceptualisation of ontology. These consequences concern the issues of freedom, authenticity, and ratiocentricism.

First, as we saw when discussing the impact of cognitive science on our understanding of conversion, an overemphasis on the power of the body to affect the mind runs the risk of

materialist reductionism, whereby religious conversions are seen as nothing more than the inevitable consequence of physical stimuli. Any philosophy of embodiment within a Cartesian framework runs the risk of collapsing into a physicalist determinism, according to which our actions are not truly our own but the result of unconscious subcutaneous forces. Freedom on this view is simply an illusion, a virtual reality created by the physiological processes which are really in control. This would imply that conversions cannot be freely chosen but are the consequence of irrational, unconscious, bodily forces. This can be especially problematic in cases where a religious group intentionally employs certain aesthetics or ritual practices in order to persuade potential converts to join: under a Cartesian framework, this is manipulation, since a potential convert is compelled to join the new religion through affective, embodied methods with no means of resisting. Since all religions are embodied, no religious conversion on this view can be genuinely free.[442]

This leads to the second consequence of a Cartesian framework for understanding embodiment in conversion. Not only does Cartesianism leave all religious conversions open to the charge of manipulation, it also suggests that a rational human subject ought to be able to overcome and control bodily influences on their behaviour. Donovan Schaefer has elegantly described this view as the 'linguistic fallacy', the assumption implicit in much of modern Western philosophy that human beings are essentially rational and linguistic beings, and thus ought to be able to rise above and overcome their animal bodily instincts and make decisions based on reason.[443] If the mind is the seat of rationality, then to act according to the body means to succumb to an irrational power. Further, it condemns any attempt to use the capacity of the body to affect one's perception or belief as bad faith. This view suggests that if a convert chooses to engage in ritual acts (such as prayer, meditation, singing, and so on) knowing, or even hoping, that doing so will change how they think or believe, then they are intentionally seeking to undermine their own freedom and thus acting in bad faith.

Third, Cartesian ontology can also lead to the privileging of doctrine and the view that religious practice is somehow not real. If the human being is defined by or identified with their conscious subjectivity, over and against the objective effects of their body, then ritual or bodily behaviours will at best be regarded as secondary expressions of or accompaniments to religion. As various scholars have noted, this doctrine-focused ratiocentricism in religious studies is a Western invention derived from the dominance of Protestant Christianity in the development of Western academia which distorts the religious practices of global cultures, reimagining them in the image of Protestant Christianity.[444] When mind is separated from body and venerated as the seat of reason and liberty, then practices such as Yoruba drumming, the Japanese tea ritual, or healing rituals will be interpreted either as irrational primitive practices which are not "real" religion or according

[442] Of course, it might be objected that some religious practices *are* manipulative. There is a need to develop a conception of freedom which recognises that embodied action can be free while still offering the resources to condemn genuine coercive practices. This issue will be taken up in the conclusion to the thesis.
[443] Schaefer, *Religious Affects*, 9.
[444] Smith, *Belief and History*; Lopez Jr., 'Belief'; Smith, 'Religion, Religions, Religious'.

to the doctrinal beliefs which must (according to Western interpreters) lie beneath these irrational practices.

The crux of all these problems is that, on a Cartesian framework, mental and physical causation is competitive. That is to say, when mind is separable from body, a mental cause is different to a physical cause: to the extent that *x* is caused physically, it is not caused mentally. Given that Cartesian ontologies generally categorise rationality and freedom as belonging to *res cogitans*, every discovery made concerning the influence of the body on the mind undermines human freedom. Only by recognising that subjectivity is physical can we begin to resolve this problem. For this, we require an ontology which does not separate the mental and physical – unless we want to be left with the ambiguity of the *Phenomenology of Perception*. Merleau-Ponty's ontology allows us to consider the phenomenon of perception from the perspective of flesh. From this viewpoint, embodiment cannot be seen as something which is added to cognition, a contingent fact about an ego which just happens to be embodied. Rather, it implies a deep intertwining of mind and body, subject and object. As Thompson demonstrates, cognition is not something peculiar to conscious subjectivity which is added to embodied subjects; rather, cognition is fundamental to all life and observable in primitive non-conscious lifeforms such as bacteria. Thus, embodiment is not something which affects human subjectivity; embodiment *is* human subjectivity.

Accordingly, the effect of the body on the mind does not threaten human freedom because freedom is no longer located on the far side of a divide between physical and mental action. If subjectivity is not the reserve of the mental but is in fact physical, then rationality and freedom cannot be at odds with embodiment. Rather, as part of embodied subjectivity, rationality and freedom depend on embodiment. Meaning does not reside uniquely in consciousness but can emerge autopoietically out of non-meaningful physical systems. Further, the use of the body to develop certain behaviours, beliefs or perceptions is not automatically bad faith. If body and mind are not separable and human subjectivity is fundamentally intertwined with objectivity, then an action cannot be condemned as inauthentic simply because it is embodied. While there remains scope in Merleau-Ponty's ontology to recognise inauthenticity, a religious practitioner is not immediately cast as inauthentic because they choose to meditate. Finally, there can be no ratiocentricism in an ontology of flesh since rationality on this view is embodied and not hived off to the far side of the mind-body divide. Again, this does not mean that there is no scope for a critic to suggest that certain practices are irrational; however, it does mean that such a criticism does not come for free. An ontology of flesh requires a reimagining of the nature of rationality. Rationality is embodied and so an embodied practice cannot be deemed irrational just because it is embodied. Hence, we can overcome the dual distortion which casts Protestantism and Protestant-like religion as disembodied, while non-Protestant religion (including Catholicism and various global, non-Christian religious traditions) is deemed irrational. This kind of ontological reconceptualisation narrows this divide, recognising the rationality of embodied religion and the embodiment of doctrine.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have articulated the embodied belief-forming context within which conversion experiences occur, revealing a conception of human subjectivity as an embodied subjectivity which emerges from the primordial flesh of the world. At root, perception is the world perceiving itself, which becomes self-aware in the establishment of self-consciousness. This means that the notion of external worldly effects influencing consciousness is ontologically incoherent. Any separation of objective and subjective, or mental and physical, causes is an abstraction. While we might choose to perform this abstraction to help describe certain experiences, we must not forget that it is not an accurate representation of the world. It might feel as though some external and physical influence has affected our subjective minds – especially because the influence of Cartesian thinking is so strong – but this is not the reality. The division of mental and physical causes cannot be ontologically maintained. Therefore, we can recognise that conversion cannot simply concern the actions and experiences of disembodied minds: even in the most cerebral, unemotional conversion experiences, embodiment and our essential connection and continuity with the world shapes our cognitive development and the formation of new beliefs. With Merleau-Ponty, we can see that such a comment does not entail a physicalist reduction; the traditional experiences and characteristics of mind, such as reason, freedom and authenticity, are present in our physical subjectivity through the ontology of flesh. The following two chapters are thus an elucidation of certain aspects of embodiment which are particularly important to conversion. We will explore the effects of expression and community in conversion, articulating more clearly their particular function as embodied and affective phenomena, having attained an understanding of the broader embodied belief-forming context within which they operate.

4. Expression: Linguistic Communities and the Affectivity of Speech

In the last chapter, we articulated the embodied belief-forming context within which conversions take place. The following two chapters will develop this argument, expanding upon certain important aspects of human embodiment. Thus, as we begin to discuss the role of expression and community in conversion, it should be remembered that these analyses are fundamentally an expansion of our analysis of embodiment in the previous chapter. As these arguments unfold, therefore, we will return to the embodiment and affectivity of expression and community, the recognition of which is essential if we are properly to understand these phenomena and their role in conversion. Neither expression nor community can be understood if we fail to situate these phenomena in their embodied contexts. The lessons from the previous chapter concerning the inadequacy of dualism in comprehending embodiment should thus be kept in mind. Such dualistic philosophies risk distorting our understanding of expression and community – and thus also conversion.

The specific concern of this chapter is expression. Developing an accurate theory of language and expression should be a matter of concern for scholars of religion and religious conversion. All religion involves expression in some form, whether this consists in confession and catechism, or ritual and devotion expressed through language or the body. Several studies have outlined the importance of language in religion.[445] We should therefore expect religious conversion to involve some process of developing new religious expressions. The question remains, what exactly is the role of language and expression in the conversion process? Is it strictly a by-product of conversion, something which changes once an individual is converted? Or does it have a function within the conversion process itself, contributing to belief change? I will argue in this chapter for the latter position, that expression change does not simply follow belief change but rather is deeply involved in the belief change process. I will argue against a view which sees expression as a mere reflection of our internal private theatre and for an embodied and social philosophy of language, according to which language is understood to be that through which new ideas and beliefs are established. Thus, I will propose that expression and entry into new linguistic communities make fundamental contributions to the process of conversion.

This chapter will first outline Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of language, speech and expression, which will function as a starting point for my own analysis. I will then introduce some criticisms of Merleau-Ponty's view, concerned primarily with introducing a Wittgensteinian praxeology into Merleau-Ponty's account. This will be followed by an application of this linguistic theory to the case of religious conversion, developing the notion of linguistic communities in order to articulate the effect which expression has on those who express. Towards the end of the chapter, I will introduce the idea that religious communities are not just linguistic communities but also affective communities which affect their members across multiple affective modalities, thus preparing the way for chapter five.

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[445] Gallagher, *Expectation and Experience*; Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell*; Hindmarsh, *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative*; Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back*.

Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Language

When Merleau-Ponty introduces the problem of expression in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, he suggests that it is this investigation which will provide 'the opportunity to leave behind, once and for all, the classical subject-object dichotomy.'[446] There is something about expression, speech and language which, if misunderstood, will lead us right back to the kind of dualist thinking Merleau-Ponty sought to exorcise but, if understood correctly, has the potential to set us on a new path, free from the division of subject and object. The basic problem with classical views on language is that they separate thought and word. Traditionally, the thought which precedes speech is the subjective bearer of meaning, while the word is the objective translation of meaning into physical articulation, itself meaningless. By subscribing to this classical understanding of expression, the separation of subject and object is found to be a *fait accompli*, presupposed by the division of thought and word. If Merleau-Ponty is to reconceptualise subjectivity and objectivity, he must also reconceptualise expression and language.

For Merleau-Ponty, both empiricism and intellectualism get expression wrong. According to empiricism, language works according to the objectively observable laws of physics and neuroscience; the word 'does not bear its sense… and is nothing more than a psychical, physiological, or even physical phenomenon'. Speech is nothing more than a sonorous phenomenon which triggers physiological responses in humans according to predictable mechanistic laws. For intellectualism, this is too mechanistic and leaves no room for meaning. Intellectualism therefore suggests that meaning is an internal mental content which attaches itself to speech. The word is 'the external sign of an inner recognition' which remains an 'empty envelope', carrying meaning but with no sense of its own.[447] Both empiricism and intellectualism make the same mistake, in that they 'concur in the claim that the word *has* no signification.'[448] To the empiricist, speech is nothing more than mechanism and meaning does not really exist; the intellectualist insists on the real existence of meaning but locates this within a distinct mental category, such that physical speech somehow carries meaning without being meaningful itself. Neither approach can overcome the dualism between thought and word, and both struggle to account for the ability of a word to transmit a meaning. Empiricism accepts the same dualism between word and thought as intellectualism. The only difference is that, for the empiricist, there is nothing that really exists in the category of thought. As such, it evacuates the word of any meaning whatsoever. It offers a mechanistic conception of words triggering meaningless reflex responses which does not square with the phenomenal experience of speaking or listening. Intellectualism, despite attempting to reinstate meaning into speech, cannot explain how a word can come to carry a thought. The process of somehow hooking a thought onto a physical sonorous sign, and then unhooking it and translating the word back into a thought on hearing it cannot be explained on an intellectualist conception. In contrast, Merleau-Ponty insists that 'the word bears the sense': the word, as a physical written or sonorous

[446] *PhP*, 214.
[447] *PhP*, 182.
[448] *PhP*, 182, emphasis original.

phenomenon, is itself meaningful.[449] As the body is physical subjectivity, so the word is physical meaning. Without this kind of reconceptualisation, we will never overcome the subject-object dichotomy because we will always be wedded to an account of expression which separates out subjective meaning and the objective act of physical communication.

Merleau-Ponty's approach to expression developed significantly over the course of his lifetime and it was a problem to which he regularly returned.[450] Chronologically, Merleau-Ponty's interest in expression began as an investigation into animal behaviour in *The Structure of Behaviour*, developed into a phenomenological interest in speech and painting in the *Phenomenology of Perception* and *Sense and Non-Sense*, before being directed towards a structuralist and ontological interest in language as a socio-historical structure, beginning with the publication of 'Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence' in 1952 and then expressed in *Signs* and *The Visible and the Invisible*.[451] Merleau-Ponty's thought on expression does not contain an obvious *Kehre* but rather displays clear continuity between his earlier and later writings. Changes in his thought come in the form of developments, clarifications, and reinterpretations, rather than revolutions. Thus, Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of expression will not be presented chronologically in this chapter; rather, we will begin with a discussion of Merleau-Ponty's later ontological and structuralist account of language, before exploring his phenomenology through his investigations into painting and speech.

Language

Merleau-Ponty's early philosophy of language presented speech as a kind of linguistic gesture which is neither wholly conventional not wholly natural. While this overcame some of the problems of empiricism and intellectualism, Merleau-Ponty recognised that this view was still dominated by the perspective of the subject and struggled fully to account for the origin of meaning.[452] Because of these difficulties, by the early 1950s Merleau-Ponty began to reconceive his philosophy of language. In the earlier work, Merleau-Ponty's primary concern is the phenomenology of speech and the individual expressions of speakers. Speech is not, however, fully constituted by the speaking subject. Speakers live and speak within a pre-existing linguistic world. A speaker does not have absolute freedom but is constrained by the limits of a language which transcends the speaker and has its own autonomy. Indeed, it is only because of these limits that speech is possible at all. Language appears paradoxical since it exists only as a result of the spoken expressions of individuals, yet from the perspective of the speaking subject, language transcends them.[453] As in the *Phenomenology*, expression is still an embodied act for Merleau-Ponty. The body remains that which,

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[449] *PhP*, 183.

[450] Véronique Fóti, *Tracing Expression in Merleau-Ponty: Aesthetics, Philosophy of Biology, and Ontology* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2013), 3.

[451] While *The Visible and the Invisible* comes to us as concerned primarily with ontology, it contains comments on expression and would undoubtedly have dealt with these issues in more detail had Merleau-Ponty lived to complete it. Low, *Merleau-Ponty's Last Vision*, 71–112.

[452] There is not the space here for an overview of Merleau-Ponty's early philosophy of language. For a detailed account, see Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, 186–201; Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty*, 108–19.

[453] Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty*, 119.

through its physiology, both constrains the possible expressions available to a human subject and makes expression possible at all.[454] Yet Merleau-Ponty came to realise that the expressive body is also immersed in a linguistic world which also constrains and enables expression. There is thus a parallel between the human being's embodied immersion in the material world and its immersion in the linguistic and cultural world. These concerns led Merleau-Ponty towards the work of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, whose influence led Merleau-Ponty's thought in a structuralist and eventually ontological direction.[455] Through Saussure's influence, Merleau-Ponty could begin to articulate a view of the transcendence of language without recourse to speculation about the metaphysical being of language or a Hegelian Absolute Spirit. Merleau-Ponty adopted Saussure's distinction of synchrony and diachrony to describe the different ways in which language transcends the speaker.

Language transcends the speaker synchronically as the linguistic culture within which every speaker exists. As Madison puts it, the subject becomes a speaking subject 'not by constituting language, but by taking it up.'[456] The speaking subject does not create their language but lives already within it: it is the background and context within which they speak. To speak is to exist already in a world of signification in which the existing structure of signs guides and influences the kinds of expression that are possible. As Andrew Inkpin argues, this linguistic structure is formed of 'sublexical elements', phonemes and morphemes. Meaning arises through the arrangement of these sublexical elements; these elements themselves are meaningful because they exist within a sublexical structure of differentiation. Hence a word or expression is meaningful because of the elements by which it is constituted and the structure within which these elements exist.[457] These linguistic structures are essential to the function of language and underlie our experiences of various linguistic tasks. Translation is an obvious example, a process which inevitably involves the loss or distortion of a word's various associations and nuances in its original language. For example, Nietzsche's moral objection to pity on the grounds that it increases suffering is clarified when one knows that the German word Nietzsche uses is *Mitleid* (literally, suffering with). The association in German between pity and suffering results from the word's sublexical elements and gives the word a nuance in German which is absent in English.[458] Inkpin argues that these associations occur in all languages but are regularly overlooked by native speakers. This, along with the fact that sublexical structures are the contingent result

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[454] *PhP*, 190–5.

[455] Because we are interested in Merleau-Ponty's own thought and how this might help us to understand conversion, we will not concern ourselves here questions over the accuracy of Merleau-Ponty's reading of Saussure. James Schmidt has pointed out that Merleau-Ponty's reading of Saussure is so idiosyncratic that it appears he has misread him. Conversely, Andrew Inkpin has suggested that the discrepancies in Merleau-Ponty's use of Saussure's terms are more likely down to the fact that he was incorporating Saussure into his own thought and that, while it is surprising that Merleau-Ponty opted not to indicate his modification of Saussure's thought, it need not imply that this was due to his misunderstanding. Schmidt, *Maurice Merleau-Ponty*, 105–11; Andrew Inkpin, *Disclosing the World: On the Phenomenology of Language* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), 151–53.

[456] Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty*, 122.

[457] Inkpin, *Disclosing the World*, 122.

[458] Of course, this association is present in the English word *sympathy*.

of historical language use, creates an inherent ambiguity in language. We can become aware of this ambiguity when language needs to be especially clear, such as when writing a technical or legal document, since these situations require that one pays attention to (and avoids) the potential nuances and ambiguities of words which would normally be overlooked in everyday language use.[459]

The speaking subject is always already immersed in language. All linguistic acts take place within an already present linguistic background; the meaning of any given linguistic act is the result of the way it interacts with this background. Because the linguistic background is a contingent historical fact, rather than a preordained logical system, and because native speakers often overlook the nuances and associations of their words, meaning is not fully in the power of the speaker. The ambiguity of language means that speakers can be misunderstood and express meanings they did not intend. As Merleau-Ponty notes in a 1951 paper, 'even we who speak do not necessarily know better than those who listen to us what we are expressing.'[460] The positive aspect of this is that speakers can be creative with their language, using the same ambiguities which can cause misunderstanding to 'tear a new sound' from 'the linguistic or narrative apparatus'.[461] The implication is that all acts of creative speech affect the whole linguistic structure, meaning that 'two cultural gestures may be identical only if they are unaware of one another.'[462] The linguistic structure is developed through human beings' contingent historical use of language. Hence, any new meaning expressed through language affects how that language can be used and interpreted in the future.[463] Creative expression does not just express hitherto unexpressed ideas; it affects every future linguistic expression and shapes what can and will be expressed in the future.

The ability for creative acts of expression to affect future expressive possibilities hints at the second way in which language transcends speakers: it does so diachronically. Language is not a static cultural object but something that exists and develops through time. The synchronic structure of language which gives meaning to expression and enables creativity is grounded in and the result of its diachronic structure. To fully understand synchrony, we must recognise that 'synchrony is only a cross-section of diachrony',[464] that the present structure of language is just a part of its wider temporal and historical existence. The synchronic structure of language is not an atemporal linguistic phenomenon but part of a metastable structure which persists and develops though time. It is not static but advances with every creative expression while also maintaining its history through both literary and oral traditions, and etymology. In so doing, is creates at every moment the synchronic structure within which new speech occurs and against which creative expressions are made.

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[459] Inkpin, *Disclosing the World*, 151–53.
[460] 'OPL', 88.
[461] *S*, 46.
[462] *S*, 69.
[463] We might therefore suggest that Merleau-Ponty does not go far enough when he says that no two cultural gestures can be identical unless they are unaware of each other. While the speaker of the second expression will not be affected by a previous cultural gesture he is unaware of, its reception and interpretation, and hence its meaning, will be affected by listeners who have heard the earlier expression.
[464] 'OPL', 84. See Madison's comments on this theme at Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty*, 123.

This diachronic development is made possible because of its historical contingency; creative progress is made possible by the 'cracks, gaps, or weak zones which prevent it from being perfectly clear for the speaking subjects and which make for difficulties in communication.'[465] Hence language moves forward not through the guidance of some Absolute Spirit but through creative acts of expression, made possible by the contingent and ambiguous nature of language. Diachrony moves forward by expressions within the synchronic linguistic structure, yet this structure is only properly understood through diachrony.

The Phenomenology of Expression

We have now outlined Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of language, with particular reference to the influence of Saussurean linguistics and the ontological direction set by his later thought. For the purpose of this thesis, a detailed appraisal of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of language is unnecessary. What we have presented is sufficient context to understand Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of expression and the critical response we will offer to it later in the chapter. From the perspective of a study into conversion, language is important insofar as it affects an individual speaker and the processes involved in conversion. With this in mind, a detailed phenomenology of speech and expression is necessary if we are to understand how various forms of religious expression can contribute to the process of conversion. We will thus now proceed more slowly, unpacking Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of expression. For Merleau-Ponty, expression was not limited to speech: much of his thought about expression comes out in his philosophical reflections on painting. We will thus proceed by exploring Merleau-Ponty's analysis of painting, before focusing on his specific phenomenology of speech. It is there that we will discover the role speech plays in accomplishing thought, which will be crucial for our understanding of expression in conversion.

To understand Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of expression, we must first understand that for him, expression is intrinsically linked with perception. For Merleau-Ponty, perception is not just the sum of sensory inputs that the body receives but it is intrinsically meaningful and expressive. Expression is always expression of something; for Merleau-Ponty, the meaningful perceptual world is the fecund ground of all expressive activity.

It is in Merleau-Ponty's analysis of painting where we first see the deep relationship between perception and expression clearly articulated. A painter's work does not just represent the world "as is". It is not an imitation of the world, nor is it an object manufactured according to good taste. Rather, art 'is a process of expressing'.[466] This process of expressing should not be understood as the transformation of a neutral perception into an expressive artwork. Rather, perception itself is expressive and it is this basic expressivity of perception that is represented in painting. When we consider our basic,

[465] Madison, 123.
[466] *SNS*, 17.

unreflected experience of perception, what Merleau-Ponty calls 'primordial perception',[467] we see that it is a unified whole without separation between the senses.

> The lived object is not rediscovered or constructed on the basis of the contributions of the senses; rather, it presents itself to us from the start as the radiant center from which these contributions radiate. We *see* the depth, the smoothness, the softness, the hardness of objects; Cézanne even claimed that we see their odor. If the painter is to express the world, the arrangement of his colors must carry with it this indivisible whole, or else his picture will only hint at things and will not give them in the imperious unity, the presence, the insurpassable plenitude which is for us the definition of the real.[468]

For Merleau-Ponty, perception is synesthetic. There is no demarcation of different sensory worlds in primordial perception; there is one perceptual world in which we can see textures and odours. It is only scientific knowledge that has undermined our synesthetic perception of the world, which teaches us that sight, hearing, touch, and so on operate within discrete perceptual worlds. In reality, we 'see the rigidity and fragility of the glass', the 'hardness of the blade in a plane', 'the weight of a block of cast iron' or 'the viscosity of syrup'; we can 'hear the hardness and the unevenness of the cobblestones in the sound of a car'.[469] This focus on the synesthetic nature of perception demonstrates Merleau-Ponty's intended focus: that the perceived world is a unified meaningful whole. The synesthetic character of primordial perception demonstrates that perception is meaningful. Our eyes do not have the apparatus to judge the texture of a certain material, yet we do see things as hard or soft. We do not experience this as a judgement that we come to as a result of interrogating the visual data we receive; rather, the phenomenological experience is of *seeing* that something is hard or soft. Our perceptual experience is that any surface we see already carries a meaning with it beyond its explicitly visual contents.

Merleau-Ponty's point is not that all the senses are the same.[470] His point is instead that the sensory worlds are not hermetically sealed ways of perceiving the world but rather form part of a perceptive whole, in which the different senses affect and communicate with one another. For example, if I hear the sound of cars passing out of sight on the street below, I would expect to see them if I looked. I perceive the cars as a visible object and not just as an aural object. There are not two objects, one visual and one aural, but one object which I can perceive visually and aurally. The world we perceive is not a collection of various sensory inputs which are collated in the brain but a meaningful whole, with smooth and continuous sensory access to the world. In other words, we experience a perceptual gestalt. A good

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[467] *SB*, 3.
[468] *SNS*, 15. Merleau-Ponty repeats Cézanne's comments on being able to see the odour of a landscape in the *Phenomenology of Perception*. *PhP*, 332.
[469] *PhP*, 238–9.
[470] Indeed, synesthesia as Merleau-Ponty describes it is markedly different from synesthesia as a medical condition, whereby one might, for example, see the colour red when hearing the note middle C. Merleau-Ponty's examples of synesthesia are not like this: while I might say that I can see the hardness of a steel blade, this phenomenon is nothing compared to the experience of actually feeling a steel blade. As we will see, the point Merleau-Ponty is trying to make is that there is communication between the senses, while all disclose one and the same world.

example here is the perception of wetness. A human being has no sensory receptors for detecting moisture, yet we can and do perceive things to be wet. On a physiological level, this "perceiving wetness" is in fact the result of a combination of other sensations (in particular, temperature and tactile sensations of pressure and friction).[471] However, upon touching a wet towel we do not experience coldness and low friction and then judge that the towel must be wet but rather immediately perceive a wet towel. Again, our perception is more than the sum of the explicit sensory data; sensations are perceived as immediately meaningful and this meaning consists in a holistic unity of the perceptual world.

How does this digression into the phenomenology of perception help us to understand expression? Perception is crucial to understanding expression because all expression is rooted in perception. This is what the painter expresses when they paint: not just the visible world but the whole perceptual world. The perceptual world which the painter paints is already meaningful before it is expressed in painting. This is what the above comments on synesthesia show: the visual world is not just a collection of visible data but is inherently meaningful because visual perception already includes tactile, aural, olfactory and taste associations, as well as associations of value or salience relative to my projects. Perception is expressive because in perception the perceptual world expresses itself to the perceiving human being.[472] Further, perception, which is expressive, also calls to be expressed. This is a continuation of Merleau-Ponty's earlier comments on behaviour. Merleau-Ponty conceived of behaviour as a meaningful response to a significant stimulus: perception for an animal does not consist in neutral sensations but stimuli which demand a response on the part of the animal (taking the food, running from danger, etc.). For human beings, who, Merleau-Ponty argues, are alone capable of creating symbolic meaning,[473] perception calls for a symbolic response, or expression. The expressive character of perception is not just something that a human being recognises as a feature of their perceptual world; it is an affective call which makes a demand on the human. The phenomenon of perception contains the feeling that there is something to be said – or painted – in the perceptual world.

> There is nothing but a vague fever before the act of artistic expression, and only the work itself, completed and understood, is proof that there was *something* rather than *nothing* to be said.[474]

The sensation which precedes expression is not cognitive but affective, a sense that there is something to be done, something to be said. As Donald Landes articulates it, there is a felt 'weight' that carries us on into the expressive act.[475]

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[471] Davide Filingeri et al., 'Why Wet Feels Wet?: A Neurophysiological Model of Human Cutaneous Wetness Sensitivity', *Journal of Neurophysiology* 112, no. 6 (2014): 1457.
[472] As Merleau-Ponty reached the end of his life and began to move towards ontology, he would begin to describe perception as the expression of Being. Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty*, 102–7.
[473] *SB*, 162–3.
[474] *SNS*, 19.
[475] Donald A. Landes, *Merleau-Ponty and the Paradoxes of Expression* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 11–12.

However, this vague fever – this feeling that there is something to be said – does not contain the content of what will be expressed. Merleau-Ponty is not describing an experience whereby the painter has a perfect image of what they are about to paint and then feels the need to represent this mental content on the canvas. This would be to adopt an intellectualist view of expression which Merleau-Ponty rejects. To suggest that the painter has a clear idea in the mind of what they intend to paint before they begin is to suggest that it is possible for a human to hold a highly complex mental image in their mind for an extended period of time. This is clearly impossible. Even if a painter has a much more sophisticated visual imagination that most people, holding a complete and fully determinate picture of the intended picture in the mind would require that every brushstroke be visualised prior to painting. If we accept that the painter does not visualise every brushstroke, then we acknowledge that the painting is not fully determined until it is painted. The precise expression remains up for grabs until it is painted. The pre-expressive feeling which calls forth an act of expression indicates that there is something to be expressed but does not fully determine the expression. There is an indeterminacy about expression which is only resolved in and though the expressive act.

Merleau-Ponty uses the word *sens* to describe the inner sensation of a meaning which goes along with an expression. *Sens* has a wider meaning in French than the English *sense*, incorporating not only "sense" and "meaning" but also "direction". Hence, the *sens* which precedes an act of expression suggests the sense or meaning of what is to be expressed but can also be understood as setting a direction for the expression. This perhaps gets closer to Merleau-Ponty's intention: the *sens* does not provide a fully formulated meaning for the forthcoming expression but rather sets a direction of meaning which the expression will follow. Sense and expression are thus 'enveloped in each other; sense is caught in speech, and speech is the external existence of sense'.[476] In this way, expression has an accomplishing function: thought is accomplished through expression. What an artist expresses 'cannot, therefore, be the translation of a clearly defined thought, since such clear thoughts are those which have already been uttered by ourselves or by others.'[477] A clearly defined thought is, by definition, a thought which has been expressed. Expression is the process by which thought is made explicit.

The above discussion illustrates the creative power of expression. Merleau-Ponty rejects the dualism of thought and expression, insisting that words are meaningful and that thought is accomplished through expression. Since an expression is not formulated in thought beforehand, the expressive act itself is involved in the articulation of thought. Creativity takes place not in the mind but in acts of expression, and so expressive acts such as speech and painting are inherently creative and play a constitutive role in formulating thought. Expression is thus a simultaneously reflective and creative power which allows genuinely novel thoughts about the world to be expressed.[478] Yet, this creativity of thought never

[476] *PhP*, 187.
[477] *SNS*, 19.
[478] It is this equivocation between 'pure repetition and pure creation' that is, for Landes, the source of paradox which Merleau-Ponty finds in expression. Landes, *Merleau-Ponty and the Paradoxes of Expression*, 10.

becomes the pure liberty of the idealist's constituting consciousness.[479] The world which enables expression by appearing to perception as intrinsically expressive also limits and guides what is perceived and therefore what can be expressed, yet this limitation does not collapse into determinism.[480] Meaning resides neither entirely in the physical world nor in the perceiving subject but rather in the embodied human being's taking up and interpreting of the world. The world is only meaningful because it is perceived but the meaning which perception recognises is still limited and guided by the world, even though the world itself is meaningless apart from perception.

We can understand this by referring back to the discussion of autopoiesis in chapter three. In Thompson's example of bacteria swimming up a sucrose gradient, the sucrose is not meaningful in itself as a chemical compound but becomes meaningful only because of the perception of the bacterium. At the same time, the bacterium is not in full control of meaning since this depends on the physico-chemical properties of the sucrose molecules. The bacterium's perception of meaning in the sucrose molecule (as nutritionally valuable) is intrinsically expressive. The bacterium expresses the meaning of the sucrose molecule by swimming up the sucrose gradient: this expression is not a decision made by the bacterium; the sucrose molecule's nutritional meaning contains the expressive response of swimming up-gradient.[481] Unlike bacteria, a human being can express itself symbolically.[482] Thus, the meaning which emerges in the meeting of the perceived world and the embodied perceiver is not fully determined. The embodied human experiences meaning in perception but is free to creatively reflect this in a variety of different ways. The meaningfulness of expression is not a cognitive feature of experience but something experienced affectively through the body. The pre-expressive *sens* is the subjective experience of this affectively experienced meaning in perception. Therefore, *sens* is not a precise articulation of what is to be expressed but rather an inchoate and indeterminate direction of meaning.

In his analysis of expression, Merleau-Ponty seeks to resolve the tension between its reflective and creative power.[483] This tension is something we can recognise in ordinary experience: we feel that we have power over our own expression, that our words are our own, yet at the same time we also recognise that our expressions are the product of our time and place. The political or philosophical opinions I hold and express feel like they are mine and that I have chosen them. Yet, at the same time, I recognise that my political and

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[479] *SNS*, 12.

[480] To understand the relationship between the material world and expression, it is useful to employ Madison's language of 'rootedness'. Expression is rooted in the physical world; that is, expression is grounded in the physical world, without which there could be no expression. However, this is not a causal grounding. Roots are necessary for a tree to survive by securing it and providing it with sustenance, yet they are not the cause of the tree; in the same way, the physical world is necessary for the existence of expression, yet it does not cause expression. Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty*, 53.

[481] Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 154.

[482] *SB*, 162–3.

[483] Merleau-Ponty holds a similar position concerning the relationship between the individual actor and their historical setting. For Merleau-Ponty, human beings exist within a historical setting which affects what and how they express themselves, yet history never compels humans to act. There remains a freedom for humans to act within history, to take up their historical and cultural situation and creatively re-express it. See *PhP*, 183–7; *S*, 68–75; *SNS*, 24–5, 81, 130.

philosophical opinions and expressions are a product of my socio-historical context and that if I lived in a different time or place I would freely have chosen to express different opinions. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of expression is an attempt to resolve this tension and recognise that expression is simultaneously the liberty of the subject and the product of their locatedness. Thus, Merleau-Ponty discovers in expression a creative reflection, a reversibility of situation and style, of perception and expression, through which the embodied subject thinks and expresses. As we will discover later, tracing the boundaries between freedom and determinism in expression is essential to understanding religious conversion. If a conversion could be described as emerging out of an individual's particular social or historical setting, does this somehow undermine its freedom and legitimacy? Merleau-Ponty would suggest not: just as understanding a painter's life history can help us understand their work without it thereby being a direct cause of it,[484] so we might suggest that the background conditions of a conversion can help us to understand the conversion without thereby simply being its cause.

The Accomplishing Function of Speech

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of speech follows the anti-intellectualist trajectory set by his phenomenology of painting. 'For the speaker, then, speech does not translate a ready-made thought; rather, speech accomplishes thought.'[485] Merleau-Ponty's recurring anti-dualism is articulated as a denial of the division between thought and word. Speech does not (and cannot) merely signify thought; instead, speech (and expression) is that through which thought is accomplished.

> First, speech is not the "sign" of thought, if by this we understand a phenomenon that announces another as smoke announces fire. Speech and thought would only admit of this external relation if they were both thematically given; in fact they are enveloped in each other; sense is caught in speech, and speech is the external existence of sense.[486]

The idea that speech and thought can be separated is an illusion created by the sedimentation of language.[487] We can see the inseparability of thought and expression most clearly in music, where 'the musical signification of the sonata is inseparable from the sounds that carry it'.[488] There is no sense in separating the idea expressed in music and the physical expression of the music itself: the idea contained in music is the physical sound expressed. While the musician about to play will have a *sens* of what is to come, this cannot mean that the musician has a fully determined idea of the piece of music about to be played in their mind before they begin playing, if only because the piece is only fully realised across a period of time which cannot be contained within the brief moment before playing. In the case of music there can be no separation of musical ideas from the sounds themselves – musical ideas *are* sonorous and so the notion of their separation strikes us as absurd. On the

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[484] *SNS*, 24–5.
[485] *PhP*, 183.
[486] *PhP*, 187.
[487] For more on sedimentation, see *PhP*, 196.
[488] *PhP*, 188.

other hand, speech is capable of 'forget[ting] itself as being a contingent fact'.[489] Even if the separation of speech and thought is in fact impossible, it does not strike us as absurd. Hence, many philosophers have chased after the phantasm of Absolute Thought or Reason, while musicians and artists do not concern themselves with Absolute Music or Painting. Expression relies on a creatively reflective dialectic with the world and so cannot be fully formulated in pure thought. This is the illusion of intellectualism, fuelled by the process of sedimentation. A *sens* precedes speech but this *sens* is not a fully determinate thought. It is rather an inchoate and affectively felt direction of meaning. The thought expressed in speech is not fully and determinately present in the mind of the speaker ahead of time but is accomplished as the word is spoken.

We can find support for this position from Ludwig Wittgenstein's private language argument. In the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein considers the possibility of keeping a diary about a recurrent sensation, S. Every time the sensation occurs, one would write "S" on the calendar and in so doing keep track of when and how often the sensation is experienced. Such a procedure, Wittgenstein argues, is in fact impossible. It relies on the possibility of having a consistent definition of S, which is not achievable. Wittgenstein asks how one would produce an ostensive definition of S. Perhaps by concentrating on the sensation when it occurs and, 'as it were, point to it inwardly.'[490] This has two problems. First, Wittgenstein's comments on rule following in §§143–242 show that this kind of ostensive defining cannot yield stable and definitive meanings. A rule is an intention to go on in a certain way (see, for example, *PI*, §185) but an intention cannot be definitively communicated through examples of past practice and is always open to an unexpected interpretation. Even when establishing a rule for one's own future private use of a term, the ambiguity of interpretation means that private definitions are always liable to wander off course from the original intended meaning.

Second, Wittgenstein argues that, even if I did manage an ostensive definition of S, there is nothing to guarantee that I will remember the sensation correctly. If tomorrow I believe that I have had sensation S again, how can I check that this really is S and not some other sensation which I have confused for S? I cannot: 'I have no criterion of correctness.'[491] This is not a point about the unreliability of memory; rather, Wittgenstein is commenting on the need for meaning to be secured against something external.[492] The point is not that I might be wrong but rather that I will always be right: if I believe that this sensation is S and not some other sensation, there is nothing to contradict me, even if the sensation I felt today was in fact wildly different to the one I felt yesterday. The meaning of the mark, "S", on my calendar (or any private word I use to name the sensation) thus can have no determinate meaning at all. Private language cannot have a determinate sense. With private language, there is no measure of correctness and nothing to pull me up short if I deviate from the meanings I decide upon. Meaning in a private language is utterly ungrounded; private language is thus indeterminate and ultimately meaningless. In order to secure the meaning

[489] *PhP*, 196.
[490] *PI*, §258.
[491] *PI*, §258.
[492] Anthony Kenny, *Wittgenstein*, revised edition (Malden: Blackwell, 2006), 151.

of a certain expression, we must appeal to an independent authority.[493] Only something independent of ourselves could establish a criterion of correctness which is not subject to the instability of our own private ostensive definitions and for Wittgenstein this independent authority is public language.

While certain passages suggest that Wittgenstein disregards the importance of private sensations altogether,[494] Wittgenstein seeks to avoid the behaviourist conclusion that pain is just pain-behaviour.[495] His solution is to insist that before expression there is 'not a Something, but not a Nothing either!' Wittgenstein is not arguing that there must be nothing prior to expression but that 'a Nothing would render the same service as a Something' when it comes to understanding pre-expressed thoughts.[496] This 'paradox' will disappear 'only if we make a radical break with the idea that language always functions in one way, always serves the same purpose: to convey thoughts'.[497] Wittgenstein is making the same argument as Merleau-Ponty here, that expression does not convey a pre-articulated thought. A view which holds that language reflects pre-articulated thoughts relies on the coherence and determinacy of private language. If language repeats what has already been thought previously, then this thought must be articulated linguistically. If not, then the act of speech is adding something meaningful to the expression and so thought is not entirely articulated before expression. As Wittgenstein shows, private language is indeterminate. Without recourse to public discourse, nothing secures the meaning of private language against error so there can be no reliable translation of private thought into speech. It would be possible for one thought to be expressed with two contradictory expressions with nothing to indicate error. The precise meaning of that which precedes expression (for Wittgenstein the not-Nothing-not-Something; for Merleau-Ponty, *sens*) can have no determinate meaning before it is expressed because determinate meaning is a social phenomenon, dependent on a community of language users.[498] Thus, Wittgenstein is not arguing that there are no sensations but that the sensations which precede expression are inchoate and inarticulate until they are expressed – which is precisely the conclusion Merleau-Ponty reaches.

The upshot of Wittgenstein's argument is that the notion of a privately articulated linguistic thought which precedes an act of expression is incoherent. Before expression, thought is indeterminate and vague. With no external criterion for correctness or consistency, unexpressed private thoughts cannot have a determinate sense; determination comes only once the thought is expressed and released into the realm of public discourse. Hence, Wittgenstein's private language argument supports Merleau-Ponty's position that thought is accomplished through speech. As well as finding support from Wittgenstein's private language argument, Merleau-Ponty's position is verified by reflection upon common

[493] *PI*, §265.
[494] E.g., *PI*, §§270–1.
[495] *PI*, §304.
[496] *PI*, § 304.
[497] *PI*, §304.
[498] Gilbert Ryle makes a similar argument against a theory of private thought: 'It would then be hazardous or impossible for a man to claim sanity or logical consistency even for himself, since he would be debarred from comparing his own performances with those of others.' Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, 21.

experiences of expression. Attention to the experience of a spontaneous conversation reveals the extent to which thought is not realised until it is spoken. When I engage in conversation, I do not find that I must always formulate my replies in my head before speaking them; I can reply, potentially at length, with a minimal amount of time to prepare my answer. However, while I do not prepare my words before speaking and I rarely know precisely what I will say, my reply does not come as an utter surprise to me. There was a *sens* I wished to articulate and an indeterminate idea of an opinion I held which I accomplished through speaking.[499]

In response, two related objections might be made. First, that we do indeed experience private language and articulated thought prior to speech through the experience of an inner voice with which we can think linguistically. Second, that speech often does not accomplish thought but rather unthinkingly repeats ideas or opinions already held. In response to the first objection, we may suggest that inner speech is not as articulate as can first appear. When we reflect upon the phenomenon of inner thought, we do not find a fully determinate, coherent monologue. Rather, the experience is of disparate snatches of words and ideas which follow their own unpredictable direction. Thoughts can get away from oneself or take an unexpected turn. If one decides to go away and think before writing or speaking, this kind of thinking-through does not consist in articulating fully what will be said but rather sets an intention and direction which will be articulated as it is expressed. The importance of expression for thought can be observed in instances where one believes that one understands a concept or idea, only to struggle to explain it to another. What can feel like a fully articulate understanding is revealed to be only partial when one attempts to express it. Further, even if it is possible to speak in one's head, this is derivative upon speaking aloud. Internal speech uses a pre-existing public language. As Wittgenstein demonstrates, one cannot think in one's head using a private language unknown to anyone else because there would be nothing to secure the meanings of the words. If I think privately to myself "the cup is red", the meanings of these words are secured by public language use: if the cup I see is actually green, this inconsistency will occur to me. I cannot capriciously change my understanding of the word "red" to apply to this green cup because I have not defined the word "red" for myself but appropriated it from public discourse. Inner thought is thus not utterly private or individual. It involves the implied presence of another which acts as an external criterion of correctness. However, thinking in the head is still not the same as speaking aloud to another. While inner speech utilises public language and involves the implicit presence of another, this presence remains implicit. Communication with another involves the explicit presence of another who can confront me with inaccuracies or inconsistencies in my expression. This helps to explain those cases where I believe that I understand a concept only to fail to explain it to another. When I represent my understanding to myself, there is no one explicitly present to pick me up on errors, inconsistencies or ellipses. I can gloss over these gaps to myself in a way that I cannot to

[499] A similar sense is experienced in the case of musical improvisation. While the musician will know the kind of thing they want to express and will be aware of the key, tempo, style and relevant chord progressions of the piece of music within which they are improvising, the precise melody they produce is not explicitly decided upon in advance but emerges in and through the improvisation.

another. Thus, while I can develop a sense of thought in my head, this can only reach full articulation in expression.[500]

In response to the second objection, the claim that thought is accomplished through speech (or, more precisely, expression) does not entail the claim that all speech accomplishes thought – it is only the former claim we wish to defend. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty distinguishes between authentic speech and inauthentic or secondary speech. Because we live in a world where language is already instituted, 'we possess in ourselves already formulated significations for all of these banal words [*paroles*].' These *paroles* give rise only to 'second order thoughts' which 'require no genuine effort of expression from us, and… will demand no effort of comprehension from our listeners.'[501] These are cases where we are simply repeating a previous expression of ours or another without thought or creativity. If authentic expression is understood to be reflective creativity, then second-order expression is fully reflective and not at all creative. Such speech is not properly called expression at all but is instead *das Gerede*. None of this undermines Merleau-Ponty's claim that thought is accomplished by speech.

Pragmatic Language Use

Before moving on, it is worth noting one salient point of criticism against Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of language. Andrew Inkpin has argued that Merleau-Ponty's approach to language has a 'systematic bias in favour of creative expression'.[502] By focusing on the creativity and openness of expression, Merleau-Ponty marginalises established language use, relegating it to the status of secondary or derivative language. For Inkpin, this focus has two problems. First, it leaves Merleau-Ponty unable to account for the stability of language. If expression is entirely creative, there is nothing to keep it in check. We risk finding ourselves in an 'expressive freefall', whereby the creative power of language is so strong that expressed meaning is always up for grabs and capable of being radically transformed with every novel expression. This is a conclusion to be avoided, since without some regularity in expression humans could not successfully communicate because communication requires a common ground of shared expressive possibilities. Synchronic and diachronic linguistic structures do play a limiting role in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of language but what we need to explain is how they have this capacity. Second, Merleau-Ponty does not recognise the role of a sign's background use, against which new expressions will be interpreted. That is to say, even for the most creative acts of expression, such expressions will be interpreted and understood by others according to their own understanding of the sign, which will be based on its more routine and mundane uses.

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[500] Another response to the thinking in the head objection can be found in Gilbert Ryle. Ryle offers a *reductio ad absurdum* to the notion that the expression of an argument must be preceded by a private intellectual operation. 'They do not plan their arguments before constructing them. Indeed if they had to plan what to think before thinking it they would never think at all; for this planning would itself be unplanned.' Even if we could push the formation of ideas from public discourse to private thought, this private thought it itself a quasi-public expression which still must be preceded by inchoate indeterminacy. Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, 30.

[501] *PhP*, 189.

[502] Inkpin, *Disclosing the World*, 156.

Inkpin's argument is important since it recognises the limitation of creative language use: while I can say new things with language, if I want to be understood by others then what I can say is constrained by the background use of my words. Others must be able to grasp what I am saying, even if I am using a word in a new way, and this grasp will be informed by the background of established use. The root of this problem, Inkpin argues, is the neglect of the pragmatic aspect of language, an aspect which 'holds a pattern of linguistic regularities in check'. It is precisely the secondary, derivative uses of language, which Merleau-Ponty regards as inferior to the creative expressions of literary or artistic greats, that give language the stability it needs to enable communication and which underlies the possibility of creative expression.[503]

Inkpin's response is to complement Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of language with insights from Wittgenstein, whose comments about language games and the importance of practice can provide a much more compelling account of the role of language in everyday life – in particular the ways in which practice can constitute linguistic meaning. This is a positive move, since it preserves Merleau-Ponty's description of linguistic creativity while grounding this in the context of pragmatic language. For our purposes, Merleau-Ponty's account of creativity remains useful, especially since we are concerned with how individuals develop (creatively) new ways of thinking about religion. However, we will still want to shift the focus away from artistic creativity, which would inevitably valorise the religious creative geniuses who so exercised William James, and towards individual acts of religious creativity or reinterpretation. Religious conversion still involves the individual developing new ways of expressing themselves and employing words in new ways but in a context within which religious language is used pragmatically by religious communities.

For Wittgenstein (which, for the purposes of this thesis, refers to the later Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Investigations*), meaning comes from use. Wittgenstein's first example of language use in §1 of the *Philosophical Investigations* is of a shopkeeper responding to a request for "five red apples". The shopkeeper opens the drawer labelled "apples", finds a colour sample to match "red" and counts up until he reaches "five". Yet, when asked how the shopkeeper knows what to do with these words (what they mean), Wittgenstein replies that 'I assume that he *acts* as I have described.' The meaning of the word "five" is not in question, 'only how the word "five" is used'.[504] A second example expounds this further in §2. Wittgenstein imagines a building site in which a builder communicates the different kinds of stones he needs to his assistant. To do this, they use a language which consists of the words "block", "pillar", "slab", and "beam". When the builder speaks the word, the assistant must bring the correct stone. This example demonstrates the limitations of a referential theory of language: it is not enough for the assistant to have the right mental picture corresponding to each word or even to identify correctly the different kinds of stone associated with each word; he must also bring the stone to the builder. If he only identifies the stones and does not bring them, he does not understand the language. A fully determinate understanding of signs and their referents is neither necessary nor sufficient

[503] Inkpin, 157.
[504] *PI*, §1.

for linguistic competency. Rather, as Inkpin argues, linguistic competence 'can be described in terms of the ability to participate in the various kinds of language-game.'[505] Language is embedded in human activity and 'the use of signs is interwoven with, or part of, activity more generally.'[506] Hence, 'human practices literally shape word use';[507] meaning is a function of practice and it is the need to engage in shared practice projects that gives rise to linguistic meaning.

This praxeological conception of language helps to explain how a linguistic structure can remain stable and provide a background context for creative expression without an Absolute Spirit to guide and limit it. The pragmatic need for successful communication guides and limits meaning. If words were subject to random, radical shifts in meaning then communication becomes impossible and practical communal projects fail. The builder does not have the freedom to creatively reinterpret the word "block" to mean "slab" because, if he attempts this, he will not receive the correct materials. This is not to say that the language cannot evolve but if the meanings of words are to change, this cannot be achieved through one act of creativity: it must occur gradually and bring the whole building community along. To see how new thoughts can be expressed in a praxeological conception of language, we can modify Wittgenstein's example from §2. In our example, words such as "block" do not exclusively mean "bring me a block" but could also mean "put a block here", "is this a block?", "no, I don't need that, I need a block", and so on. The various possible meanings are differentiated by the specific situation, along with paralinguistic features such as intonation, body language, facial expression, and gesture. Thus, even in this simple language game, expression is inherently ambiguous and open. The ambiguity of pragmatic language means that it is open to reinterpretation and the development of new meanings, according to the changing pragmatic needs of the builders. Ambiguity means that pragmatic meanings of words can shift according to the needs of speakers. As practical, social, political and technological situations change, speakers need ways to respond to these changes and express new thoughts. With a perfectly unambiguous language this would be impossible, since every possible way of speaking is already completely understood within the old situation. Adapting to new situations would need brand new words, yet even communicating the meanings of these brand new words in the old language would be impossible. A language with built-in ambiguity is capable of adapting in this way because the meanings of existing words and their sublexical elements was always underdetermined by their use. These changes can be immediate responses to new situations but are often gradual shifts in language use (and therefore meaning) over time, as different concerns or situations become more salient in a society. Praxeology thus shows how language can remain both stable and open to change. The practical concerns of a linguistic community mean that 'there is an implicit practical requirement that the language used be sufficiently unambiguous for the practice in question to work'.[508] However, such a language – especially in the face of an ever-changing situation – remains open to a limited amount of reinvention.

[505] Inkpin, *Disclosing the World*, 169.
[506] Inkpin, 171.
[507] Inkpin, 176.
[508] Inkpin, 176.

The limitations imposed on expression by pragmatic language use sustain creativity in two ways. First, although creative acts of genius allow language to move forward, these must be sustained by society-wide pragmatic use in order to maintain their efficacy as language-shaping expressions. Without entering pragmatic usage, the creative power of an expression is lost: people stop using it to express themselves and it ceases to operate as an act of expression. Pragmatic language use is thus necessary to secure and stabilise creative expressions. Second, pragmatic language is itself capable of developing and creating new meanings. The meanings, nuances and associations of words can shift gradually; this is often not the result of one creative individual but of individuals beginning to change the way they use words to express themselves in everyday life, driven by various factors including changing social norms, current affairs and technology.[509] As well as developing new meanings themselves, these developments play an important role in creative acts: a creative person must take these developments into account when they express themselves. Indeed, this cannot be avoided, since movements within pragmatic language use form part of the synchronic structure within which new creative expressions will be made. Hence, Merleau-Ponty is wrong to overlook the importance of pragmatic language use, or secondary speech, because it is pragmatic language which operates as the limiting factor in acts of creative expression, thereby preventing creative freefall.

A further reason for the importance of pragmatic use in understanding creative language is that a pragmatic background is necessary if others are to understand creative expressions. While Merleau-Ponty emphasises the importance of the act of creative expression, it is important to recognise that these acts of creativity are only meaningful if they are heard and understood by others. A creative expression which is not heard or understood by anyone else says nothing. This is in part the result of both Merleau-Ponty's and Wittgenstein's insight that speech does not involve the expression of ready-formed thoughts but that thought is accomplished through its expression.[510] As Merleau-Ponty recognises, the meaning of an expression is not solely in the power of the one who expresses it but is affected by those who hear.[511] What I mean is not something I can fully determine in advance, and your interpretation of my meaning is at least as important as my intention. The implication of this is that a meaningful expression cannot be made without another person present to hear and understand it. However, for those others who hear the creative expression, it is not a case of having some kind of access to the speaker's internal mental state and understanding clearly what was said. Rather, the expression is made into a social and linguistic context and understood in relation to this. The hearing other will

[509] For example, the Oxford English Dictionary word of the year for 2018 was 'toxic'. The OED noted that the development of the word's meaning can be traced by its common collocates which, alongside words such as 'chemical' and 'waste', now includes words such as 'environment' and 'culture' and, even more recently, 'masculinity', which was the second most common collocate in 2018. This final example is particularly interesting, since the OED attributed the rise of the term 'toxic masculinity' to the #MeToo movement, a phenomenon of collective expression in which words and phrases which individuals find suitably express their individual situations are adopted by large numbers of people and gather momentum without the input of some literary genius. Oxford English Dictionaries, 'Word of the Year 2018 Is...', Oxford Dictionaries, accessed 6 March 2019, https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/word-of-the-year/word-of-the-year-2018.
[510] *SNS*, 19; *PI*, §304.
[511] 'OPL', 88.

interpret the speaker's words according to the language that they know – and this is informed by their own pragmatic everyday use of language. Thus, for creativity to be capable of expression, it must remain in some sort of contact with pragmatic language use. A speaker who uses words in radically new ways will never be understood by anyone else without explaining in common language what they are doing. This is why a good poet is both creative with their language use while remaining sensitive to pragmatic meanings and shifts in language. Indeed, it is precisely this sensitivity which allows a poet to disclose hidden or obscure meanings of words which are nevertheless implicitly present in their everyday use. Acts of creative expression thus cannot be understood without the background of pragmatic language use. If pragmatic use is treated as merely secondary and not contributing anything of substance to the development of language, then the creative expressions which are supposed to drive language forward become nothing more than meaningless shouts in the dark.

The Language of Conversion

We now have a well-developed phenomenology of expression and are well placed to explore the role of expression in religious conversion. To summarise our findings so far, we have followed Merleau-Ponty's opposition to the inherently dualist positions of intellectualism and empiricism, insisting that words and other expressions are inherently meaningful. The notion of a private thought which precedes expression and is then translated into language is shown to be incoherent by both Merleau-Ponty and Wittgenstein. Expression is intrinsically social and external, and occurs within an already existing linguistic, cultural and historical milieu. Expression thus reflects the context within which it is made, while at the same time having a creative power to take up and transform the world to say something new. We have called this the accomplishing function of speech and it follows from our rejection of dualism and private language. If expression is not articulated beforehand in the mind, then thought must be achieved through the process of expression. New ideas only come to life when they are spoken or otherwise expressed. This does not mean, however, that only acts of creative genius are capable of accomplishing new thought. We depart from Merleau-Ponty by not dismissing everyday pragmatic language as *das Gerede* or secondary speech so quickly. The pragmatic use of language serves as the essential background of all speech. Not only does pragmatic language use operate as the context within which creativity takes place but everyday social communication is itself capable of establishing new expressive possibilities. With this in mind, we will now return to the question of conversion.

The Creative Bias

The first thing to note is that how we evaluate the alleged bias towards creativity in Merleau-Ponty will have a significant influence on how we understand religious conversion. If we reject Inkpin's criticism and hold that new thought is only accomplished in acts of creativity, we will create in our study of religious conversion a systematic bias in favour of dramatic religious experiences and religious geniuses of the kind that William James believed characterised true religious conversion. If new ways of thinking and speaking can only come about through genius acts of creativity, it would suggest that the same limitations

exist for new ways of thinking about religion. Applied to the phenomenon of religious conversion, the creative genius model of language progression suggests that all religious thought which is not the result of an individual act of religious genius is nothing more that inauthentic secondary speech.

A conclusion which finds the majority of conversion experiences to be nothing more that inauthentic secondary speech should at least be treated with suspicion. Nevertheless, it is worth examining in more detail. It could be argued, in defence of creativity, that this kind of creative bias does not undermine an accurate account of conversion. If we choose to accept Merleau-Ponty's focus on the power of creative expression to drive language forward, then it is possible to link the idea of diachronic linguistic progression with that of large-scale historical religious development, with individual conversions following the patterns set by those genius individuals. This position would argue that, since individual converts to a religion do not change the religion they join, it is unnecessary to posit any creative element in the conversion experience. A conversion can involve new thought for the individual without this implying brand new ways of religious thinking. A convert does not move religion forwards but rather adopts the religion of others. This could still be made to fit the empirical research into conversion, since the empirical findings from chapter one do not require the convert to think something which has never before been thought but only requires a process of change from the perspective of the individual convert. Conversions conceived as such are analogous to secondary speech, where an individual speaker repeats words already expressed by another. This could be a new thought for that individual and quite significant within their personal history; however, from an external perspective, this secondary speech is of little interest to someone interested in linguistic development.

While this is a plausible account of the relationship between conversion and religious creativity, it has two significant problems. First, this approach creates a bias in the wider study of religion. Even though this account still seems able to maintain the empirically observed features of religious conversion, the price is the importance of such experiences. If individual conversion is likened to secondary inauthentic speech, it would suggest that the most interesting aspect of religion is the experience of the religious genius. Not only does this skew research focus towards these geniuses at the expense of the vast number of more mundane conversions, it also contains the implicit assumption that "real" religion is to be found exclusively in the experiences of religious geniuses (and perhaps their authoritative texts), demoting the experience of ordinary believers to pale imitations of a model set by others and judged according to their conformity to the original.

Second, the above approach distorts the historical narrative. This is a stronger objection than the former since it not only judges the desirability of its outcomes but questions its empirical validity. To say that religious creativity is the preserve of religious geniuses marginalises the role played by individual religious practitioners and religious communities in not just following religious teachings but shaping and transforming them. The philosophy of the religious genius becomes a history of great men in which religion is advanced by geniuses, and ordinary believers simply follow along. Not only does this strip the religious

genius of their social, political and religious context,[512] it also obscures the ways in which a religious community can develop and adopt new beliefs and practices gradually, without influence of a great leader. The picture we get is that religions remain stable until a religious genius emerges to shake things up and that, between moments of creativity, religions are static. In reality, religious beliefs and practices develop as a result of various pressures from within and without the religious community. Those individuals who come to be regarded as religious geniuses, while undeniably having an important influence on the development of a religion, act in response to changes which have already begun to occur within a community. If our theory of conversion cannot comprehend the possibility of religious change apart from the influence of a religious genius, it will present a distorted picture of religious development. We are at this point beginning to retrace some of the criticisms of William James from chapter one so can now put this discussion to one side. If it is accepted that Merleau-Ponty's creative bias leads us towards a Jamesian emphasis on religious geniuses, this will be criticism enough of this aspect of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of language as an aid to understanding conversion.

Belief

In our overview of conversion in chapter one, we briefly considered the importance of belief for conversion, in light of criticisms of belief-centric conceptions of religion. Following Kevin Schilbrack we suggested that, while critics such as Wilfred Cantwell Smith are right to challenge the idea that religion is essentially a matter of propositional belief, religion does involve belief in the non-propositional sense of taking something to be true. We thus concluded that non-propositional belief change is at least a necessary (if not sufficient) condition of conversion. Following our phenomenological analysis of expression in this chapter, we are now in a position to develop this account and trace out the role of belief in conversion more precisely.

Our phenomenology of expression demonstrates that propositional belief cannot be essential to expression. If thought is accomplished in expression, then there can be no sense in a propositional belief which precedes expression. To suggest otherwise is to attempt to reintroduce private language to expression. The case for this can be seen most clearly when considering Merleau-Ponty's analysis of painting. Whereas speech and language appear to contain the possibility of disembodied thought, this is not the case for painting. While the idea that a propositional belief must precede expression may appear sound when we restrict our analysis to speech, once we consider painting it becomes clear that the requirement that expression must issue forth from propositional belief is misleading. A painting does not represent a belief, even if the activities of painting or viewing a painting assume that certain things be taken to be true. Expression is a philosophical problem for Merleau-Ponty precisely because it is the expression of perception; the ideas contained in expression are somehow rooted in perception, yet perception is not the perception of ideas but the perception of the world. Perception has a sense (*sens*) but it is only through the process of expression and its social implications that thought emerges. The pre-expressive

[512] See Nicholas Lash's criticism of William James on this point, outlined in chapter one of this thesis. Lash, *Easter in Ordinary*, 57.

experience is inchoate and uncertain; if this is thought then it is an affective rather than cognitive kind of thought. If we are to talk about having beliefs before expression, these beliefs are non-propositional, since expressions are not determined by pre-expressive propositions. An unexpressed belief is indeterminate and, while there is a *sens* of what the meaning of the expression will be, it remains up for grabs until the expression is made. Even when a belief is expressed, it is only fully determinate in the act of expression and becomes increasingly indeterminate as time passes. Both the individual's sense of what they believe and the structures of language which gave the original expression meaning can change over time, meaning that a past expression can only be a rough guide to what an individual now believes. Indeterminacy does not affect all beliefs equally: the more regularly a belief is expressed, the clearer it is. Regular repetition gives less time for a belief to degrade into indeterminacy, minimises the effects of language structures and belief senses changing over time, and offers opportunity for the speaker to make subtle corrections or alterations to their expressions to account for these.

If expressions are not necessarily preceded by propositional beliefs, then where do expressions come from, and how, if at all, do they relate to beliefs? We have begun to answer the first part of this question – where expressions come from – with Merleau-Ponty's notion of *sens*. We are yet to consider how (and if) a pre-expressive *sens* is related to a person's beliefs. Answering this latter question will also provide further clarity about what *sens* consists in. To answer the question of the relationship between belief and expression, we turn to Gilbert Ryle, whose dispositionalist theory of belief was alluded to in chapter one. For Ryle, a dispositional property is not a particular state or occurrence but rather 'is to be bound or liable to be in a particular state, or to undergo a particular change, when a particular condition is realised.'[513] Thus, that someone is a smoker does not entail that they are smoking at this moment but rather that they have a proneness to be smoking in certain situations. Ryle then distinguishes between simple and more complex dispositions. Simple dispositions, such as being a smoker, are 'single-track', meaning that the disposition manifests in a proneness to one single kind of act. A smoker is prone to smoke. Complex dispositions do not have such simple relationships between disposition and action: someone who is proud (has a proud disposition) is not prone to one simple act of being proud. Rather their pride is liable to be actualised in various different kinds of acts, thoughts, feelings, and words – and this proneness can be instigated by a variety of different situations.[514] For Ryle, a belief is a disposition of this more complex kind, a tendency to do, think, say or feel certain (multiple but not infinite) things in some situations.[515]

The argument for this position is straightforward. Against Ryle's view is the position that a belief is a simple disposition: to say that "X believes P" is to say that "X is so disposed that X has a tendency to assert that P". Yet this is not our experience of belief. As Ryle argues, a person may believe that the earth is round and may assert this proposition. However, this assertion is not sufficient for us to attribute to him this belief. His behaviour also plays an

[513] Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, 43.
[514] Ryle, 44.
[515] Ryle, 133–34.

important role in determining whether to attribute to him this belief. If he refused to board a ship set to circumnavigate the world for fear of falling off the edge, we would not attribute to him the belief that the earth is round, even if he regularly and confidently asserted it. Similarly, if another person never asserted that the earth was round, we may still attribute to her this belief if she behaved in ways we would expect of someone who held this belief (for example, being willing to board the same ship). How someone is disposed to act indicates what they believe.[516] Believing can include the liability to make certain propositions but it is neither limited to nor requires this. Fundamentally belief is 'a propensity not only to make certain theoretical moves but also to make certain executive and imaginative moves, as well as to have certain feelings.'[517] While beliefs can include propositions, the presence of a proposition (expressed or somehow in the head) is insufficient to determine whether they in fact believe this proposition. Beliefs are dispositions to respond in certain ways due to a particular (not necessarily expressed) fact held to be true. Whether or not an individual holds a certain proposition in their head bears no relation to whether or not they believe it. It therefore follows that an expression cannot simply be the articulation of an already held belief because beliefs do not consist in propositions. A proposition might accompany a belief but it might not – and a person might assert a proposition which they do not in fact believe. An expression cannot therefore be the articulation of some proposition but must rather express something non-propositional and dispositional and, in so doing, translate this inchoate *sens* into language (or painting, etc.).

The *sens* which precedes expression is thus an inchoate disposition – and this is captured by Merleau-Ponty's use of the French term which, as we noted above, connotes the notion of direction, as well as sense and meaning. At this point, I will introduce my argument that beliefs are affective. This idea has been implicitly present in our discussion so far but it is now time to make this position explicit and offer argumentative support. My contention here is that a theory of affective belief follows from a dispositionalist theory: indeed, dispositionalism *is* a theory of affective belief. To see this, let us consider an example. On a dispositionalist conception of belief, if I believe that it is raining this means that I am disposed to certain actions – such as taking an umbrella when I go out. We may then ask, if this belief is non-propositional, what is it that motivates me to pick up the umbrella? I cannot at this point appeal to any reasons, since this involves making propositions. Even if, on reflection, I say that my belief that it was raining was what motivated me to pick up the umbrella, this does not explain why, in the moment, I chose to pick it up. Yet, without this articulable reason, why did I not leave the house without the umbrella? I pick up the umbrella because it feels like the right thing to do: perhaps I look at the sky and am nervous to go out without one, or see the rain and want to avoid getting wet. If belief is dispositional then the things I am disposed to do – the actions which can be explained by reference to my beliefs – cannot be motivated by propositional reason. We might say that there is a kind of somatic logic which leads me to take the umbrella, yet this is just another way of saying that belief is affective. If dispositionalist belief operates according to a somatic or embodied logic

[516] Ryle, 44.
[517] Ryle, 135.

then it cannot use propositional reason to convince me to act; rather, it will operate subcutaneously, moving my body through feeling. There is clearly an affective tone to Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of expression since the *sens* which precedes expression is not a thought but a feeling. Therefore, the extent to which I can be said to have believed what I expressed before expressing it must be cached out in terms of affect – I believed it insofar as it felt right and this feeling led me to express it.

What this means for conversion is that the apparently common-sense view that an expression of new religious belief follows belief change in the conversion process needs refining. If belief change here is understood to mean propositional belief change, then the statement is wrong. New confession does not follow from the acquisition of new propositional religious beliefs. This gets it the wrong way round: propositional belief change only happens *through* expression. Thus, to say that a conversion causes an individual to express new propositional beliefs is incorrect. An individual may experience the sense of a non-propositional belief changing internally. This might involve noting that they feel differently or intuitively respond to various circumstances in new ways. However, this does not constitute a change in propositional belief. A theory of conversion which prioritises belief change and locates this at the start of the conversion process will misunderstand what is happening. Propositional belief change cannot be the starting point for conversion because it is dependent on both affective non-propositional belief and expression. Before propositional beliefs change, something must happen to affectively alter an individual's non-propositional belief and something must motivate the articulation of this inchoate *sens* into expression. My contention in the rest of this chapter is that one of those "somethings" which can affectively alter an individual's non-propositional belief is expression itself. That is to say, expression has the affective power to change what an individual (non-propositionally) believes and thus to precipitate conversion. Since new expressions cannot come from already articulated propositional beliefs, I argue that new religious expressions themselves can contribute to a conversion process, rather than simply resulting from it. In order to make this argument, we will need to move beyond an individualistic conception of speech and language in order to understand how humans express themselves within communities.

New Linguistic Communities

If we accept that religious conversion cannot be accurately understood on a model of propositional belief, then we must consider other approaches to help us understand this phenomenon. Our phenomenology of speech has already indicated that language is a social phenomenon and cannot be understood by attending exclusively to the experience of individuals. Language takes place in community and so, if we are to understand the role of language in conversion, we must understand the effect of linguistic communities. Hence, we can hypothesise that conversion involves entry into a new linguistic community and that such an entry affects an individual's religious worldview and identity. The argument I will advance here is that participation in new religious communities requires the ability to make expressions that align with the community's identity and specific use of language. Linguistic communities are not hermetically sealed communities but do require that an individual

adopt new ways of expressing themselves if they are to participate fully in the community. I will then argue that, because expression is capable, through its affectivity, of instituting new beliefs, the new expressions adopted by new members of religious communities do not flow *from* conversion but are in fact significant factors in precipitating conversions. A potential convert will join a new religious community and begin to speak its language; this precipitates the process whereby a person's sense of worldview and identity begin to change. Thus, I will argue that language and expression are important factors in driving conversion. To make this argument, I will begin by re-examining the notion of linguistic communities in Wittgenstein.

Joining a New Linguistic Community

Much of the interest in Wittgenstein's philosophy of language concerns its application as a theory of language and meaning, capable of answering the question of what language is or how words have meanings.[518] While these are important questions, they are not what concern us here. For an investigation into religious conversion, the question "what is language?" is less important than the question "how does language affect its speakers?". Of course, this latter question does seem to presuppose the former: if we are to understand how language affects its speakers, then it would appear necessary that we know what exactly language is. However, while some familiarity with language is necessary in order to answer this latter question (we cannot think that language is the name of a small rodent), a full and determinate theory of language is not required for two reasons. First, a full theory of language would include an account of how language affects its speakers. Language does not occur in isolation and so a theory which understood language abstractly would be impoverished by its failure to comprehend how language operates in practice. We must at least begin to answer the second question before the first can be answered adequately. Second, we have enough of a conception of what language is to be able to ask how language affects its speakers – just as (following Wittgenstein in *PI* §66) we can ask how playing games affects a player without being able to define exactly what a game is.

In Wittgenstein, the notion of a linguistic community is a consequence of his praxeology. For Wittgenstein, meaning is use. Words do not refer to things through a system of rules but by their ability to facilitate the completion of practical tasks. If I use a word incorrectly, it is not incorrect because I have broken some linguistic rule but because the practical task to which I am attending will fail.[519] For example, in the building site from §2, if I say "block" when I need a slab, I am wrong not because there is an intrinsic connection between the sound "block" and that particular shape of stone which I have failed to capture but because I will not be handed the slab which I need. The implication of this view is that language can only exist in communities (this follows from Wittgenstein's private language argument too). If I am performing a task alone, I do not need a language in order to communicate with myself.

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[518] See, for example, Kenny, *Wittgenstein*, 126–40; Alexander Miller, 'Introduction', in *Rule-Following and Meaning*, ed. Alexander Miller and Crispin Wright (London: Routledge, 2014), 1–15; Stephen Mulhall, *Wittgenstein's Private Language: Grammar, Nonsense and Imagination in 'Philosophical Investigations', §§ 243–315* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[519] As Kenny shows, the feeling of 'following a rule' is not a reliable indicator that one will produce the right answer. Kenny, *Wittgenstein*, 138–39. See also *PI* §170.

If I choose to speak to myself as I work, this is not really a language. If my soliloquy somehow goes wrong, I say "block" when I pick up a slab, nothing happens. All I have done in this scenario is redefined the meaning of "block" to myself. Language is required when a community of people are engaged in the same practical task. This is the condition that must be met for there to be language. In this case, if I say "block" when I want a slab, I will get a block and my task will fail. The practical considerations combined with the social nature of the task keep the group's language in check.

If we are content to move past the question of what a language is and to the question of how language affects speakers (and eventually to the question of how language influences conversion), then we need to develop further some of Wittgenstein's examples. Wittgenstein uses intentionally pared-down snapshots of language use which are not meant to represent real linguistic situations. The language of the building site in §2 has only four words and communication is exclusively to do with the provision of differently shaped stones. In reality, the language use on such a building site would be much more complex. This complexity would not simply be the function of a more complex building site than the one which Wittgenstein imagined, with additional words for different kinds of tools, machines, processes, and so on.[520] Rather, we would expect that the builders talk while they work (or over lunch) – they talk about their lives, the latest gossip, site politics, upcoming projects, the weekend's sport, current affairs, and so on. Nevertheless, despite the introduction of language which does not specifically relate to the practical tasks of the building site, there remains a sense that the building site is a distinct linguistic community. A builder will not speak to their colleagues in the same way that they speak with their partner – and this difference cannot be explained wholly as the result of the builder being engaged in different kinds of projects at work and at home. There is a characteristic way that language is used on the building site which is different to how language is used at home, at church, or in the supermarket.[521] This is partially the result of differing practical needs – there is no need to talk about blocks and slabs in the supermarket or at home – but also of the different social situations. The language of the builders might change when the site manager is present because the social situation has changed even though the practical situation remains the same. At the same time, the kind of language that develops on the building site is not entirely unrelated to the practical context. Certain practical considerations such as the need to be heard over noisy machines or the physical effort required to do the work, will play into the kind of language which develops on the building site. So too will the socio-economic background of the builders, the education and training levels required for this job, the ethnic and gender makeup of the builders, and so on. The language of the building site is thus a function of the interrelationship between the practical needs and social situation of the site.

[520] Indeed, Wittgenstein imagines this sort of developing complexity in §8, where number words, colour words, and words for "there" and "this" are added to the builders' vocabulary. The added complexity here is entirely practical, allowing for communication about a wider range of practical tasks.

[521] This comment is not specific to building sites: an office worker will use a different language in the office, in the pub, and with their family.

We are attempting to answer the question of how language use affects a speaker and thus what role language might play in conversion. We have seen from Wittgenstein that language must be a social phenomenon. This means that language occurs within different linguistic communities. Linguistic communities are defined by both their pragmatic and social situation, and these two factors drive the development of a distinctive language use. By a distinctive language use, we mean shared ways of using language, which includes elements such as dialect, idioms, cultural and historical references, norms and values, and various nuances associated with different words. Two linguistic communities are distinct if a speaker from one (speaking the same language, such as English or French) could not immediately and fully participate in the other community. This does not mean that members of two different linguistic communities are utterly incomprehensible to each other. If they speak the same language, then they will be able to get a sense of what is being said in the other community. However, the different references, nuances, idioms, and so on will not be immediately apparent to the outsider. They will thus be unable fully to understand and participate in the new linguistic community.[522]

We must be careful here not to portray linguistic communities as utterly discrete, separable groups. An individual may be a member of multiple different groups and will adjust their language use accordingly. As we noted above, we would expect a builder to speak differently on the building site than when at home. Equally, a builder might be part of a local sports team which has its own norms of language use. Additionally, linguistic communities can exist within linguistic communities: the small team of builders who work in one particular area of the site might have a distinct way of speaking to each other which can be distinguished from the language of the site as a whole, yet is still subsumed within the larger linguistic community. The boundaries of the linguistic community will also be fuzzy. Various personnel on the site – such as site managers, other tradespeople, and clients – as well as the families of the builders will all to different degrees have some familiarity with the language of the building site and will be able to participate with more or less ease in the linguistic community. In a similar way, a new church member and a long-serving elder are both part of the same linguistic community of the church, yet the elder can participate in the linguistic community more confidently than the new member. It is possible to distinguish between different linguistic communities but these linguistic communities are not closed groups of mutually incomprehensible speakers. Linguistic communities are dynamic and fluid and contain the possibility of multiple belonging, various degrees of

[522] For an example of this kind of encounter, Peter Fristedt considers an imagined encounter between Richard, a member of an atheist community, and Joseph, a member of a religious community. When they discuss religion, their conversation makes no progress because each uses words like “God” or “religion” differently, with different nuances and meanings, to great enough of an extent to render each other’s argument incomprehensible to the other. Clearly, each understands what the other says as an English sentence; however, they are unable to participate fully in the discourse the other is trying to have. As I will argue later (and as Fristedt goes on to argue), Richard and Joseph are not mutually incomprehensible to one another but full mutual understanding will require some effort. This example serves to illustrate the gap in understanding which can exist, at least initially, between members from two different linguistic communities. Peter Fristedt, ‘Philosophical Hermeneutics and the Relativity of Truth and Meaning’, *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 18, no. 4 (2010): 473–74.

participation, and movement between groups.[523] Relevant to our study of conversion, therefore, is the notion that someone can move into, out of and between different linguistic communities and belong to more than one linguistic community at the same time. A religious group is one example of a linguistic community and so the ways in which one is affected by joining a new linguistic community will begin to shed light on how language and expression affects the process of conversion.[524]

It must be stressed here that I am not using "linguistic community" as a synonym for "language game" or "form of life", concepts which are often used in the literature on Wittgenstein and philosophy of religion.[525] I concur with Gordon Graham's criticism of the debate between the so-called Wittgensteinian school and its critics. Both sides of this debate regard Wittgenstein's comments on language games and forms of life to be applicable to phenomena as broad and abstract as religion, and consequently regard religion as a closed "language game", separate from the "language game" of science or secular discourse, which has its own internal logic and is immune from external criticism (or, on the other side of the debate, criticise Wittgenstein for holding this position).[526] For the purposes of this thesis, a linguistic community is understood to be characterised by a specific way of using language, which includes both what is said (dialect, idioms) and what is meant (nuances, associations, unspoken references). Whereas the historical literature on religious "language games" or "forms of life" suggests that two different language games are incomprehensible, I maintain that a linguistic community retains a level of comprehensibility to the outsider. Sentences such as "we are taking a delivery of 10 tonnes of concrete"; "please make sure you are wearing your PPE"; "who is giving the sermon this morning?"; and "you will come to ours for Shabbat" are comprehensible to an outsider even if they do not understand all of the vocabulary.

However, despite the comprehensibility of linguistic communities to outsiders, *full* understanding and participation may not be possible. What do we mean by full understanding and participation in this case? I do not intend to suggest that there is a full, comprehensive system of linguistic, grammatical, or logical rules that can only be understood by insiders. Rather, full understanding refers to the unspoken meanings that are recognised by insider speakers, the ideas and references which lie behind speech, the associations, the cultural references, the shared common sense of the community. For

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[523] On multiple belonging in religious groups, see Rhiannon Grant, 'Using Multiple Religious Belonging to Test Analogies for Religion', *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 79, no. 4 (2018): 370–82.

[524] At this point our discussion is still quite generic, treating religious communities simply as one kind of linguistic community. We will later tease out some of the more specific features of religious communities but at this stage it will be useful to examine how linguistic communities normally affect their members.

[525] Kai Nielsen, 'Wittgensteinian Fideism', *Philosophy* 42, no. 161 (1967): 191–209; D. Z. Phillips, *Belief, Change, and Forms of Life* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986); John W. Cook, 'Wittgenstein and Religious Belief', *Philosophy* 63, no. 246 (452 427AD): 1988; Yong Huang, 'Foundation of Religious Beliefs after Foundationalism: Wittgenstein between Nielsen and Phillips', *Religious Studies* 31, no. 2 (1995): 251–67; John Hyman, 'The Gospel According to Wittgenstein', in *Wittgenstein and Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Robert L. Arrington and Mark Addis (London: Routledge, 2001), 1–11; Mark Addis, 'D. Z. Phillips' Fideism in Wittgenstein's Mirror', in *Wittgenstein and Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Robert L. Arrington and Mark Addis (London: Routledge, 2001), 85–100.

[526] Gordon Graham, *Wittgenstein and Natural Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 35–47.

example, while an outsider would not be utterly perplexed by someone asking "have you received the Holy Spirit?" in a Pentecostal church, the specific nuances and shades of meaning included in this sentence – built up through personal and communal experiences, shared stories in the community, a commonly understood history of Holy Spirit baptism, recent sermons by the preacher, and so on – would not be fully grasped without immersion in the community. This kind of full understanding is necessary for full participation in the community, whereby one is able to have a conversation in the community *as an insider*, without needing further explanation. A visitor to a building site, Mosque, or football match can get on well and will probably understand much of what is said but may need the support of an insider to explain and help them navigate the new environment.

To help elucidate what we mean by a linguistic community, we can borrow Merleau-Ponty's notion of style, suggesting that a linguistic community is characterised by a certain *style* of speaking. Style is for Merleau-Ponty 'a certain way of handling situations' which is conserved across different situations (although can develop through time) and is something that we can recognise in an individual before we can formulate a description of them.[527] Matthew Ratcliffe describes style as 'an organized way in which possibilities interrelate and unfold' which 'essentially involves being *affected* in a certain way'.[528] Understanding linguistic communities in terms of style helps to overcome the tendency to seal different communities in impenetrable semantic bubbles, which we risk doing when we describe religion in terms of "language games" or "forms of life". To say that linguistic communities have a distinct style is to say that these communities (or their members) perceive the world in a distinctive way, recognise certain possibilities, and see particular saliences in the world. The language of such a community will naturally reflect this distinctive style of perception and will be harder to understand for those who do not experience the world in a similar way. Speaking with a new style opens and closes different kinds of expressive possibilities and so joining a new linguistic community can give one the opportunity to express things previously inexpressible – and therefore to experience things never before experienced. Given the connections between perception and expression described by Merleau-Ponty, adopting a new style of expression opens up to an individual the possibility of seeing and perceiving the world in a new way. This conception of linguistic communities allows us to recognise that language is used differently in different communities and adds to this the idea that these differences can affect an individual's perception and experience (and, as we will go on to argue, beliefs) – without thereby falling into a form of quasi-Wittgensteinian fideism derived from a misunderstanding of his notion of language games.

If a linguistic community is characterised by language use, then joining a new linguistic community will involve encountering new words and new meanings of familiar words. Thus, joining a linguistic community requires that one begins to speak in a new way; this is learnt by necessity through participation. If one is to join a new linguistic community, one must learn the language of the community in order to effectively communicate. This is a pragmatic social response: in order to participate fully in a community, to understand it and

[527] *PhP*, 342.
[528] Ratcliffe, 'Sensed Presence Without Sensory Qualities'.

to make oneself understood, an individual must learn the language. This does not imply that the individual in so doing has adopted the beliefs, worldviews or values of the new community: it is, for example, possible for an anthropologist to conduct ethnographic research on a group of people by participating in their community and learning to speak their language, without thereby adopting the beliefs, worldviews or values of the group they are studying. Indeed, successful ethnography often *requires* the anthropologist to learn to adopt these new ways of speaking in order both to participate more fully in the group they are studying and to understand more precisely the experiences of group members; none of this requires the anthropologist to personally commit to the group's belief system or worldview.[529] Nevertheless these are the processes by which an individual can find their beliefs beginning to change and it is notable that Luhrmann and Harding, both anthropologists who have conducted ethnographic research in American evangelical churches, have expressed a sense of being somewhat persuaded by or not-quite converted to the congregations they were studying.[530]

So far we have focused on language use; however, expression is not limited to language and the particular language of a linguistic community extends to non-linguistic forms of expression. We can see this already in Merleau-Ponty, whose discussion of expression encompasses phenomena such as behaviour, gesture, art and music. A linguistic community which has certain forms of speech, derived from social and practical need, might also develop specific forms of gesture or behaviour and, in some settings, encourage particular forms of aesthetic expression. Religious expression can include ritual, taboo, bodily comportment,[531] behaviour, and clothing,[532] among others. Not all of these forms of expression are necessarily equally available to all. It is possible for a community to limit access to certain forms of expression according to factors such as a person's membership status (whether or not they are considered a full member), status or position within the group, age, or gender – for example, many Christian denominations restrict participation in the Eucharist to those who have been baptised. However, many of these forms of expression are indeed open and available to outsiders who are able to participate and make expressions within the community – some degree of openness is required for any community open to or seeking new members.

What is important to note for our purposes is that participation in a linguistic community requires these kinds of community specific non-linguistic expressions just as much as it does speech. This is because, in contrast to the picture often painted by Wittgenstein, the life of a community does not consist simply in performing practical tasks and communicating in order to achieve these tasks. Rather, communities are centred around common values,

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[529] For example, Tanya Luhrmann describes the very particular nuances associated with words such as 'worship', 'prayer', and 'Holy Spirit' in the church communities she joined as part of her research into the experience of God's presence in American evangelicalism. Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back*, 3–12.
[530] Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell*, 58; Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back*, 325.
[531] See Mark Wynn's comments on body comportment in Mark Wynn, 'Aesthetic Goods and the Nature of Religious Understanding', in *New Models of Religious Understanding*, ed. Fiona Ellis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 116–33.
[532] See Shahidha Bari's comments on the expressiveness of clothing. Shahidha Bari, *Dressed: The Secret Life of Clothes* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2019).

experiences and identities. This is particularly obvious in the case of religious communities, for which the accomplishment of practical tasks is secondary to the shared life of the community.[533] However, even communities which ostensibly exist for a specific practical purpose cannot be described simply according to the performance of these practical tasks. Although Wittgenstein's presentation of the language of the building site is an effective description of how language is formed by use, he overemphasises the practical, task-oriented aspects of such a language. While communication about practical tasks is necessary, it is also important for the builders to cement the social bonds between them; this builds trust, eases relationships and fosters a sense of togetherness which are important aspects both in building a successful and effective team as well as being beneficial for the builders as individual social beings.

In this section, I have argued that linguistic communities are not completely sealed but have a characteristic way of using language – which I have described using Merleau-Ponty's notion of style – which reflects a particular way of relating to and perceiving the world. To join and participate fully in a new linguistic community, one must learn this style of speech, a process which necessarily involves making new expressions and being open to experiencing the world in a new way. We can thus already see how the effects of joining a new religious community might affect the process of belief formation. If participation in a new community involves opening oneself up to new experiences and a new style not only of speaking but perceiving, it seems straightforward to suppose that such a process will influence what a person believes and how they understand their worldview and identity. To explore this idea further, we will examine the affectivity of language and how this can resonate with the affectivity of belief to foster the conditions for conversion.

The Affectivity of Language

So far we have discussed what is involved in joining a new linguistic community and noted that full participation requires the learning and adoption of new expressive practices and speech. The remaining question is how joining a new religious community can precipitate the kind of belief change observed in conversion. As noted above, joining a new linguistic community does not require that one immediately adopt the new community's beliefs and values; rather, one speaks the community's language out of social necessity and learns to do this through social participation. This is important since it means that community entry and participation come before any change in a convert's worldview – before what might traditionally be called the conversion. However, this does not mean that conversion is nothing more than community involvement and new expression. As we noted above, it is possible for someone to join a new linguistic community without experiencing a change in their beliefs or values. Joining a linguistic community is an important part of the conversion process because of the effect this can have on an individual's worldview; what is now left to explain is how these elements of conversion are linked. I will suggest in the rest of this chapter that language and expression can effect changes in belief because language and expression are affective activities which are capable of resonating with the affectivity which

[533] Esther McIntosh argues for a community focused understanding of religion in Esther McIntosh, 'Living Religion: The Fluidity of Practice', *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 79, no. 4 (2018): 388.

underlies belief. I have already argued for an affective theory of belief, which I contend follows from dispositionalism. I will now argue for the affectivity of language, before showing how affective language can alter belief. This will serve as a bridge into chapter five, which will apply these findings specifically to religious communities as ritual communities.

Given the affectivity of belief, it follows that belief change is not primarily achieved by rational deliberation or persuasion but rather involves some affective change in the individual. If belief is not primarily propositional then it follows that a belief is not sustained by an individual's continued assent to a proposition. Many beliefs are never fully articulated and yet still affect how an individual feels and behaves; it is not uncommon for someone to claim to believe a certain proposition but feel and behave (i.e., have a disposition and affect towards) a contrary belief. Further, even when a belief does change through rational persuasion – the apogee of academic research – this experience is still an affective one, whether it is the excitement of discovering a new and persuasive argument or the fear that one will have to give up cherished beliefs. This can result in experiences of cognitive dissonance, in which the new propositional belief comes into conflict with the individual's instincts about what to think and how to feel and behave. If an academic is persuaded rationally of a proposition's truth value but is unable to change their behaviour – such as the philosopher who is convinced by an atheist argument but cannot bring themselves to renounce their faith – their belief on the matter, understood as an affective and dispositional state, is unchanged.[534] If a new member of a linguistic community is to change their beliefs, this change must occur at an affective level.

Speech and expression can precipitate belief change because they are affective acts. This is a lacuna in Wittgenstein's thought: while Wittgenstein recognises the pragmatic and social aspects of language, he does not discuss how this interacts with the affectivity of human experience – how language makes us feel. Speech is an affective act which begins with the felt need to express and then, in the act of speaking, resonates through the body. Speech is not the digital transmission of thoughts from mind to external world but a physiologically involved process. A whisper feels different to a shout; speaking tenderly feels different to telling someone off, which feels different again to delivering a lecture. Here we can see the connection between the physiological mechanism of speaking and its emotional feeling. Angry speech feels angry – what accounts for this? If we follow Merleau-Ponty, it cannot just be an internal feeling of anger. Anger is felt in the body and expressed through the physicality of speech. If I speak with anger, I feel this physically through my raised heartrate and clenched fists, and through the feel of shouting – its loudness, the vibrations I feel through my head and body, the effect it has on my throat, mouth and larynx. A speaker does not hear their own speech like they hear that of another. The speech is heard not only externally through the air but internally, through the resonances which travel through the speaker's jaw and skull. The speaker feels the vibrations of speech in their body and the effect that speech has on bodily functions such as breathing or eating. Equally, a painter

[534] More precisely, we can say that their belief has not fully changed. In this example, the individual's actual belief is in a state of uncertainty and likely marked by significant psychological conflict. Getting to what they "really" believe might only be possible some time later, after observing their actions over a period of time.

does not just see what they paint. They feel the brush in their hands and the different textures of different paints and canvasses; different painting techniques have a different feel about them, and one's mood will affect the physical way in which one paints (is it relaxed or frantic, for example?). Rituals which involve certain kinds of gesture or body comportment clearly involve the body and such expressions are felt affectively. Proprioception means that standing feels different to prostration, and rituals which involve maintaining a formal or respectful posture can begin to be experienced as fatiguing. Further, expression can emotionally impact an individual and this too is an embodied experience. Confession can create feelings of sorrow or repentance; participating in a religious carnival or celebration can cause feelings of joy. Speech is often emotionally charged, especially when one cares about the topic of speech. These feelings are themselves bodily experiences, the subjective pole of a physiological process in the body.[535] Expression is thus both an intrinsically physical and corporeal act, and one which can induce embodied emotional responses and therefore interacts with the affective experience of embodiment.

So far I have argued for the affectivity of belief and the affectivity of language. This is in the service of my thesis that language's affectivity is what gives it the power to change an individual's beliefs. Merleau-Ponty and Wittgenstein both argue that thought is accomplished through expression and I have argued that this means that new beliefs are formed and articulated through expression. In the context of conversion, religious expression – through confession, ritual participation, and so on – does not occur following a conversion but is itself an integral part of the conversion process. My comments on the affectivity of both belief and expression explain why expression has this capacity to change belief, and thus why joining a new linguistic community is a necessary part of the conversion process. Expression, as an embodied and affective practice, can change how an individual feels. When an expression is made repeatedly, its affective impact will be multiplied; if the same thing is expressed through a variety of media, it will engage a greater range of affective responses and so again multiply its impact. Since beliefs are underpinned by affective feelings, any change in an individual's affectivity will impact their beliefs, altering their dispositions towards certain acts or expressions. This will occur according to the processes outlined in chapter three: when we say that language is affective, we mean that it has the capacity to influence and respond to prenoetic factors in the body which subsequently shape what and how we think.

Conclusion

This chapter has been concerned with the effect of language and expression on the conversion process. We have seen that the relationship between thought and expression is not one of cause and effect; rather, thought is accomplished and articulated in expression and this means that beliefs are formed in the process of expression. We have also seen that expression and belief are affective and that this affectivity explains the capacity for expression to precipitate a change in belief. Thus, for our study into conversion, we can say that entry into a new linguistic community, which involves an individual learning a new language and the skills to make new expressions, is bound up in the process of conversion.

[535] Goldie, *The Emotions*, 51–52.

Therefore, joining a religious community should not be regarded as something which happens post-conversion, after one's beliefs have already changed. Rather, the processes of joining and being socialised into a new community are the same processes which affect what and how one thinks and believes. Making new expressions, which can only be made within the expressive framework of a new community, are part of the conversion process. However, this is still not the full story. While joining a new linguistic community is an important aspect of conversion, a religious community is not just a linguistic community. We have hinted at this already: the affectivity of language, and the inclusion of ritual practices in our definition of expression, already suggests that we should be wary of a biasing our understanding of religion towards linguistic experience. Religious communities are linguistic communities but they are also affective and ritual communities, communities which do not just share a common language but share common feelings and participate in common rituals. It is this affective and ritual aspect of religious communities, and the impact of this on religious conversion, to which we will turn in chapter five.

5. Community: The Affective Power of Ritual and the Need to Belong

In 1820, Thomas Tui left England to return to his native New Zealand, after having spent a number of years living in Australia and England with the Rev. Samuel Marsden. Tui was a Maori, influential in his community, who had converted to Christianity after meeting Marsden and was now planning to return to New Zealand to spread the gospel among his community. However, without a Christian community to support his faith, Tui could not sustain his Christianity and within a week he told Marsden that he needed to be joined by a European if he was to continue his mission. After a few months Tui had reverted to his original Maori way of life with little remaining of his earlier Christianity.[536]

In 1955, the Tell Scotland campaign, an ecumenical Christian mission movement founded in 1953 to re-evangelise Scotland, hosted a Billy Graham Crusade in Glasgow. The campaign was founded on a parish-based model of community mission, using local churches to make the gospel relevant to local people and build strong communities to support new converts. Graham's Crusade was intended to galvanise the movement and form the basis of large-scale mission to the Scottish people. Numerically, the Crusade was successful: over six weeks 1,185,360 people attended Crusade a rally and 26,457 people responded as 'enquirers' to Graham's invitation to come forward and be saved by Jesus Christ. However, despite its apparent success, the Crusade had no lasting effect on Christianity in Scotland. The initial surge in church attendance which followed the Crusade was not sustained and the churches in Scotland did not experience any long-term gains in membership – in fact the following years saw a sharp decline in Scottish church membership.[537] Alexander Forsyth argues that the Graham Crusade undermined the community-based Tell Scotland campaign, obscuring its ideals of community growth with high-intensity mass evangelism. The result was that converts from the rallies were often unclear about what they had responded to and soon fell away. 'The thrill of the spectacle of the mass event, and the brilliance of Graham's oratory simply could not be replicated on the cold hard pew of a Sunday morning.' Church attendance among these converts fell and the converts returned to their prior disinterest in Christianity.[538]

In 1993, Eugene Gallagher published an article which examined the importance of community for conversion narratives in late antiquity. Gallagher analyses three texts which deal with conversion – the *Acts of John*, *Joseph and Aseneth*, and *The Golden Ass*, an apocryphal Christian text, a Jewish story, and a pagan Roman story, respectively. In all three, Gallagher finds that a successful conversion requires the convert to join a new community, change their behaviours, and participate in new rituals; individuals who have a conversion experience but do not go on to change their ways and join a new community are presented as failed converts.[539] 'In each instance, the convert's new life is not limited to the moment

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[536] Andrew F. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission and Appropriation of Faith* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002), 11–12.
[537] Alexander Forsyth, *Mission by the People: Rediscovering the Dynamic Missiology of Tom Allan and His Scottish Contemporaries* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2017), 28–49.
[538] Forsyth, 50–54.
[539] For example, the *Acts of John* includes the example of Fortunatus who, having been raised to life by John, refuses to embrace Christianity and runs away; he subsequently dies of the snake bite which had originally

of transformation; it is sustained by continuing ritual practice within a social and religious community.' Conversion stories in the ancient world, across multiple religious perspectives, represent 'points of entry' into new religious communities which sustain one's conversion through new moral behaviour and ritual practice.[540]

In 1965, John Lofland and Rodney Stark published an influential paper examining the conversion process in a millenarian cult (the Divine Precepts, or D.P.) on the West Coast of the US.[541] An essential condition for conversion identified by Lofland and Stark was the development of 'cult affective bonds' between potential converts and group members. These affective bonds preceded any intellectual commitment from potential converts, so 'persons developed affective ties with the group or some of its members while they still regarded the D.P. perspective as problematic, or even "way out."'[542] In addition to affective bonds with group members, Lofland and Stark found that for an individual to convert they must also have relatively few positive social attachments outside of the group (through strained personal relations or geographical distance, for example). They tell the story of a recently married young man who was showing increasing interest in the group but whose wife was reluctant to join. Eventually the man left the group to stay with his wife, although at the time he still believed the group's teachings and 'it was only months later that he finally lost all belief in the D.P.'[543] For both those joining and those leaving the D.P., affective social bonds led to change in group affiliation, while beliefs only changed some time later. Revisiting the paper 12 years later, Lofland noted that the D.P., which had since grown from a small cult into a much larger movement, had increasingly recognised the power of affective and emotional attachment for creating converts. Thus, potential converts would be invited to a weekend at The Farm, a country retreat at which recruits were isolated from the outside world and bound to an intensive and close community. The key strategy at The Farm was to downplay the doctrinal elements of D.P. belonging and overwhelm recruits with love so that they felt the desire to '"melt together"… into the loving, enveloping embrace of the collective.'[544]

Conversions to Islam in the West often involve contact with an immigrant Muslim community. Conversion to Islam is most common among those who live in multi-cultural environments, meet Muslim people, and especially among those who have a Muslim

killed him. Salvation in the *Acts of John* thus cannot be sustained by the conversion experience alone and relies on the convert's continued action and entry into a new community. Gallagher, 'Conversion and Community in Late Antiquity', 6.

[540] Gallagher, 14.

[541] Lofland and Stark, 'Becoming a World-Saver'.

[542] Lofland and Stark, 871.

[543] Lofland and Stark, 872–73.

[544] John Lofland, '"Becoming a World-Saver" Revisited', *The American Behavioural Scientist* 20, no. 6 (1977): 811. While certain aspects of Lofland & Stark's conversion model have subsequently been criticised, the importance of affective bonding remains well-supported. David A. Snow and Cynthia L. Phillips, 'The Lofland-Stark Conversion Model: A Critical Reassessment', *Social Problems* 27, no. 4 (1980): 440; see also, Willem Kox, Wim Meeus, and Harm 't Hart, 'Religious Conversion of Adolescents: Testing the Lofland and Stark Model of Religious Conversion', *Sociological Analysis* 52, no. 3 (1991): 238.

partner.[545] In cities across the US, post-conversion support groups, often run by Western converts to Islam, have been set up to support newly converted Muslims. For an American convert, integration into a Muslim community can be difficult: Chicago's Muslim Community Centre *da'wa* group provides social support for new Muslims, and the Islamic Circle of North America recommends social acts such as taking a person out for samosas as part of a *da'wa* strategy.[546]

The preceding vignettes suggest the importance of community for conversion. The stories of Thomas Tui and the Tell Scotland campaign are stories of individuals who are converted to Christianity but, without a Christianity community to support their Christian life, lose their faith. Gallagher's paper indicates the importance of communities for conversion in the ancient world and a non-Jamesian framework of understanding conversion in which the conversion event is far less important than the subsequent life and community involvement for an individual's salvation and future wellbeing. Lofland and Stark illustrate the same point in reverse, highlighting the positive effect that communal ties can have on an individual's propensity to convert and the ways in which these can be exploited by proselytisers. Van Nieuwkerk and Hermansen show these same processes in conversions to Islam in modern Western countries.

Clearly, community is an important part of the conversion process. Both Rambo's and Gooren's models of conversion involve a significant role played by a religious community in an individual's conversion process.[547] In chapter four, we considered religious communities as linguistic communities and focused on the effect that joining a linguistic community and learning new modes of expression can have on an individual's belief. However, as we noted towards the end of the chapter, religious communities are not just linguistic communities but also ritual and affective communities. The important conclusion of chapter four was to see that the affectivity of belief and language means that joining a new linguistic community has the capacity to precipitate a change in an individual's beliefs. In this chapter we will add to this account and show that the effect of a religious community on an individual's belief and conversion exceeds its effect as a linguistic community and also includes the affectivity and rituality of religious communities. This chapter will argue that community is a central element to conversion. Indeed, it is my contention in this chapter that a religious conversion must involve a change in a convert's communal setting. I will thus push against an individualistic understanding of conversion, insisting that any account of conversion which does not recognise the social dimension of conversion is necessarily impoverished. While conversions may appear to be events which happen to individuals, I will argue in this chapter that individual converts cannot be separated from the social world they inhabit. This social world provides a perceptual and affective structure and framework, through

[545] Karin van Nieuwkerk, '"Conversion" to Islam and the Construction of a Pious Self', in *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, ed. Lewis R. Rambo and Charles E. Farhadian (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 670.

[546] Marcia Hermansen, 'Conversion to Islam in Theological and Historical Perspectives', in *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, ed. Lewis R. Rambo and Charles E. Farhadian (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 653–54. *Da'wa* translates as inviting and refers to the obligation to invite others to the Islamic faith.

[547] Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 16–18; Gooren, *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation*, 48–52.

which the individual develops new beliefs and practices. Hence, a change in one's social world has the capacity to alter how one perceives the world and their place in it.

This chapter is divided into two sections. The first is an analysis of ritual, based on the observation that religious communities are often also ritual communities. I will argue that rituals work through emotional mimesis and by imaginatively investing the world with meaning, which they do by engaging with the body's prenoetic and anticipatory structuring of perception. Participating in a ritual can affect how the world looks and feels; religious ritual is thus not something in which one participates following a conversion but is in fact an integral part of the conversion process. The second part of the chapter analyses community at a more basic level and considers the effect that simply belonging to a new community can have on the processes of belief formation. Taking my lead from affect theory and recent research into the affectivity of religion, I argue that the need to belong is a fundamental human affect, rooted in our shared biology and evolutionary history. Therefore, the need to belong operates as an unconscious affective driver of human belief and action. Hence, the second part of this chapter will conclude by finding community belonging to be an essential part of the conversion process, a contributor to – rather than a consequence of – religious conversion. I will conclude the chapter by revisiting my argument that community is an essential part of religious conversion, seeking to sail a course between presenting an overly deterministic view of community, on the one hand, and underrepresenting the power social power of community, on the other.

Ritual Communities

It might seem odd to begin a chapter on community with a discussion of ritual. From one perspective, religious ritual can be interpreted on individualistic terms as performances which take place between the individual and God. Yet, this position betrays the kind of Protestant bias exhibited by William James, whereby religious rituals are understood ultimately in terms of how they contribute to an individual's private religious experience.[548] The social aspect of rituals becomes particularly apparent when we widen the scope of our investigation and consider non-religious rituals. Even a ritual as apparently straightforward as a handshake involves a complex set of social cues and understandings, without which it is impossible to perform. Shaking someone's hand is social not just because it involves another person but because it takes place within a broader social context, according to a set of complex rules, norms and expectations. Returning to religion, even those rituals which appear to be performed by a lone individual are passed down through tradition and even breaking from tradition is itself a social response. The sense of ritual, that feeling which helps determine whether a ritual has been done right or wrong, is socially instituted, practically learnt over time by participation with other ritual practitioners.

This section will begin by clarifying what we mean by the concept ritual and thereby attempt to clear away the historical dualist interpretation of the concept. We will then consider what it is that accounts for the efficacy of rituals in affecting how individuals think, feel, and believe, finding the answer in the ways in which rituals engage with human affective and

[548] For this criticism of James, see Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today*, 23–25.

embodied experience. First, rituals make us feel things through emotional mimesis, whereby desired emotions are mimicked in the body and thereby induced. Second, rituals involve the development of new anticipatory poises which affect perception, such that regular ritual participation can result in the world appearing differently. Rituals are thus embodied practices with an affective import, capable over time of affecting how one feels. Given our earlier discussions of the affectivity of language and belief, we can begin to see how this understanding of ritual might add to our understanding of conversion.

What is a Ritual?

As we have seen throughout this thesis, studying factors relevant to conversion must often begin by challenging prevailing dualist assumptions – this is no less true for our study of ritual. As Catherine Bell argued in 1992, any modern study of ritual must overcome the dichotomy of thought and action (and ultimately mind and body) which implicitly prioritises the thoughts or ideas which supposedly lies behind a ritual act. The historical view which Bell sought to challenge was one which regarded ritual as a kind of routinised action which expresses thoughts and ideas, and is interesting as an object of study only insofar as it can teach us about the beliefs of a religious community.[549] Our discussion of expression in the previous chapter should immediately suggest the drawbacks to this historical approach, resting as it does on a theory of expression which detaches meaning from word or action and relocates it in the private realm of an individual's inner mental life.

For a recent example of this dualist tendency in the philosophical discussion of ritual, we can turn to a 2017 paper by Guy Bennett-Hunter. Bennett-Hunter attempts to move away from the dualism of thought and action and adopts Wittgenstein's criticism of the traditional view that rituals are simply the expression of false beliefs.[550] While he successfully challenges a belief-centric view of ritual, Bennett-Hunter still conceives of ritual as expressing pre-existing values. Thus, while managing to overcome the overreliance on belief, he remains wedded to a dualism of expression and value. For Bennett-Hunter, interpreting rituals as expressions of value can explain why individuals will still perform a ritual even if it can be shown to be practically inefficacious. For example, modern science shows that the ritual washing of eucharistic vessels is impractical since we know that microscopic traces of bread and wine will remain. On Bennett-Hunter's view, such a ritual should be understood as the expression of a religious value rather than simply being evaluated on the basis of the facts of the matter as the result of false beliefs.[551] While this is an advance on the false-belief theory of ritual, Bennett-Hunter's view still regards the ritual action itself as meaningless without the input of some anterior thought: one distinguishing feature of rituals for Bennett-Hunter is 'the fact that they are practically useless'.[552] Yet, this reveals a limited conception of ritual which limits rituals to expressions (of beliefs, values, desires, etc.) and does not recognise the capacity of a ritual to make a real difference in the world. To take another example of a ritual, consider a handshake. A handshake is a social

[549] Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 14–19.
[550] Guy Bennett-Hunter, 'Ritual Perspectives: An Emergentist Perspective', *The Expository Times* 129, no. 2 (2017): 59.
[551] Bennett-Hunter, 60–61.
[552] Bennett-Hunter, 59.

ritual which can perform a variety of functions – such as welcoming someone or concluding a deal. It might be argued that a handshake is practically useless: it appears that there is nothing about grasping another's right hand and moving it up and down that transforms a deal from pending to completed. However, the alternative view, which regards a ritual as an expression of a previously held belief, value or desire is inaccurate. When I shake your hand, I do not simply express my desire that the deal be struck or my belief that it is now concluded. In the performance of the handshake, the deal is concluded. Without the handshake (or an alternative ritual in its place), there is no deal.[553] While, on one level, the handshake does not cause any physical change (in the way that dropping a glass would cause it to shatter), a handshake is still an act which makes a difference in the world. The difference it makes is not physical but social – and this social difference can give rise to physical implications.[554]

To return to the context of religion, the ritual of a wedding is more than an expression of love or desire to stay with one's partner until death (although it of course includes this). Rather, the ritual of a wedding does something. It changes the social facts in a way which goes beyond mere expression. Both a handshake and a wedding are illocutionary gestures which make a real, observable difference in the world.[555] If rituals are not merely expressions of previously held beliefs, desires or values but are rather practical acts with real-world consequences, then a dualist theory of ritual will be unsustainable. A wedding or handshake cannot be divided into the physical act and the thought which stands behind it because the thought is deeply intertwined with the action. A wedding cannot be understood simply by attending to the beliefs, values and desires of the wedding couple; neither can it be understood merely by observing the physical actions which occur on the wedding day. Rather, it is important that the thoughts and actions of the participants are understood holistically, whereby what is thought, what is done, and what is understood to be socially achieved are all taken into account. One consequence of this is that dualistic theories of ritual cannot account for how ritual practice can establish new beliefs and values for an individual, rather than just express those already held. If a ritual expresses a previously held thought or value, then this thought of value must already be determined at the point of participation in the ritual. If, on the other hand, a ritual is an illocutionary gesture which can achieve things, then it is possible that participation in a ritual can affect what and how someone believes. For our study into religious conversion, therefore, we must develop a view of ritual which regards it as more than an expression.

If we are to overcome the dualism of action and thought in ritual studies then one aspect of this task will be to demonstrate how ritual practice can itself be a form of knowing, rather than the action relying on some previously held belief. For Nick Crossley, a ritual involves both embodied and social knowing. The embodied knowledge of ritual takes the form of

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[553] Gordon Graham makes a similar point regarding a handshake as welcome. Graham, *Wittgenstein and Natural Religion*, 163.

[554] See Nick Crossley, 'Ritual, Body Technique, and (Inter)Subjectivity', in *Thinking Through Rituals: Philosophical Perspectives*, ed. Kevin Schilbrack (New York: Routledge, 2004), 38. We will return to Crossley's analysis of the handshake later.

[555] J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, second edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 94–108.

embodied know-how or competency: one must know how to perform the ritual act, when it is appropriate, and what role one takes within the ritual.[556] This knowledge is not propositional but felt in the body. This is what Bell refers to as 'ritualization'.[557] This creates a ritualised body, whose affective responses to the environment are shaped by the ritual, experienced individually as a 'sense of ritual'.[558] This sense of ritual is an embodied knowledge and situational feeling of appropriateness, the ability to practically discern correct and deviant ritual practice. Ritualisation is thus the process by which situational practical knowledge becomes embodied in an individual. It creates new affective responses which, as we saw at the end of the previous chapter, influences an individual's beliefs. Participation in rituals will, therefore, effect affective changes in an individual and thus contribute to the adoption of new non-propositional beliefs.

In addition to embodied knowledge, Crossley also argues that ritual practice involves knowledge of social norms.[559] This includes understanding the meaning of certain ritual actions in specific contexts, knowing what kinds of action will and will not be regarded as appropriate, recognising who has the authority to perform different kinds of ritual, and so on. For example, as we have discussed already, a handshake can mean a variety of things in different contexts: engaging in this ritual requires not only the physical capability to shake another person's hand but also an understanding of what the handshake means in this context and how it relates to current social norms. For Crossley, this is not just an additional level of understanding but a necessary condition of being able to perform the ritual at all: 'To be able to "do" the ritual of handshaking, competently, requires that one understands what one is doing by doing this across a variety of contexts.'[560] It is important that I know whether I am welcoming you with this handshake or concluding a deal. Without this social knowledge, I cannot competently perform the ritual. While Crossley discusses the embodied and social knowledge involved in ritual separately, Bell combines these in her theory of ritualisation and the embodied sense of ritual. For Bell, the sense of ritual is that by which the ritualised body knows what to do, how to do it and when it is appropriate. It is a 'social instinct' which encompasses both the practical know-how and the social awareness necessary for ritual participation.[561]

The Efficacy of Ritual

The above gives us a working definition of ritual for our purposes. The next important question concerns the efficacy of ritual: *how* does a ritual do what it does? This is a phenomenological question. Up until this point we have engaged with sociological questions about ritual: what is a ritual and what does it do? These questions remain exclusively in the social sphere. The role of a handshake in concluding a deal is a social fact and does not depend on any specific feeling on the part of the individuals involved. The phenomenological question builds on this, asking how a ritual does what it does. If ritual has

[556] Crossley, 'Ritual, Body Technique, and (Inter)Subjectivity', 38.
[557] Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 88.
[558] Bell, 98–99.
[559] Crossley, 'Ritual, Body Technique, and (Inter)Subjectivity', 38–39.
[560] Crossley, 39.
[561] Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 98.

the capacity to make a social difference in the world, what does this capacity consist in? What effect does the performance of a ritual have on how I perceive and experience the world, such that I recognise it to be efficacious? How is embodied and social knowledge imparted through ritual participation? Ultimately, how can a ritual change how I feel, what I believe, and how I perceive the world? I will suggest two ways in which rituals can be efficacious: through emotional mimesis and imaginative investment. These are taken from Nick Crossley but expanded using, in the first place, material from chapter three concerning embodiment and prenoetics, and in the second place, a phenomenology of poise and anticipation.

Emotional Mimesis

First, Crossley argues that rituals are capable of inducing specific emotional states by a form of mimesis: by mimicking certain emotions through ritual, a practitioner can come to have these emotions themselves.[562] Crossley cites Merleau-Ponty's reflections on his bedtime ritual: Merleau-Ponty cannot simply decide to sleep but rather must lie in his bed and mimic being asleep until sleep comes.[563] Crossley applies this analysis to ritual in general: ecstatic rituals (that is, 'rituals which mimic ecstasy') allow an agent to 'tap into their corporeal potential for ecstatic ways of being, putting themselves into an ecstatic state.' The same is true of calming or mindful rituals, such as yoga or meditation.[564] What Crossely does not ask is how emotional mimesis works and why mimicking an emotional state can induce the state itself. As we have discussed in previous chapters, feelings are bodily states, the subjective awareness of embodied responses to the environment.[565] As we discovered in chapter three, all bodily states are subject to various prenoetic factors, such as blood pressure, blood sugar levels, hormone levels, heart rate, bodily and ambient temperature, and so on. If a feeling is the subjective awareness of a body state, then these prenoetic factors have the capacity to change how one feels.

For example, the feeling of ecstasy Crossley describes is the result of certain things happening in the body – changes to one's hormone levels, blood pressure, heart rate, and so one will result in the feeling that one is in a state of ecstasy. These bodily factors do not *cause* ecstasy, as if the body is having some ecstatic effect on the mind; rather, the bodily factors *are* the ecstasy, one aspect of which is the subjective feeling had by the individual. If bodily factors only caused ecstasy rather than being the ecstasy itself, then we could imagine a feeling of ecstasy caused by some other factor and the body remaining in its original state. If I drop a brick on my foot, it causes pain in my foot. However, I can imagine pain in my foot caused by something else – either another object dropped or some kind of

[562] Crossley, 'Ritual, Body Technique, and (Inter)Subjectivity', 42–44.
[563] Crossley, 42; see *PhP*, 166–7.
[564] Crossley, 43.
[565] At this point, we will not get into the difference between emotions and feelings. As Goldie notes, while emotions depend for their specific character on feelings, an emotion consists in more than just feelings and also includes perceptions, dispositions, thoughts, and ideas. Nevertheless, Goldie still maintains that 'without feelings, emotions would not be what they are' and so it is legitimate for us to focus on this affective element of emotion for our analysis. Indeed, when Crossley refers to emotions – such as an ecstatic or calming emotion – what he describes is much closer to what Goldie calls a bodily feeling. Hence, in this chapter, we will understand emotion and feeling to be synonymous. Goldie, *The Emotions*, 12–13, 50.

electrochemical intervention which stimulates the relevant nervous pathways in my body. Thus, we can say that the pain is not the same as the dropped brick (but perhaps is the same as the stimulation of nervous pathways).[566] In contrast, if we try to imagine a state of ecstasy without (for example) a raised heartrate, we cannot. In lowering the heartrate, the feeling of ecstasy is reduced. Ecstasy is a condition of the body which is felt subjectively. When I mimic the feeling of ecstasy through ecstatic ritual, I mimic it in my body: it is a bodily performance whereby I excite my body with various sensorimotor techniques. Because the feeling is mimicked in the body and because the feeling is ultimately a bodily feeling, by mimicking the feeling one recreates it. As the bodily conditions of the feeling are recreated, the feeling is felt. Since the feeing *is* the body-condition, when the body mimics having the feeling, the feeling is really had. Mimicking is not necessarily easy and not all ritual practitioners are successful at entering the desired emotional state. However, this does not mean that mimicry creates only a reflection or semblance of the mimicked emotion. Rather, it shows that emotional mimesis is a skill: one must learn how to use one's body in order to properly mimic and therefore successfully induce the emotion. Ritual involves the skilful use of the body. Hence, Bell refers to 'ritual mastery', and calls the development of this skilful use of the body ritualisation.[567]

Imaginative Investment

Second, Crossley argues that rituals are efficacious because they allow the individual to invest meaning and structure into the world through the use of the imagination. Rituals which supposedly recognise and respond to some feature of the world actually create it. Hence, 'when secular monarchists participate in the rituals and festivities of their king or queen, they imaginatively generate a "majesty" which they misrecognize as emanating from the person whom they, by way of ritual, invest with it.'[568] Thus, rituals are capable of shaping the perceptual experience of individuals, creating features in the world which are then responded to through further ritual practice. Despite the focus on the imagination, this too is a bodily act: things in the world are imaginatively invested with structures and meanings through an individual's bodily responses and approaches to things in the world. So far, Crossley's claim that rituals allow the individual to imaginatively invest meaning and structure into the world has been asserted but not argued for. I will make an argumentative case for this position by outlining how a ritual could be capable of performing this function.

My argument is that rituals are capable of imaginatively investing the world with meaning and structure through the effect they can have on the anticipatory structure of perception. This happens through bodily changes in an individual's poise, which is the embodiment of anticipation. Ratcliffe outlines a compelling account of anticipation when he develops a phenomenology of trauma and psychiatric illness. Following Husserl, Ratcliffe argues that

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[566] My argument here should not be taken to mean that I regard pain as *nothing more* than a physical property in the body. Clearly, pain has an important subjective element. However, it is only on a dualist ontology that these two aspects of pain come into conflict. As the argument from chapter three should demonstrate, pain as a subjective feeling and pain as an objective bodily state should be recognised as being two sides of the same coin.

[567] Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 107–8.

[568] Crossley, 'Ritual, Body Technique, and (Inter)Subjectivity', 44.

perception includes 'a sense of the possible', such that our perception involves not only the present appearance of an object but also its perceptual possibilities. If I perceive a cup from one angle, I also perceive its reverse side – not because it is visually present to me but because the perception of the front of the cup includes the possibility that I could turn it around and see the reverse side. This is not a judgement I make following my perception of the cup but rather an anticipation which is integrally bound up with the perception. Thus, 'perceptual experience of a given entity is inextricable from a characteristic *horizon* of possibilities, a structural system of potentialities for ongoing perceptual access'.[569]

The anticipatory structure of perception becomes most evident when it is disrupted. To illustrate this, we can take an example from Samuel Todes, that of a crudely counterfeited dollar bill which (without the assistance of modern technology) can go unnoticed for a long time. Even if the counterfeit is so crude that it misspells the word "dollar", we are so used to dealing with genuine bills, that the counterfeit can go unnoticed because we anticipate seeing – and therefore see – the correct spelling. Similarly, writers will often miss obvious typographical errors in their writing because they know what they are intending to write and so anticipate the words being correctly spelled. Anticipation can do a great deal of filling in, such that our perception is not merely a representation of the sensory world as is but rather a complex interaction between sensuous data and anticipation.[570]

Ratcliffe further elaborates his account of anticipation by including its embodied aspect.

> The possibilities we experience as integral to entities in the surrounding environment are at the same time felt as bodily dispositions, as phenomenologically accessible movement tendencies of various kinds.[571]

The anticipation involved in perception that this cup has a reverse side which I could perceive includes the sense that I could use my body to perceive this possibility. By picking up the cup or moving from my own position, I can fulfil this anticipation. Thus perception, and its anticipation-fulfilment structure, depends on my embodiment. We can fill out this account of embodied anticipation by returning to Todes. For Todes, the embodiment of anticipation can be understood through the notion of poise. Poise is an anticipatory bodily response to an object, through which I set my body to react to the perceived possibilities of an object. For example, if a baseball is flying towards me, I can perceive it as a baseball only if I anticipate it as a baseball – and I can anticipate it as a baseball only by setting my body to catch or otherwise respond to it.

> *We come to know for sure that it is a ball by catching it as a ball.* If I merely wait inertly for the ball to reach me, wait as a pure spectator with an inactive body, then when the ball finally reaches me it will appear to do so all of a sudden, hitting me or whizzing by me, allowing me no opportunity to respond to it by catching it. […] The

[569] Ratcliffe, *Real Hallucinations*, 123, emphasis original.
[570] Samuel Todes, *Body and World* (Cambridge, MA.: The MIT Press, 2001), 80.
[571] Ratcliffe, *Real Hallucinations*, 125.

> "ball" then appears to me mainly as a missile of indeterminate character that is not so much to be responded to as to be avoided.[572]

My perception of a ball in the distance includes my anticipation of its trajectory, specifically my perception of its trajectory relevant to my own body (whether it is on course to hit me or not). However, if I do nothing to respond to the ball (and assuming I do not want to be hit), then I have not anticipated the ball. The ball appears as meaningful and replete with significant possibilities because of how my body is poised. In a similar way, Dreyfus shows how Todes's account of poise can explain one of Merleau-Ponty's well-known examples. Merleau-Ponty argues that perception is intrinsically meaningful and multimodal such that, for example, a carpet is perceived not just as blue but as 'wooly blue'.[573] Dreyfus argues that the perception of the woolly-blueness of the carpet is a function of the perceiving body's poise, 'as one's body is set to feel the carpet's particular flexibility, weight, warmth, fuzziness, etc.'.[574] Perceived meaning is a function of poise. Perception, which is characterised by an anticipation-fulfilment structure, is structured according to the anticipatory responsiveness of the body. We can imagine the different feel in our body on approaching a woolly-looking carpet versus approaching a spiky-looking carpet and, if we were to be told mid-approach that the apparent wooliness is in fact an illusion concealing a spiky texture, we would register this new information first in our body as a reflexive stiffness or jerky avoidance movement. Our poise towards the carpet would change and, as a result, the carpet would appear differently to us.

Following the above discussion, we are now in a better position to understand how rituals are capable of imaginatively investing the world with meaning and structure and give some support to Crossley's position. A religious ritual is a deeply embodied activity in which the position and movement of the body bears a close relation to the religious or spiritual significance of the activity.[575] Engaging in a religious ritual involves adopting a certain kind of poise with religious or spiritual significance. This can include prescribed body positions, such as the various positions adopted by Muslims in prayer or Catholics during Mass, as well as more general non-prescriptive attitudes, such as the reverence which might be shown to the Qur'an or Torah which is expressed through the way in which the body approaches these significant things. Given our discussion of poise and anticipation, we can argue that the bodily requirements for participating in a new ritual can change how an individual perceives the world. We have argued that poise is an embodied anticipation and that if one's anticipation changes (such as from a woolly to a spiky carpet) one's poise will change.

We can further argue that this relationship also works in the reverse direction: if one's poise changes, one's anticipation will change. This is because poise and anticipation do not exist in a strict relationship of cause and effect, whereby poise is a secondary response to the primary anticipation. Rather, it is through poise that we anticipate. We can see this by

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[572] Todes, *Body and World*, 64, emphasis original.
[573] *PhP*, 326.
[574] Hubert L. Dreyfus, 'Introduction I: Todes's Account of Nonconceptual Perceptual Knowledge and Its Relation to Thought', in *Body and World*, by Samuel Todes (Cambridge, MA.: The MIT Press, 2001), xxii.
[575] Wynn, 'Aesthetic Goods and the Nature of Religious Understanding', 122–23.

considering the alternative: if poise and anticipation are separate, then it should be possible in theory to anticipate something without the accompanying poise. At first glance this might appear to be possible. There seems to be no contradiction in saying that I can anticipate a baseball flying towards me but do not poise myself to catch it. However, this is misleading. While it is certainly possible that I might anticipate the baseball but do not poise myself to catch it, this does not mean that I have no poise at all. If I am not prepared to catch the ball for some reason, then I will poise myself to be hit, through the tensing and bracing of my body. If I anticipate, there must be poise. Even an anticipation that the ball will not hit me is experienced as a poise – this time a more relaxed stance. Hence, a change in poise is a change in anticipation. This does not mean that I can simply change my anticipations by adopting new poises: poise is not under such conscious control but much more a matter of reflex and unconscious embodied knowledge. If I know that the baseball is going to miss me but I am not convinced, my poise will still be braced for impact, even if I try to consciously avoid dodging the ball. If I repeat the exercise, practicing a more relaxed poise each time, I will gradually build up a habitually formed relaxed poise and, in so doing, begin to anticipate the ball missing me. Therefore, repeated poise practice can change how I anticipate perception in a way that would not be possible by conscious fiat. In this way, repeated practice can alter my perception.

It might be objected that the kinds of anticipatory perception we have discussed so far – such as catching a baseball and approaching a textured carpet – are disanalogous to religious rituals. This objection is twofold. First, the examples used are relatively short-term experiences, whereas rituals take place over much longer timescales. It is one thing to say that my poise structures my anticipatory perception of a baseball flying towards me and quite another to say that ritual participation can have long-term, global effects on the structure of my perception. While anticipation and poise might be involved in my participation in rituals, it does not follow that the effect of anticipation and poise in these ritual situations will have any lasting effect on my perception. Second, there appears to be a disanalogy concerning the role of belief. Catching a baseball or walking over a carpet do not involve any specific beliefs, whereas a ritual often contains many beliefs which are essential to its performance.

I will answer these objections in turn. First, anticipation does not just structure perception in the present moment but can have long-term and global effects. As Todes argues, anticipation is habit-forming. The more we engage with a particular type of perception, the more likely we are to perceive the same thing in the future. Anticipation works on the basis of what has come before. We anticipate in order that we can respond to situations before they reach us because it takes time for the body to adopt a poise which can respond to the situation. This is the point of Todes's counterfeit bill example. Someone completely unfamiliar with dollar bills would be much more likely to recognise the misspelling of "dollar" because they will pay greater attention to the details of the bill. It is only when someone has seen genuine dollar bills regularly that they begin to anticipate the correct spelling, forming a habit of perception that persists through time.[576] Further, while our

[576] Todes, *Body and World*, 80.

examples thus far have mainly concerned visual perception, the anticipation-fulfilment structure of perception can also be applied to the perception of value. We have already seen this to an extent in the counterfeit bill example: when a counterfeit bill is misrecognised as genuine, it is not simply a matter of visual perception being misled by anticipation. Bound up with the visual perception is a perception of value. The misperception of the counterfeit as genuine includes not only a misperception of the bill's visual qualities but also its value. When it is recognised as a counterfeit, its perceived value changes.

Now we can answer fully the first objection. A visitor to a church might see the eucharistic elements and perceive no strong significance – just some bread and wine. A Christian who has participated in the eucharist for many years will perceive a much greater significance, perceiving, for example, the presence of Christ in the elements. This is not a visual perception – the bread and wine look visually identical to the believer and the visitor – but a perception of value. If the visitor then returns to the church and regularly participates in the eucharist, their perception of the elements will begin to change and over time they will begin to anticipate perceiving the presence of Christ. Then, because anticipation is habit-forming, this new anticipation has the capacity to affect the individual's perception more globally. If they are used to perceiving the presence of Christ in the eucharist, we might expect them to begin anticipating (and therefore perceiving) the presence of Christ in other situations in their life. Through this example, we can see how our discussion of poise and anticipation is applicable to rituals and can affect an individual's perception over longer timescales.

To answer the second objection, we need to re-evaluate what we understand the relationship between rituals and belief to be. The objection that religious rituals involve belief, whereas our examples of anticipation and poise do not, assumes a propositional theory of belief. It is true that preparing to catch a baseball or misrecognising a counterfeit bill do not necessarily involve propositional beliefs, whereas some rituals do.[577] If we understand belief non-propositionally, then we see that anticipatory perception does involve belief in the sense of taking things to be true. If I am poised to catch a baseball, then I take it to be true that there is a baseball flying towards me, that it will hurt if it hits me, that I have the capacity to catch it, and so on. These are not propositional beliefs but rather the kind of affective, dispositional non-propositional beliefs as described in chapter four. At the same time, even for those religious rituals which do involve propositional beliefs, ritual beliefs are not exhausted by propositions. Rather, participating in a ritual involves the taking to be true of many things which may never be articulated as propositions.[578] Thus, to object to my account on the grounds that my examples of anticipatory perception do not involve belief both underestimates the role of belief in perception and overestimates it in ritual. My argument does not require that religious rituals change an individual's propositional beliefs. Rather, it is sufficient for me to show that rituals can alter the structure of perception,

[577] Of course, as we saw earlier, not every ritual involves a propositional belief either. It is a Western, Christocentric perspective which regards all rituals (or religions) as necessarily concerned with propositional belief.

[578] The argument for this has already been made in chapter one, so will not be repeated here; see pp. 36–7.

allowing the world and objects within it to take on a new or different salience. Rituals can imaginatively invest the world with meaning and structure not because they change my propositional beliefs but because they require me to take up new poises which alter my anticipation. Since anticipation is integral to the formation of perceptual habits, it follows that rituals can change the global long-term structure of perception. This is not equated with belief change but rather affects the context within which new beliefs are formed. The meaning and salience structure of the perceived world affects how I interpret the world and thus the beliefs I come to form. Further, the emotionally mimetic function of rituals means that a ritual can change how the world both looks and feels, especially if participated in regularly over time. Given the affectivity of belief which has already been argued for, we may conclude that ritual participation can engage with the affective and embodied belief-forming processes of the human body and thereby contribute to conversion. Thus, we should not expect that converts participate in religious rituals *as a consequence* of their conversion but rather see ritual participation as an integral part of the conversion process.

The Need to Belong

So far we have sought to understand the role of community in conversion through an analysis of ritual. Rituals are social activities which, through their engagement with human embodiment and anticipation, are capable of restructuring the salience and affectivity of perception, altering how an individual sees the world and the feelings which lie at the base of belief-formation. Rituals are thus able to operate at an affective and non-propositional level to contribute to belief change; ritual participation is in this way capable of precipitating or otherwise accelerating the process of conversion. What we have not yet considered is the role of community participation more broadly in the conversion process. Specifically, it remains to ask whether participation in a religious community is itself – independently of what a community can do for an individual – capable of adding something to the conversion process. Or, in other words, if we accept that belonging to a community plays an important role in conversion, is this because of various things (such as rituals) that the community can offer the potential convert, or is there, on top of this, something about simply belonging to a community that interacts with human belief-forming processes in such a way as to affect the conversion process? If community belonging plays an important role in conversion, is this a merely instrumental role that could equally well be fulfilled by something else, or is there something unique about belonging to a community that is important for conversion and belief? I will argue for the latter position, that community belonging is itself an important part of the conversion process, beyond any further benefit or experience that a religious community might provide for a potential convert.

To make this argument, I will turn to recent research in affect theory and develop an account of the need for community belonging as a fundamental affective driver of human behaviour which can be attached to various religious beliefs, practices, or affiliations. I will argue that the affectivity of community belonging does not simply motivate individuals to join new religious communities but that the feeling of belonging which comes from this kind of community participation can itself drive changes in an individual's worldview, identity and beliefs. Being in community alters the belief-forming context of the human body and is

thus an important factor in the process of conversion. Following this, the findings from our studies of ritual and community belonging will be integrated to produce a vision of religious communities as affective ritual communities. This will then be integrated with our findings on the affectivity of and language from chapter belief four to show how community involvement can contribute to religious conversion. Before this we will turn to a brief literature review of the turn to lived religion in philosophy of religion and the attention received by the concept of community in this scholarship.

The Turn to Lived Religion

Recent development in the philosophy of religion have seen a move away from traditional questions about God's existence and nature, questions which can drift so far from the religious life of most believers that they can end up having little relevance for understanding religion. Simon Hewitt and Anastasia Philippa Scutton list the humane turn, feminist philosophy of religion, and philosophers with interests in non-Christian religion as three exciting developments in this direction.[579] However, while a lot of progress has been made in this arena, the importance of community remains neglected. While there have been many recent works which have sought to recognise the diversity of religious understanding and move attention away from questions of metaphysics and ontology towards understanding lived religious practice, these works tend to neglect the important role played by religious communities, focusing rather on the religious life and understanding of the individual practitioner. This is not to say that these scholars do not recognise the importance of community for concrete lived religious experience; rather, the importance of belonging to a community per se is overlooked in favour of what the community can do for the individual. For example, community can be regarded as that which initiates individuals into rituals, encourages the adoption of new values, or as the background condition for new kinds of religious perception or understanding. My contention is that the sense of belonging itself, apart from what else can be achieved through community, is a fundamental aspect of lived religious experience.[580]

We get closer to a philosophical examination of community belonging in the *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology*'s special issue on lived religion (79:4, 2018). Rather than exploring alternative formulations of religious understanding, this special issue focuses on 'what dimensions of religious existence other than doxastic ones are interesting objects of study, or how philosophers might study – and teach – living religion.'[581] This offers a broader scope for philosophical study of religion by stepping even further from the prioritisation of doxastic questions. From this issue, the two papers which engage the question of

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[579] Simon Hewitt and Anastasia Philippa Scrutton, 'Philosophy and Living Religion: An Introduction', *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 79, no. 4 (2018): 349.

[580] We do not have the space for a full review of this literature. The following is a selection of the kinds of work to which I refer. Mark Wynn, *Faith and Place: An Essay in Embodied Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); John Cottingham, *Philosophy of Religion: Towards a More Humane Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Clare Carlisle, *On Habit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 113–40; Fiona Ellis, *God, Value, and Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Schilbrack, *Philosophy and the Study of Religions*; Fiona Ellis, ed., *New Models of Religious Understanding* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[581] Hewitt and Scrutton, 'Philosophy and Living Religion: An Introduction', 350.

community most clearly are Esther McIntosh's 'Living Religion: The Fluidity of Practice' and Beverley Clack's 'Lived Religion: Rethinking Human Nature in a Neoliberal Age'. McIntosh's paper discusses Scottish philosopher John Macmurray's view that religion is primarily communal. Macmurray distinguished between two kinds of social groups, those which exist for the sake of a particular goal (such as a sports club or political party) and those which exist exclusively for the sake of relationship (friendship and family groups); while the former kind is formed out of necessity, the latter is an ends in itself. Macmurray, concentrating on Christianity, argued that the religion's central tenets drive its adherents towards communal living and so is an example of the latter kind of social group. The basis of this position is that 'human nature is inherently relational' and that religion, as a primarily community-oriented phenomenon, is expressive of this human nature. For Macmurray and McIntosh, human interdependence is fundamental to the experience of being human.[582]

Clack's paper argues that a religious understanding of human existence as fundamentally communal can overcome the neoliberal market-based assumption of what it means to be human.[583] Following the etymology of the word religion, Clack finds that the Latin *religare* literally means *to bind* and suggests that religion thus concerns the human need to bind oneself to the world and others. She argues that this 'desire for connection is the very thing that makes us human' and lies at the heart of the drive towards human civilization.[584] Connection is, for Clack, 'a basic feature of humanity', such that human subjectivity is defined through its connection with the world and with others.[585] These papers get further into the philosophical question of belonging: rather than considering the effect of communal life on epistemology, the need to belong is recognised as fundamental to human experience and therefore worthy of philosophical reflection in and of itself.[586]

My intention is to take this research further and consider the philosophical implications of the idea that belonging is a basic human need. While McIntosh and Clack recognise that belonging is a basic human need, I argue that the affective salience of belonging as a basic human need makes it capable of both driving human practice and altering how individuals perceive and believe. To make this argument, we will need to take a detour through affect theory.

Affect theory

Having introduced the notion of community belonging and reviewed the recent literature in philosophy of religion on the importance of community belonging for lived religion, we are now in a position to put forward a positive account of community belonging in religion. My contention is that we cannot fully appreciate the importance of community belonging for religion – and thus its role in religious conversion – without taking note of its affective

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[582] McIntosh, 'Living Religion: The Fluidity of Practice', 386.
[583] Beverley Clack, 'Lived Religion: Rethinking Human Nature in a Neoliberal Age', *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 79, no. 4 (2018): 355–69.
[584] Clack, 363.
[585] Clack, 364.
[586] For a similar argument about the fundamental communality of human nature but in a more theological register, see James Greenaway, '*Communitas*: Belonging and the Order of Being', *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 79, no. 1–2 (2018): 194–212.

character. While I do not mean to overlook the various secondary benefits and experiences that can be provided by community belonging, my argument here is that communities provide something beyond these secondary goods and are in themselves affectively satisfying for human beings. Talk of affect invariably implies feelings and it is certainly part of my argument that belonging to a community feels good. However, this idea does not exhaust my thesis. Rather, I contend that community belonging satisfies deep affective drives in human beings, many of which operate beneath the level of conscious awareness, which are rooted in human evolutionary history. My argument in this section is thus that community belonging is a fundamental human need and driver of human activity, that this is the result of human evolution, and that this need for community belonging operates at an unconscious, prenoetic level to influence human emotion, belief and behaviour. I will therefore argue that, in the context of religious conversion, the simple fact of belonging to a community has the capacity to change how an individual feels and therefore what they believe.

Thus, I make two arguments relevant to the study of conversion. First, joining a religious community is not a consequence of conversion but part of the conversion process itself. Converts do not wait until they have adopted new beliefs, worldviews and identities before joining a new religious community but rather develop their new beliefs, worldviews and identities through their belonging to the new religious community. This conclusion is consistent with much of the social scientific research into conversion, which finds new community belonging regularly precedes transformation of a person's religious identity and worldview. Second, the capacity that community belonging has to drive developments in belief, worldview and identity does not wholly derive from what the religious community can provide for the potential convert. Rather, community belonging works at an unconscious, subcutaneous, prenoetic level to drive the adoption of beliefs and behaviours in individuals, thereby contributing to the conversion process. In order to make this argument, we will turn to recent research in affect theory, in particular Donovan Schaefer's *Religious Affects*. Having overviewed affect theory in general and Schaefer's interpretation of the theory for understanding religion, I will put forward an argument for understanding community belonging as a fundamental human affect, before examining the effect that this has for understanding conversion.

First, then, we turn to Donovan Schaefer's *Religious Affects*. Schaefer uses affect theory to challenge the linguistic bias of popular structuralist and constructivist accounts of religion, arguing that only through a recognition of the affectivity of religion can religion and its relationship with power be understood. Schaefer describes affect theory as a turn from the linguistic turn, where affects – rather than (or perhaps, as well as) language and culture – are key interpretive tools in understanding human behaviour. Affect theory offers a corrective to the overemphasis on linguistic and social constructivism in modern critical theory and insists that feelings and emotions are at least partially rooted in the biological reality of the body. Thus, affect theory challenges the notion that emotions are wholly socially or linguistically constructed and thus subject to the sociolinguistic interpretation of the feeling subject; rather, there is something basic to emotions which cannot be explained fully by language or society. As we will see, a precise definition of affect or affects – along

with its relation to emotion and feeling – is contested; however, Schaefer provisionally suggests that 'affect or affects can be understood as the propulsive elements of experience, thought, sensation, feeling, and action that are not necessarily captured or capturable by language or self-sovereign "consciousness."'[587] As Simeon Zahl has argued in a theological context, affects are basic to human experience and have a long history of theological reflection.

> Human beings are affective creatures. Fundamental to how we think, how we behave, and how we go about our lives in the world, is as creatures who feel and desire. We get angry and sad, we are filled with joy, we desire love and we desire for suffering to end, we hate, we yearn, we despair, and we feel compassion and hope.[588]

Schaefer traces a dual genealogy of affect theory, one a Spinozistic-Deleuzian theory which can be traced in its contemporary form to a 1995 paper by Brian Massumi, and the other a phenomenological theory traceable to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank's paper of the same year.[589] Schaefer summarises the differences between the two strands thus:

> In Deleuzian affect theory, bodies are fundamentally plastic. In phenomenological affect theory, experiencing bodies are hybrid systems of locally devised power relations and semiplastic biological structures – intransigent affects.[590]

As I will go on to argue, for both Schaefer and myself, phenomenological affect theory is a more fruitful resource for interpreting religion than it Deleuzian counterpart. We will thus only briefly summarise Massumi's arguments here. For Massumi, affect is located in the body pre-phenomenologically. Affect has primacy over language and cognition is performed in the body affectively and autonomically, below the level of conscious awareness.[591] Massumi links affect to power through an analysis of Ronald Reagan, who, Massumi argues, was successful because of his ability to produce affectively persuasive speeches. Affect is thus for Massumi an anonymous, plastic, subcutaneous human force, capable of driving political and ideological change.[592]

What Schaefer calls the phenomenological stream of affect theory can be traced back to a paper written by Sedwick and Frank in 1995. Sedwick and Frank's paper is a recovery of the American psychologist Silvan Tomkins, who published a four-volume work on affects from 1962–1992, and whose work was initially disregarded by critical theorists in fear of biological reductionism. Sedgwick and Frank challenge Stanley Schachter's theory of emotions – judged by Sedwick and Frank to have become common sense in the field of cognitive science at the time – that various emotional experiences emerge from an

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[587] Schaefer, *Religious Affects*, 23.
[588] Simeon Zahl, 'Engineering Desire: Biotechnological Enhancement as Theological Problem', *Studies in Christian Ethics* 32, no. 2 (2019): 217. For a brief history of reflections on affect in Christian thought, see Zahl, 217–19.
[589] See Schaefer, *Religious Affects*, 23–34; see pp. 36-51 for his discussion of this dual genealogy.
[590] Schaefer, 38.
[591] Brian Massumi, 'The Autonomy of Affect', *Cultural Critique* 31 (1995): 88–90.
[592] Massumi, 101–3.

undifferentiated arousal which is subsequently interpreted linguistically and culturally as a particular emotion. Thus, phenomenologically, joy is the same as fear, the two only differentiated in interpretation.[593] Sedgwick and Frank contest that such a view is 'no less biologically based than differential arousal' and indeed implies a stronger mind/body dualism whereby the mind is needed to interpret the homogenous and inchoate sensations of the body.[594] As Schaefer argues, this is a departure from Massumi's theory, arguing that 'it is a mistake to consider affect to be a homogenous domain outside the perimeter of the sphere of representation, the binary antithesis of the linguistic.'[595] Unlike Massumi, Sedgwick and Frank do not draw a clear division between affect (or Affect) on the one hand and emotions on the other. As Sara Ahmed argues, such a strict division between affect and emotion risks detaching emotions from lived experience,[596] while Naomi Irit Richardson notes that such a view presupposes that we can locate a clear demarcation between awareness and unawareness.[597]

Schaefer argues that phenomenological affect theory allows a deeper understanding of religion than is possible solely from the perspective of the linguistic turn: 'Phenomenological affect theory helps map the lines linking biologically grounded emotional responses – for example, fear – to religion and other systems of power.'[598] Affect theory seeks to dig beneath the explanations that can be offered by structuralist linguistic critical theories of religion and discover the affectivity and animality which subvenes religion as linguistically and culturally mediated. This does not mean turning away from the linguistic turn of the late twentieth century which was a crucial moment in destabilising the 'rigid phenomenological architecture' of early theories of religion (such as those of James, Durkheim and Otto). Phenomenological affect theory differs from these early approaches by refusing to characterise affect as strictly biologically determined and universal across human experience; yet, at the same time (and *pace* Massumi's Spinozistic-Deleuzian version), it does not see religion as wholly linguistically or socially constructed but recognises finitely many semistable affects, such as fear, which have an evolutionary history in human biology. Phenomenological affect theory thus has the resources to map this biological reality to systems of power, sensitive to the effects that race, gender, class and other categories have on the experiences of bodies.[599] Schaefer suggests that, for a religious conviction to take hold, it need to do more than engage with an individual's beliefs; he quotes Ann Pellegrini, who argues that the individual is 'invested… in a deeper structure of religious feeling that can tie together disparate, even contradictory, experiences, bodily sensations, feelings, and

[593] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank, 'Shame in the Cybernetic Fold: Reading Silvan Tomkins', *Critical Enquiry* 21, no. 2 (1995): 515–16.
[594] Sedgwick and Frank, 517.
[595] Schaefer, *Religious Affects*, 31.
[596] Sara Ahmed, 'Collective Feelings: Or, The Impressions Left by Others', *Theory, Culture & Society* 21, no. 2 (2004): 39, fn. 4.
[597] Naomi Irit Richman, 'What Does It *Feel* Like to Be Post-Secular?: Ritual Expressions of Religious Affects in Contemporary Renewal Movements', *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 79, no. 3 (2018): 301.
[598] Schaefer, *Religious Affects*, 51.
[599] Schaefer, 51–59. See also Pamela Klassen, 'Ritual', in *The Oxford Handbook of Ritual and Emotion*, ed. John Corrigan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 157–58.

thoughts.'[600] The relevance to conversion should be becoming clear at this point: I have insisted throughout this thesis that a full understanding of conversion will recognise the role the body plays in shaping human experience. More specifically, this theoretical background will form the basis of my arguments about the importance of community belonging, which I will argue is an affectively driven human need, capable of resonating with the affectivity of belief and contributing to conversion.

When introducing the importance of affect in religion, Schaefer focuses on fear. Fear is a basic emotion, rooted in the biology and evolutionary history of most or all animals and essential for survival. Fear 'is a universal aspect of embodied experience, an onto-phenomenological structure shared by all humans and most, if not all, animals.'[601] Fear is a biological and evolutionary technology which operates below the level of linguistic or cultural forces; it is a universal affective response established in animal biology, selected for because of its indispensable role in survival. However, the cross-species biological grounding of fear does not make the affect 'rigid or uniform'. Across species, the stimuli which provoke fear responses differ (humans fear dark spaces while rats fear illuminated spaces, for example). Similarly, within the human species, fear responses differ. Human affects such as fear can be mapped onto other cognitive, imaginative and affective forms, resulting in the diversity of human fear responses.[602] Thus, a universal human affect grounded in human biology and evolutionary history – in this case fear – can be experienced diversely, according to how this affect is socially, culturally and linguistically attached or transferred to other bodies, ideas, emotions, or feelings. The relevance to religion comes when Schaefer describes how religious practices and narratives can map the affect of fear onto various religious phenomena – such as eschatological models, or the combination of fear and wonder in the thought of Rudolf Otto.[603] Thus, these religious processes, 'piggybacking on the bodily technology of fear, continue to reverberate through contemporary Christian contexts, offering the durable raw materials for new regimes of political solidarity 2,000 years later.'[604] This is not to say that all religious fear is the same but rather that 'we all fear or have feared, and the reconfiguration of that fear can be accomplished using a set of practices that can span historical epochs'.[605]

What Schaefer does with fear, I intend to do with community belonging. It is my contention that the need to belong and experience positive social relationships is a deep and fundamental human need which is experienced as an affective drive towards the formation of communities and relationships. As we saw with the affect of fear, this does not mean that all humans will experience this need for community belonging in the same way and this need will be linguistically and culturally mediated; however, I argue that this is based on a

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[600] Ann Pellegrini, '"Signaling Through the Flames": Hell House Performance and Structures of Religious Feeling', *American Quarterly* 59, no. 3 (2007): 917.
[601] Schaefer, *Religious Affects*, 51.
[602] Schaefer, 52. See, for example, Sara Ahmed's description of this process occurring with regards to racism and the fear of immigrants and international terrorists in modern Western cultures, Ahmed, 'Collective Feelings'; Sara Ahmed, 'Affective Economies', *Social Text* 22, no. 2 (2004): 118–39.
[603] Schaefer, *Religious Affects*, 53–54.
[604] Schaefer, 53.
[605] Schaefer, 57.

shared affective reality, grounded in human biology and evolutionary history, which drives humans to form social bonds. I will thus argue that, in the sphere of religious life and conversion, community belonging is not just a means to other religious experiences (such as communal ritual) but is an ends in itself which motivates human behaviour. This will allow me to argue that the affectivity of community belonging is able to resonate with the affectivity of language and belief and thereby contribute to the conversion process.

How might we argue that the need for community belonging is a fundamental human affect? In making the case for fear, Schaefer cites Darwin, who 'identifies fear as a universal emotional response found across human cultures and nonhuman animal bodies',[606] along with research that finds the development of fear occurring early in the ontogenetic development of humans and other nonhuman animals. Further, fear 'was so evolutionarily important – an indispensable bodily technology – that it could not be left in the hands of learning mechanisms alone.'[607] The early ontogenetic development of fear in humans and its widespread presence across different cultures and species is evidence for Schaefer of fear's place as a basic affective driver of human behaviour. The evolutionary case lends support to this thesis: it is not difficult to imagine the survival benefits granted to those individuals with instinctive fears of various dangerous situations incorporated into their bodies. Instinctive, affective fear will save an individual from various environmental dangers, allowing it to pass on its genes to future generations. We should therefore expect fear to exist in human beings as an instinctive, bodily affect, rooted in human biology and evolutionary history.

Can the same sort of analysis be provided for my claim that the need for community belonging is a fundamental human affect, of the same order as fear, and not merely a desire that is learned wholly through sociocultural transmission? I argue that this kind of analysis is indeed possible. The high level of sociality among primates in general and *Homo sapiens* in particular is well-documented.[608] Across human cultures and across primate species, sociality is consistently observed. Moreover, this sociality occurs early in human child development. As Kristen Hawkes notes, 'investigators looking for social engagement and interactive participation in human infants find them soon after birth.'[609] Much more complex forms of social engagement can be observed in human children at two-and-a-half years of age, by which time they already outperform chimpanzees in social tasks.[610] This

[606] Schaefer, 51.
[607] Schaefer, 51–52.
[608] Kristen Hawkes, 'Primate Sociality to Human Cooperation: Why Us and Not Them?', *Human Nature* 25, no. 1 (2014): 28; Federica Amici and Anja Widdig, 'An Evolutionary Perspective on the Development of Primate Sociality', *Behavioural Ecology and Sociobiology* 73, no. 8 (2019): 115; Michael Tomasello and Malinda Carpenter, 'Shared Intentionality', *Developmental Science* 10, no. 1 (2007): 121–25; Lira Yu et al., 'Understanding Empathy from Interactional Synchrony in Humans and Non-Human Primates', in *Evolution of Primate Social Cognition*, ed. Laura Desirèe Di Paolo, Fabio Di Vincenzo, and Francesca De Petrillo (Cham: Springer, 2018), 47–58; Roy F. Baumeister and Mark R. Leary, 'The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation', *Psychological Bulletin* 117, no. 3 (1995): 497–529.
[609] Hawkes, 'Primate Sociality to Human Cooperation', 40.
[610] Francesca De Petrillo, Fabio Di Vincenzo, and Laura Desirèe Di Paolo, 'An Evolutionary Perspective on Primate Social Cognition', in *Evolution of Primate Social Cognition*, ed. Laura Desirèe Di Paolo, Fabio Di Vincenzo, and Francesca De Petrillo (Cham: Springer, 2018), 1–10.

sociality is neither rigid nor uniform, either between primate species or across human cultures. While bonobos and chimpanzees are both social primates, the form that this sociality takes differs between the two species: whereas bonobos are more egalitarian, exhibiting tolerance of strangers and high levels of xenophilia, chimpanzees are often highly suspicious of (and can be lethally violent towards) outsiders.[611] The sociality of different human cultures also show remarkable variation, as even the most cursory observation of global and history culture will reveal. This variability of sociality further supports my claim concerning the affectivity of the need for community belonging. As Schaefer notes, human affects are marked by 'a dynamic between the intransigence and the configurability of affects.'[612] Just as fear is an intransigent affect which can be mapped onto different human bodies in a variety of different ways, so can the need for community belonging be a universally felt need among humans (and perhaps all primates) but expressed and experienced differently according to the sociocultural situation.

Sociality is present across different primate species and human cultures, and emerges early in child development. There is also evidence that sociality was a trait selected for in the evolution of *Homo sapiens* and which therefore is present in modern human bodies, rooted in our shared biology and evolutionary history. Social attachment has been found to improve human health and wellbeing,[613] and its lack has a mortality risk factor in humans comparable to smoking, excessive alcohol consumption, or obesity.[614] This evidence from contemporary studies on humans suggest that, if social attachment has such a positive impact on human health and wellbeing, then we should expect sociality to be a trait selected for through human evolution. Those individuals with a deeply felt affective need for community belonging would have been more successful and able to pass on the genetic bases for these social characteristics. Brian Hare argues that modern humans were selected for their prosociality – that is, their willingness to help another individual at no obvious immediate benefit to themselves – because it allowed the development of more complex, uniquely human, forms of social cognition.[615] Eiluned Pearce offers various survival benefits that might have accrued to more social individuals early in hominin evolution. A wider circle of social contacts means that groups can gain a greater knowledge of resources, vital for survival during leaner times, and may be on friendlier terms with other groups, reducing the risk of conflict over resources. When conflicts do occur, the more social groups will have a wider range of supporters to call on and thus will more likely be successful. Greater sociality also makes groups less vulnerable to demographic instability since individuals can reproduce in a wider mating pool. Larger social groups are also at lesser risk of losing survival-

[611] Hawkes, 'Primate Sociality to Human Cooperation', 162–64.
[612] Schaefer, *Religious Affects*, 52.
[613] James A. Coan, 'Adult Attachment and the Brain', *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 27, no. 2 (2010): 210–17.
[614] Julianne Holt-Lunstad and Timothy B. Smith, 'Social Relationships and Mortality', *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 6, no. 1 (2012): 41–53.
[615] Brian Hare, 'Survival of the Friendliest: *Homo Sapiens* Evolved via Selection for Prosociality', *Annual Review of Psychology* 68 (2017): 165.

enhancing cultural innovations because such cultural knowledge can be spread more widely among the group and is not dependent on the survival of a small number of individuals.[616]

While sociality is a trait shared by humans and other primates alike, there are aspects of human sociality that are unique to *Homo sapiens*. Shared intentionality – the capacity for multiple individuals to perform a shared task within a common socio-linguistic context – is a specifically human trait.[617] While chimpanzees are capable of working together to achieve a desired goal, their projects remain individual goals for each chimpanzee, who simply reacts to the actions of other chimpanzees in the group to achieve its own ends. In contrast, humans can form shared goals as a group to which all members are collectively committed, whereby the collective goal exceeds the sum total of each individual's goal. Experiments show that, in contrast to chimpanzees, the pursuit of a shared task is itself intrinsically rewarding to human children, beyond any individually acquired material reward.[618] This suggests that, beyond mere sociality, the desire to be a part of the group and participate in shared experiences, projects and goals is a basic, affectively felt drive in human beings. The need for community belonging where individual members feel part of a single group with a collective purpose and identity is felt strongly in human beings, above and beyond the simple felt desire to live in close proximity to conspecifics (which exists in many mammal and bird species[619]). This felt need for community belonging perhaps arose in human evolutionary history as the development of in-group favouritism. Humans show a high degree of in-group favouritism across cultures which manifests both as an increased tolerance for insiders and an increased hostility towards nonconformists or out-group members; this in-group favouritism emerges early in human child development.[620] Hare argues that strong in-group favouritism enabled the development of egalitarian social structures capable of ostracising aggressive individuals who might seek to monopolise the group. Such behaviour gave *Homo sapiens* a competitive advantage over other groups who could not maintain egalitarian structures so easily. Thus, 'humans became kinder and crueler as a result of selection for intragroup prosociality.'[621] Thus, the need for community belonging – for being part of the in-group – was an evolutionarily advantageous trait which we should expect to find in modern humans.

The presence of sociality across different primate species and human cultures, as well as its early development in human infants, indicates the likelihood that sociality is a deeply rooted part of human biology. Primate sociality has given humans and other nonhuman primates a distinct evolutionary advantage and so this innate sociality has been inherited by modern primates, including humans. As Schaefer argues with fear, it is reasonable to suppose that a trait so important for the survival both of individuals and of the species as a whole would be grounded in affective bodily mechanisms, experienced affectively by human bodies as a felt

[616] Eiluned Pearce, 'Neanderthals and *Homo Sapiens*: Cognitively Different Kinds of Human?', in *Evolution of Primate Social Cognition*, ed. Laura Desirèe Di Paolo, Fabio Di Vincenzo, and Francesca De Petrillo (Cham: Springer, 2018), 181–96.
[617] Tomasello and Carpenter, 'Shared Intentionality', 121.
[618] Tomasello and Carpenter, 123–24.
[619] Coan, 'Adult Attachment and the Brain', 213.
[620] Hare, 'Survival of the Friendliest', 170.
[621] Hare, 172.

need to belong. Without a basic felt need for sociality, humans and other primates could not have survived the ever-changing and often threatening conditions through which they evolved. Further, humans feel a need not simply to socialise but to belong. Humans are not just social animals but animals which deeply desire and need to be part of a larger group or community. For humans, community belonging is inherently rewarding, even in the absence of further tangible benefits. This felt need to belong emerges early in child development and was a crucial factor in the evolutionary success of *Homo sapiens*.[622] We thus have ample evidence to support our thesis that the need for community belonging is a fundamental human affect, rooted in human biology and evolutionary history. The need to be part of the in-group drives human behaviour at a deep, subcutaneous level. The need to belong to a community is a powerful driving force in human belief and behaviour and can therefore help to explain why participation in a new religious community will contribute to and advance the conversion process, just by virtue of the fact of belonging.

The implication of this is that joining a religious community will go some way to satisfy the affective drive for community belonging – especially so when that individual is particularly socially isolated,[623] though not exclusively. Of course, if belonging is a deep affect as I have suggested, then it not does not necessarily need to be satisfied by religious belonging: any form of social engagement (a community of work colleagues, a sports team, a political party, etc.) could effectively provide satisfaction of this affective need. I am not intending here to argue that religious communities are the only places where this need for belonging can be met, and indeed it is part of my thesis that processes involved in religious conversion are similar to those involved in other significant worldview changes. However, religious communities do often provide a particularly strong form of belonging. We may recall McIntosh (and Macmuarry) arguing that there are two kinds of social group, those which exist for the sake of some other purpose, and those which exist for the sake of community and relationship, as an ends in themselves.[624] While I would want to resist such a strict dichotomy in this division of social groups (genuine friendships may develop amongst work colleagues or teammates which are sustained for their own sake, apart from their contribution to the group's explicit purpose), it is true that social groups exist along a spectrum of the level of belonging available. In terms of feeling understood, accepted and connected, some groups feel better to belong to than others. A family can (if it is functional and healthy) feel better to belong to than a group of work colleagues because it is capable of providing a deeper feeling of belonging. Baumeister and Leary found in their review of literature that the mere presence of social bonds alone does not satisfy the human need for belonging; rather, 'it appears that people require their primary social bonds to be characterized by affectively positive interactions that signify the other's affective concern.'[625] Thus, while any kind of belonging is better than no belonging, deeper belonging feels better and more effectively satisfies the affective need to belong. When a religious

[622] For a review of psychological literature on the need for belonging in humans, see Baumeister and Leary, 'The Need to Belong'.
[623] As is reflected in Lofland and Stark, 'Becoming a World-Saver', 872–73.
[624] McIntosh, 'Living Religion: The Fluidity of Practice', 386–87.
[625] Baumeister and Leary, 'The Need to Belong', 515.

group can provide this deep feeling of belonging to its members, a strong positive affect is generated – it feels good to belong in this deep sense. That is not to say that all religious groups do provide this feeling of belonging, nor that this is exclusive to religious communities, and there will be variations in how effectively different groups achieve this. Nevertheless, the intention of this chapter is to show that, when strong positive belonging is achieved, it generates a strong positive affective response in individuals. Hence, affect theory can fill the lacuna identified in current philosophical reflections on lived religion: along with all of the practice benefits provided by conversion, community belonging also satisfies a deep affective human need and there is experienced in concrete religious life as valuable in and of itself.

How does meeting the affective need to belong contribute to religious conversion? Belonging to a religious community is not to be equated with conversion to that religion, so the effect of the affectivity of belonging must extend beyond simply prompting individuals to join new religious communities. The thesis of this chapter is that there is something about belonging to a religious community in itself, beyond any further benefits or experiences that might be had within the community, which is capable of contributing to or precipitating a conversion. An argument for this thesis can now be made. An affective drive to belong also implies an affective drive to remain. If in-group favouritism exists as Hare describes, then the positive feeling of belonging to a community will be further augmented by the fear of being ostracised and so the affectivity of belonging will drive humans not simply to join communities but to want to stay in them. For humans, belonging to the group is inherently rewarding, beyond any specific rewards that the group might confer on its members. The affective drive to belong means that humans will not simply want to be part of a group but will find that they value the needs, values and goals of the group highly, perhaps more highly than their own. Where there is a conflict between self and group, the affectivity of belonging will favour the sacrificing of one's own needs for the benefit of the group. The insight of affect theory is that this does not ever need to reach conscious awareness but is rather felt in the body as an affective responsiveness to the relationship between self and group and the need to remain an insider. Experience tells us that being the only who believes or behaves differently to the majority can feel deeply uncomfortable – even when one is confident in one's own position.

The implication of this for conversion is that there is an unconscious, subcutaneous drive to remain an insider. This does not mean that humans are overwhelmed by and powerless in the face of their desire to conform – clearly people can resist the pull of the in-group and in some cases we would morally condemn those who cannot overcome the force of peer pressure.[626] However, it does imply that, where there is a conflict between one's own beliefs and those of the wider group (as may occur to a potential convert as they join a new religious community), the affectivity of belonging will cultivate a drive to change oneself. Again, it is important to resist a determinist reading of affect theory: the affectivity of belonging does not force potential converts to adopt the beliefs of their new communities

[626] Remember that Hare regarded in-group favouritism as the source of both human kindness and cruelty. Hare, 'Survival of the Friendliest', 172.

but it does alter the affective landscape within which decisions about beliefs and behaviour are made.

I propose two ways in which this works. First, the affectivity of belonging makes it much more difficult to reject the beliefs of the group one belongs to. While rejecting the belief of one's community is clearly not impossible,[627] the affective drive to belong creates a greater affective hurdle which needs to be overcome. Dissent has a greater affective cost than consent because it must overcome a biologically and evolutionarily rooted felt need to belong. It is notable that when individuals do leave a religious community, they often leave the group before they experience their beliefs changing. It is much easier to resist religious beliefs once one is no longer participating in the religious community.[628] Therefore, joining a new religious community changes the affective calculus for a potential convert. The beliefs, worldview and identity of the new community are mapped onto the affective desire to belong and so are much easier for the potential convert to believe in. This also helps to explain conversion experiences whereby people lose their religious identity, what Gooren calls religious disaffiliation. As Callum Brown has observed, religious disaffiliation during the latter half of the twentieth century was linked to people's increased feelings of alienation from churches. This alienation was often linked to disagreements over issues of lifestyle, morality, or social causes and resulted in individuals leaving these communities.[629] Gooren, in his analysis of disaffiliation narratives, notes that, for all the cases he reviewed, 'religious socialization was typically weak'.[630] When someone stops participating in a religious community, belief quickly falls away because the affective drive to conform is weakened. Equally, it is easier to stop participating in a community when one feels that they no longer belong – perhaps because of a divergence over some important moral issue – and so the affective hurdle to leaving and disbelieving is much reduced.

Second, joining a new religious community changes the affective salience of certain beliefs, worldviews, and identities. If belonging responds to a deeply felt affective need and humans experience an unconscious affective drive to conform with the group, then the beliefs of any group of which I am a member will take on a much greater affective salience than the beliefs of other groups. The beliefs of my group matter because doxastic conformity is an easily recognisable measure of belonging. Disagreements within the community will feel like they matter because they threaten to undermine the feeling of belonging or even invoke the fear of ostracisation. It might be noted that my argument about community does not take much notice of the role of teaching or catechism in religious conversion, whereby the importance of community is understood as the context in which teaching occurs. This is partly because, as I have argued in earlier chapters, doctrinal teaching is not a universal feature of religion but mostly a feature of Western Christianity. However, an expanded notion of teaching could encompass both doctrinal instruction and other forms of non-propositional teaching whereby community members are inducted into rituals and spiritual

[627] See the various accounts presented in Brown, *Becoming Atheist*; and Gooren, *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation*, 102–10.
[628] Lofland and Stark, 'Becoming a World-Saver', 872–73.
[629] Brown, *Becoming Atheist*, 36–41.
[630] Gooren, *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation*, 110.

activities, leaving the question of teaching a relevant one for conversion. The reason I have not focused on community as a context for teaching is that, in order for any teaching to contribute to a conversion process, the convert must recognise the teaching as important for them. Teaching can either be engaged with and responded to or ignored; understanding the affectivity of belonging can help us to explain both the efficacy and inefficacy of teaching. Belonging to a group changes the landscape of affective salience. If I am a member of a community, then the teaching of the community leaders feels important. This does not mean that I will accept it by default but it does mean that I will feel that this teaching is, as something to engage with and take seriously. For conversion, then, we can say that the affectivity of belonging means that joining a new religious community gives the beliefs of the new community (both taught and not) a greater affective salience for the potential convert which, combined with the affective drive to conform, can contribute to and precipitate the process of conversion.

One possible objection to my account is that many people apparently manage to convert without being part of a community. There are numerous stories of individuals who spend time reading about a religion, convert, and only then seek out a local religious community to join.[631] These cases would appear to contradict my argument that joining a new religious community is not simply a consequence of conversion but an integral part of the conversion process. This is clearly a challenge and we must recognise that community will play a more central role in some conversions than others. However, in response to this objection, we must remember that conversions are not one-off events but long-term processes. If this is true, then we cannot understand these intellectual conversions simply in terms of one moment of intellectual transformation. Indeed, what is perhaps more notable in these cases is that these intellectual converts then seek out a community, recognising that their conversion cannot be sustained in isolation (as the story of Tui at the start of the chapter illustrates). While journeys of individual intellectual discovery are undoubtedly an important part of some religious conversions, I contend that, if such a conversion is to be sustained, religious community will play a central role.

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has been to explore the role that religious community plays in the conversion process and argue that joining a community is not something that people do once they have converted but is rather a crucial part of the conversion process. My intention has been to push back against a more individualistic examination of conversion and identify the religious community as a central element to conversion. While conversion can often be presented as an experience of individual transformation, I argue that it is in fact best understood as a social transformation, wherein a change in an individual's social world alters how that individual interprets and understands the world and their place within it. Joining a new religious community (or changes which can happen within one's existing

[631] See, for example, van Nieuwkerk's discussion of intellectual converts to Islam. Van Nieuwkerk, '"Conversion" to Islam and the Construction of a Pious Self', 671–72. This is born out in, for example, Gooren, *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation*, 82.

community) are thus an integral part of the conversion process itself and not a social afterthought to an essentially individual process.

The substance of this argument is that religious communities engage in a bodily way with their members, acting on and through their perception and affectivity. Human beings are engaged and invested in the world through their bodies; communities can become a part of this embodied world engagement and in so doing change how the world is experienced. A religious community becomes an important social world for its members, experienced perceptually, affectively, linguistically, and interpersonally. It is capable of shaping the perceptual structure and affective framework of an individual's world, both of which play into the processes of belief formation. In this chapter, we have explored how this works through analyses of ritual and the affective need to belong. Ritual works through the prenoetic and anticipatory structures of perception to induce emotional mimesis in ritual participants and imaginatively invest the world with meaning. By co-opting mechanisms by which the human body builds and engages with its world, rituals can change how someone feels and what they perceive in the world. Further, the simple fact of belonging to a community is inherently rewarding for human beings; this fundamental need to belong is a subcutaneous affective driver of human activity which rewards compliance with a community's beliefs and behaviours. While this does not amount to a determinism of community, the affectivity of belonging shifts the affective momentum towards pro-communality, rewarding compliance and creating affective hurdles to dissent. The process of conversion – of aligning one's worldview and identity with that of the new community – is affectively rewarding and so being part of a community can both precipitate and contribute to conversion.

Throughout this chapter I have sought to strike a balance between the need to articulate the force that communities can exert over their members and, conversely, to avoid presenting an overly deterministic picture of community. It is important that the effect which a community has on the beliefs, worldviews and identities of its members is neither over nor understated and achieving such a balance is a demanding task. On the one hand, an individual's social world is an integral part of their existence and the communities to which they belong are powerful influences in their life. On the other hand, it is undeniable that people do dissent from their communities and such dissent can be the driving force behind schisms, reformations and revolutions – as well as being transformative for an individual's life. A successful account of the role of community in conversion must be able to account for both the power of the community and the ability of the individual to resist. In order to achieve this balance, we must remain mindful of two important facts. First, communities are not institutions. While religious communities can often overlap to a great degree with religious institutions, we should avoid equating the two. Various social groups can exist among the affiliates of a religion, and the beliefs of these various social groups can diverge from institutional doctrine. For example, the Catholic Church's teaching on contraception is not accepted by all Catholics. In these situations, it would be a mistake to simply equate an individual's religious community with the institution with which they are affiliated. Rather, the relevant religious community might be a local church, or even a subgroup within the local church, whose members hold different beliefs to the Vatican. This

chapter concerns social groups rather than institutions. While the institution is an important factor in determining the beliefs of the group, I argue that it is the beliefs of a person's social group which has the powerful belief-forming effect described in this chapter. If we recognise this distinction between community and institution, this will help us to avoid positing a model whereby someone who begins attending a Catholic Church will inevitably become a Catholic. The way in which an individual joins a community and the kinds of social contacts they build will influence the feelings and beliefs which that individual develops.

Second, community is not the only influence on an individual's beliefs and behaviour. While this chapter analyses the specific role of community in conversion, it is not intended to present community as the sole influence on an individual. An individual's personal history and prior beliefs are important factors in determining how someone responds to a new community, as are other affective drives which influence human action (such as fear, as outlined by Schaefer). Further, a new religious community is not (or is rarely) the only form of social belonging that a potential convert has, and these multiplate belongings will often be in tension with each other. It is pertinent to remember the man described in Lofland & Starke who initially showed interest in the D.P. but fell away due to the reluctance of his wife. This chapter has not intended to map out the various specific social attachments which can affect an individual's religious identity – such a project would depend on empirical sociological research and would fall outside the remit of this thesis. Rather, we have in this chapter presented a philosophical argument for the power of community in driving religious belief and behaviour which I suggest can help to illuminate research into the more specific influences of different kinds of sociality on religious affiliation. Religious communities are an especially powerful driver of human action and as such their role in conversion is worthy of examination. However, they are neither the only social input that most potential converts will experience, nor the only influence on their members' beliefs and behaviours. Thus, we can simultaneously hold that communities exert a powerful influence over their members and that membership of a community does not inexorably lead to conversion.

Nevertheless, I maintain that community is necessary for conversion, even if conversions depend on additional conditions being met. I do this to avoid understating the role that communities play in conversion and it is a contention of this thesis that, if a conversion is to take place, it must be supported by a community. Conversions may appear to happen to individuals but in fact they happen to individuals who are always already enmeshed in a particular social world. Even William James, who defines religion in exclusively individualist terms from the outset, cannot help but mention the social context of his conversion case studies. While the social world does not have the power to absolutely determine the course of a conversion, it is capable of exerting a strong influence of the mechanisms of belief formation in an individual's body and in this way contributes to the process of conversion.

Conclusion

As this thesis reaches its conclusion, we can review what has been achieved. First, we have identified a conception of religious conversion that is empirically and historically accurate, and which can become a useful object of philosophical reflection. While this conception is not novel to conversion studies, it has been missing from philosophical analyses of conversion which often continue to work with an outdated and empirically inaccurate conception of conversion. As we saw in chapter one, the concept of conversion has its roots in Christian thought and a recognisable modern use of the concept began to emerge initially in post-Reformation Europe and then more substantially in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century North America. This conceptual history has impeded previous philosophical studies into conversion, which have tended to adopt an individualistic and event-based model. This is no better exemplified than by William James, whose *Varieties of Religious Experience* set the trajectory for twentieth- and twenty-first-century conversion studies. Consequently, philosophical reflections on conversion have been limited by this modern Western Protestant conceptualisation of conversion which does not accurately capture the experiences of the majority of global converts and occludes important aspects of the conversion process even for those within the modern Western Protestant framework. By developing Henri Gooren's conversion careers approach, this thesis has been able to conceptualise conversion in a way which does not restrict the experience to a one-off event with the individual at the centre. By recognising that conversion is a process which takes place over a period of months or years (and within a lifelong conversion career), we have been able to include the social setting and personal history of a convert in our philosophical analysis. Thus, in our attempt to reflect phenomenologically on conversion, it has not been possible to isolate a single event or experience as the locus of phenomenological reflection. Phenomenological analysis of conversion cannot take place if it is extracted from a more general phenomenological analysis of human perception, affectivity, and belief-formation. As a result, this thesis has resituated religious conversion in its embodied, expressive, and social setting. Consequently, we have been able, through phenomenological methods, to examine how embodied, expressive, and social factors influence human belief-formation and what role they play in conversion. While our recontextualisation of conversion is not original in conversion studies, its translation into philosophy of religion has made possible an embodied and extended phenomenology of conversion which is sensitive to the historical and cultural contingencies of the concept of conversion yet still able to explore those universal features of human being that can initiate and propel religious conversion across diverse cultures and history.

Second, I have in Maurice Merleau-Ponty introduced a philosopher whose work can be a fruitful resource for the study of religious conversion – and religion more broadly. Of course, I am not the first to use Merleau-Ponty in philosophy of religion; however, my engagement with Merleau-Ponty diverges in some important ways from current philosophy of religion literature. My thesis has resisted the urge to theologise Merleau-Ponty's philosophy and has instead sought to use Merleau-Ponty's thought as a resource for understanding how humans perceive and respond to the world – including the variety of religious and spiritual responses across global history and culture. At the same time, my thesis does not use

Merleau-Ponty simply as a jumping-off point for a more general discussion about embodiment but rather treats Merleau-Ponty as a philosopher whose broader philosophical project is relevant for understanding religion. Merleau-Ponty was a philosopher deeply interested in the human disciplines but never in thrall to them. Thus, he was able to engage with research in psychology, biology, linguistics, and child development without any one of these disciplines becoming a reductionist or determinist principle. For Merleau-Ponty, human perception was, first and foremost, an experience of wonder at an endlessly fecund world which always has more to offer than can be perceived by any one situated individual. Merleau-Ponty did not spiritualise this insight, as some subsequent commentators have done, but found it to be a guiding principle in recognising the limits of human perception and reason. It is for this reason that Merleau-Ponty can be such a useful resource for philosophy of religion. His interest in empirical human sciences derives from a recognition that human beings are embodied animals, whose subjectivity is situated in a material, fleshly world. This means that research from more empirically minded disciplines need not be antithetical to phenomenological research. Once we recognise that our essential embodiment and embeddedness is both the enabling and limiting factor of human subjectivity, then it follows that research into the material world in which we live will be able to offer insights for philosophy. At the same time, Merleau-Ponty's philosophy does not allow for any reduction of subjectivity or consciousness to mere material causes. Merleau-Ponty's philosophy (and especially his ontology) is not so much a relegation of the mental and subjective as it is an elevation of the physical and objective. For Merleau-Ponty, physicality is no barrier to mentality or subjectivity and so human consciousness is not threatened by empirical research into the brain. For philosophy of religion, this is of immense importance. For a project like mine, striking the balance between understanding why human beings are religious without thereby reducing religion to some psychological and physiological cause is a difficult balancing act. By challenging the ontology whereby a physical cause is by definition not a mental cause, Merleau-Ponty opens the way for an examination of how religion interacts with the bodies of its adherents without this necessarily leading to dismissing religion as coercive or self-deceptive.

Third, this thesis demonstrates how a philosophy of embodiment can help us to understand the process of conversion. One of Merleau-Ponty's major insights is that the human subject is an embodied subject and that the body is a structuring horizon of human perception and action. In this thesis I have taken this philosophy of embodiment, along with more recent research from cognitive science, to articulate the embodied belief-forming context within which conversions take place. In particular, Shaun Gallagher's research into the prenoetic factors which influence human subjectivity has provided a more sophisticated psychological and biological framework for understanding how human experience is shaped by the fact of its embodiment. The importance of embodiment to this thesis is thus not just the insight that conversion is affected by embodiment (a fact already recognised in current research) but that conversion is first and foremost a process which takes place in the body – a body which is materially, historically, linguistically, and socially situated. This conception of conversion as a process *of* the body has allowed us to develop an affective theory of belief which does not only replace propositionalism with dispositionalism but also describes the

fundamental affectivity of human belief and belief-formation. This affective theory of belief has enabled us to outline the affective threads linking body, language, ritual, community, and belief. Conversions are initiated through material and embodied phenomena which then resonate along these affective threads within a convert's body, reinforcing each other and driving changes in belief. Thus, our conclusion about embodiment is not just the conclusion *that* conversion is affected by embodiment but a distinctive articulation of *how* the fact of human embodiment affects the conversion process.

Further, my account of embodiment does not end with Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* and Gallagher's account of prenoetics. Rather, in chapter three I followed the progression of Merleau-Ponty's thought to its later ontological formulation. This is crucial because, without a reconceptualisation of our Cartesian ontological heritage, a philosophy of embodiment is essentially a philosophy of the body acting on the mind. Within a Cartesian ontology, it is impossible to introduce notions such as embodiment, affect, or emotion into the study of religion without these concepts appearing to come into conflict with ideas of human reason and freedom. By developing my analysis of conversion from within Merleau-Ponty's ontology of flesh, it has been possible to recognise the embodiment and affectivity of religious conversion without this automatically rendering it irrational or unfree. Questions about human freedom and authenticity still remain, and we will take a closer look at these issues below. However, while Merleau-Ponty's ontology does not answer all of these questions, it provides a framework within which future research may be pursued. An ontology of flesh precludes any move that would find in the body something necessarily irrational or inauthentic because it recognises that all of human rationality and authenticity is by necessity embodied. There can be no physicalist reductionism for an ontology of flesh because the physical is not conceptually separated from the subjective or the mental. My proposals concerning the embodied affective networks through which the processes of conversion operate have been made within this alternative framework and so resist a simple reduction to materialism or determinism. I have thus been able to present conversion as fundamentally a process of the body while leaving questions around freedom and authenticity open.

Finally, this thesis has developed a philosophical analysis of three important factors in religious conversion: expression, ritual, and the affective need to belong. The thread that has run throughout these analyses has been affectivity – the affectivity of the beliefs which change in conversion and the affective capacity of expression, ritual and belonging to instigate belief change. As described above, our philosophy of embodiment has allowed us to reconceptualise the notion of belief, finding it to be fundamentally non-propositional, dispositional, and affective. It follows that belief change (conversion) is in essence to do with the acquisition of new dispositions and feelings, rather than the articulation of new propositions. Earlier, we noted that our analysis of embodiment allowed us to outline the affective threads through which the processes of conversion operate; in chapters four and five we paid close attention to three factors which are particularly important parts of this affective network: expression, ritual, and the affective need to belong.

Our close analysis of the affectivity of expression, ritual and belonging in the embodied process of conversion reveals two important implications. First, it means that the factors involved in conversion do not work in isolation but can resonate with one another to hasten or strengthen the conversion process. All three of these factors are affective processes working in the same body and so we should expect the affective work of one to resonate with and support the affective work of the others. Expressing new ideas has an affective force and can contribute to belief change; however, if I not only express new ideas but also participate in new rituals and a new community which aligns with these new ideas, I will not experience three separate affective influences but one multimodal affective experience, the three elements of which are mutually supportive. The new beliefs which might emerge from my new expression are felt to be all the more plausible because they resonate with other feelings I am having through my participation in new rituals and a new community.

This shows the importance of treating conversion as a process which occurs to a whole human body. Such an approach is particularly important because it also allows the recognition that affective drives do not always point in the same direction. For example, a potential convert may be a member of multiple communities which affectively pull in different directions, or they may have personal relationships outside of the new religious community which hold a strong affective sway. Equally, the affective factors of conversion are not limited to the three discussed in this thesis. We may also note the influence that personal history, cultural values, or rational deliberation, among others, might have in creating affective drives which might either complement or contradict those experienced in the new religious community. This allows us to analyse the factors involved in conversion without this analysis becoming deterministic. By recognising that there are multiple affective drivers which can either combine with or contradict each other, we recognise that no one factor can ever have absolute power over an individual. At the same time, we can take note of the strong (but not irresistible) power that these affective drives do have. In so doing, we are also able to account for differences between people without minimising the power of expression, ritual and belonging. These three factors will affect different people in different ways – in some it will result in conversion while in others it will not. While expression, ritual and belonging are important bodily affects, the particularities of the body on which they are acting is also important and forms the context within which any belief change might occur.

At the same time, while I recognise that expression, ritual and belonging are not the only factors involved in conversion and also that the particularities of the individual to whom these experiences occur is important, I maintain that there is value in focusing our analysis specifically on expression, ritual and belonging, as this thesis has done. This is partly because, among the many affective forces which act upon human bodies, these three are particularly strong and so a good starting point for any analysis of human belief formation. It is also because, despite the caveats above that the three do not always work in concert, in processes of conversion they often do. The regularity with which expression, ritual and belief affectively pull in the same direction is due to the fact that, together, they make up three important elements of religious community. As mentioned at the end of chapter four, religious communities are rarely just linguistic communities but also affective and ritual

communities and so when someone joins a new religious community it is common for the affective influences of expression, ritual and belonging to change at the same time and in the same direction. Therefore, it is likely that joining a new religious community will result in a strong multimodal affective pull towards the beliefs, worldview and identity of the new community, even if we accept that this pull is never utterly irresistible.

The preceding leads to the second implication, that the processes of conversion are the same processes as those of religion. I have commented throughout this thesis that religious participation is not a consequence of conversion but rather a contributing factor. This means that a person does not convert and then seek out a new religious community but rather, by joining a new religious community, begins a process of conversion. Hence, we should not draw a sharp distinction between insiders and outsiders in religion. The processes of conversion which we have discussed in this thesis also work on lifelong religious adherents, often to keep them within their community. The affective background which drives religious belonging, behaviour and belief does not just have to be created for new converts but also must be sustained for existing religious practitioners because, as we have discussed above, this affective background is susceptible to erosion from other affective forces. In my critique of Mark Wynn in chapter one I asked, if religious conversion can renew the senses, what sustains this renewal? My thesis proposes an answer to this question: religious conversion can be sustained over long periods of time because the processes which precipitate conversion are the same processes as those which sustain a person's religious worldview and identity. This idea is reflected in Gooren's notion of conversion careers, according to which the process of conversion is never complete but involves people moving into, out of, and between religions throughout their lifetime. Religious participation and adherence is not static but rather a continual process where the means of entry are also the means of continued participation; the model of religious conversion outlined in this thesis reflects this. This thesis focuses on a shorter time period, encompassing the entry (or exit) of an individual to a group over a period of months of years but it should be remembered that this process occurs within the context of a whole lifetime, or conversion career. Our analysis recognises that conversion is never finished but that the affective processes involved in religious conversion are also the affective processes of religion itself which will continue to operate after a conversion has ostensibly been completed, and which are subject to change over the course of a convert's life.

At this point I raise one note of caution: this thesis does not purport to present a *model* of conversion, which would outline an ideal progression of an individual through certain stages of conversion or articulate a fully comprehensive account of all the factors which have a bearing on conversion. Importantly, this means that this thesis has not attempted to map out every possible influence on conversion processes and, while I contend that all conversions will involve some configuration of expression, ritual and belief, these three alone should not be taken as holding full explanatory power for any or all cases of conversion. Rather, these three factors have been singled out for analysis because they are particularly powerful affective forces which regularly coalesce around conversion. If we understand how expression, ritual and belief work affectively on bodies then we will understand much more clearly how and why people convert – and how religion works in

general – even if there is more of this story to tell. I have already identified personal history, cultural values, and rational deliberation as other potentially important factors in conversion which have remained unexamined in this thesis and which would benefit from further research. Nevertheless, my choice of expression, ritual and belonging as the three loci around which to analyse conversion is not an arbitrary one. While other factors are certainly deserving of research, I have focused on these three because of the widespread and fundamental role they play in conversion. Where other affective factors are found to play an important role in conversion for certain individuals, it will be necessary to articulate how such factors interact with expression, ritual and belonging, as well as how they engage human affectivity and belonging more generally.

Freedom

The above considerations have raised the question of freedom in conversion and it is at this point that we can begin to offer some tentative suggestions concerning any normative evaluation we might make about conversion.[632] As we suggested at the end of the last section, our embodied conception of conversion, understood within the context of physical subjectivity and Merleau-Ponty's ontology of flesh, offers a response to the critic of religion who would dismiss religion or conversion as simply manipulation: by engaging the embodied or affective aspects of human experience, religion is in fact no different from any other experience. This response is sufficient to rule out a wholesale rejection of religion; however, our critic may respond by arguing that, while engaging the affective and embodied responses of human beings does not itself make religion manipulative, the fact remains that some (or even many) religions engage in affective practices in such a way as to make them manipulative. It is certainly true that, while all experiences are embodied, some are more visceral than others and we might expect an emotionally intense revivalist meeting to exert more influence over an individual's body (and beliefs) than a quieter and more measured service. In this case, our critic makes a good point: while affectivity and embodiment cannot be considered universally exploitative or malicious, neither can they be considered universally benign.

This question of freedom is not simply a matter of defending religion from its critics: religious practitioners and theologians will be concerned about their own practices and those of others. At what point does another sect or denomination within one's own religion become a dangerous cult? Where is the line to be drawn between charismatic renewal and emotional hype or manipulation? For academic researchers of religion, who perhaps have an interest to avoid interfering with or casting judgements on the beliefs and practices of the peoples they study, the question of freedom is essential if they are to be able to articulate the difference between free expression and oppressed groups. Outside the domain of religion narrowly defined, this question of freedom is important in understanding and responding to extreme political ideologies. In the context of, for example, far right or Islamic extremism, this question of freedom will be instrumental in both developing ways of responding to these kinds of threats as well as attributing moral culpability for

[632] This section on freedom is adapted from a recent paper of mine. Williams, 'Maurice Merleau-Ponty and the Philosophy of Religion'.

radicalisation. These examples demonstrate the complexity of this problem: the world contains people who will use human affectivity and embodiment to create cults or spread extremist ideology; it also contains those who will use affective and embodied techniques for their own spiritual development or free religious expression. Providing a definitive answer to this question of freedom is beyond the scope of this thesis; however, I hope that the research presented here offers some philosophical resources for understanding these issues and conceptual clarity for future research. I will finish by offering some initial suggestions as to how we might move forward.[633]

We have already suggested that a resolution to the question of freedom will require an ontological reformulation of the kind we outlined in chapter three. My contention is that the question of freedom arises whenever we have adopted an implicitly dualist ontology. The question of freedom reflects a concern that I will no longer be responsible for my actions: my real or genuine self is somehow controlled or affected by external forces beyond my rational control which lead me to make decisions or judgements that I would otherwise not have made.[634] Hence, the impact of religious rituals or intense emotions on my body is regarded as a threat to my freedom because they cause me to do things which, in their absence, I would not rationally have chosen to do. Adopting a philosophy of embodiment is not enough to overcome this concern, since recognising the impact of the fact of my embodiment does not equate with endorsing it. This can create a deeply intellectualist approach to religion which accepts that the body can play a role in religious formation but insists that a truly free human being ought to be able to overcome these effects. Any religious belief or action influenced by embodied factors (which, as we have seen, includes every religious belief or action) becomes tainted as not genuine: I am either the victim of manipulation or engaging in self-deception.[635]

The problem here is that Cartesian ontologies do not deal well with freedom. Freedom is threatened when the actor ceases to be responsible for their actions: I am not free if I am not the author of my own decisions. This is what drives the fear of manipulation, that I will end up affirming a God in whom I did not believe because of some external affectively charged factor. This notion of freedom is based on a view of the authentic self, that there is some real "me" in the driving seat who should be making my free decisions. For a substance dualist, this is the immaterial soul which is rendered unfree when it is overpowered by anything external to it. At first glance, physicalism seems to avoid this problem since it rejects the notion of an immaterial soul which would treat influence from the body or world

[633] As Pamela Klassen notes, expressions of emotion in religion have traditionally been dismissed as primitive. Our task is to overcome this bias without overlooking the ways in which emotion and affect can be used to manipulate. Klassen, 'Ritual', 144–45.

[634] See Klassen's discussion of ritual and authenticity. Klassen, 151–53.

[635] See, for example, Jones, 'Religious Conversion, Self-Deception, and Pascal's Wager'. Jones is concerned with the question of whether Pascal's Wager is an exercise in self-deception. For Pascal, those convinced by his argument should go to church in order that they may develop dispositions conducive to Christian belief. For Jones, self-deception is linked with irrationality, so knowingly choosing to go to church in order to change one's beliefs through a non-rational process is self-deception. While Jones claims to save Pascal from this fate, this is achieved only by invoking the grace of God as the ultimate cause of conversion, relegating non-rational factors to the status of minor, insufficient causes.

as entirely foreign to the acting subject. However, to avoid falling into determinism, an alternative conception of freedom, other than the freedom from external influence, must be articulated. The authentic self is thus recast as the rational self and nonrational interference is regarded as unfree. Thus, for the compatibilist, freedom is still a case of rational decision making. While this view might be able to accommodate the fact that our rational decisions are affected (even determined) by the atoms in our brains, the idea that I might train my body to believe something I did not previously believe is still rejected as coercive.[636] However a dualist tries to account for freedom, as soon as the human subject is affected by their body or the material world (i.e., as soon as they enter the world), their freedom is compromised.

If the problem of freedom is rooted in an implicitly dualist ontology, then the solution is to reimagine ontology; I propose this can be achieved with Merleau-Ponty's ontology of flesh discussed in chapter three. With an ontology of flesh, the aforementioned problems disappear. From the perspective of flesh, there is no conflict between the ego's freedom and the effect of their embodiment because, at this most basic level, they are one and the same thing. The ego *is* the body; the body does not restrict freedom but rather is the condition of the possibility of freedom. The idea that the world can threaten the freedom of the human subject makes no sense when we consider that the human subject *is* the world. This means that, for an ontology of flesh, freedom cannot be based on an authentic self. From the perspective of flesh, this idea is meaningless since I am continuous with the world: there is no clear demarcation between what is authentically me and what is external. The divergence I experience between myself and the world is not a fundamental difference and so it is not possible to distinguish between my own rational actions and the irrational material effects of the physical world. Hence, there can be no separating my own actions from the effects of the world – they become one and the same thing. While the inseparability of my own actions from the world might seem to undermine freedom, it in fact makes it possible. Rather than seeing the body as something which restricts freedom, we should rather see it as the condition of the possibility of freedom: without my body, I cannot act at all. The body is that which opens up possibilities for me and through which I act. Certainly, the body sets limitations on my actions; however, this is less a limitation and more a horizon of possibility, within which I am free to act.

This analysis of the body's role in freedom is something Merleau-Ponty recognises as early as the *Phenomenology of Perception* and does not yet take us much further in overcoming the problems that embodiment causes freedom.[637] While the body on this analysis is no longer antagonistic to freedom, we are not much further than a Sartrean conception of radical freedom tempered by an embodied articulation of facticity: that is, we might accept that free actions require a body and that this also means we do not have utterly unfettered

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[636] See, for example, P. F. Strawson, 'Freedom and Resentment', in *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays* (London: Routledge, 2008), 1–28; Daniel C. Dennett, *Elbow Room: The Varieties of Freedom Worth Wanting* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984). For the alternative, incompatibilist side of this debate, see Peter van Inwagen, 'The Incompatibility of Free Will and Determinism', *Philosophical Studies* 27, no. 3 (1975): 185–99; Derk Pereboom, 'Determinism al Dente', *Noûs* 29, no. 1 (1995): 21–45.

[637] *PhP*, 100–48.

freedom (I cannot fly because it is a limitation of my body, for example); however, in determining how we wish to use our bodies and deciding what projects we will undertake, the old dualist conception of freedom remains. For Sartre, authenticity comes from taking full responsibility for one's actions; while the body might be a limiting factor in what actions are possible to perform, claiming that one's actions are affected by one's embodiment – or worse, attempting to manipulate one's own body in order to create alternative desires, beliefs or actions – is bad faith.[638] Embodiment must be understood from the perspective of flesh in order to overcome this egocentricism and rationalism in freedom. The radically free authentic self cannot exist from the perspective of flesh since there is no way to draw a boundary between what is a free and authentic decision of the self and what is inauthentically influenced by the body or external world. The self which we experience is derived from the flesh. This means that non-rational influences which affect how we think (such as hormone levels, blood pressure, ambient temperature, and so on) are inextricably linked to the experience of the self. This deciding ego cannot be separated from the extra-ego factors which influence it because, without these, the ego would not exist. If freedom means freedom from external influence, then there can be no action at all. This does not mean that coercion or manipulation is not possible – we might want to maintain, for example, that using a psychoactive substance to make someone believe something they would normally deny is manipulative and undermines their freedom.[639] However, what it does mean is that rationality is not the measure of freedom and the irrational body can (indeed must) be involved in free acts.

The upshot is that, from the perspective of flesh, religious practice cannot be cast as necessarily manipulative or self-deceptive. A decision or belief which is based on or influenced by affective physical stimuli is no less rational for it; indeed, human rationality is grounded in physicality – no decision, however apparently rational or scientific, can be extracted from its physical and affective context. We can see the payoff of this view by considering Clare Carlisle's recent work on habit. In a 2013 paper, Carlisle argues for the importance of habit in understanding human religion and brings recent work in cognitive science into conversation with historical theologians. In her article, Carlisle notes two perennial but profoundly different responses to habit: positively, habit enables spiritual training and the development of moral virtues; negatively, habit undermines human freedom and authenticity.[640] Carlisle finds herself drawn to a more positive conception of habit since 'it allows us to think of human freedom as situated in communal forms of life, as embodied in routines and rituals and practices, as continuous with the natural world, as embedded within history'.[641] This is where Merleau-Ponty's ontology of flesh can deliver. The threat to freedom which habit seems to pose is based on a fundamentally Cartesian

[638] *BN*, 70–94.
[639] Equally, asking a hypnotist to make me believe something which I know not to be true does appear to be self-deception. Bernard Williams, 'Deciding to Believe', in *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 149–50; Barbara Winters, 'Believing at Will', *The Journal of Philosophy* 76, no. 5 (1979): 248–49.
[640] Clare Carlisle, 'The Question of Habit in Theology and Philosophy: From Hexis to Plasticity', *Body & Society* 19, no. 2–3 (2013): 49.
[641] Carlisle, 50.

ontology. Habit works on the unconscious physical responses of the human body and as such seems to stand in contrast to rational human freedom. From the perspective of flesh, however, there is no difference between an action which is performed out of habit and one which is performed out of rational deliberation. Both are physical processes which involve interaction between brain, body, world, and the bodies of others. Habit might work below the level of conscious awareness but this does not make it any less free. Indeed, the language of freedom in this context is misleading, suggesting as it does an external force which can compel action and thus undermine freedom.

Merleau-Ponty can thus help us to articulate a conception of habit which does not reject it as amoral and antithetical to freedom. A human being may freely choose to exploit the physical, affective, and habitual capacities of her body to pursue projects that would otherwise be closed off. This is the same technique adopted by, for example, a virtuoso pianist, for whom habit and practice are essential in opening up new projects and possibilities. It is also the approach taken by a religious practitioner – a Christian monk in the mystical tradition, for example – to open up spiritual projects and possibilities denied to the uninitiated novice. This, then, offers the beginnings of a normative evaluation of conversion: with an ontology of flesh, we can articulate a notion of free manipulation of the body, whereby an individual can exploit the capacities and predispositions of their body in order to achieve a desired outcome. Without an ontology of flesh, this kind of activity will be denounced as bad faith. This implies a certain conception of freedom in belief which will itself have epistemological implications. The traditional view is that we cannot choose what we believe: beliefs come to us based on the evidence of reason and our senses, and we cannot deny their force. This kind of epistemology is present in the scientific method: the scientist must follow the evidence. This is not simply a procedural point – we are not saying that the scientist *ought* to believe according to the evidence. Rather, a good scientist who understands what they see and all the relevant theories and methodologies *cannot but* believe according to the evidence. Belief, on this view is not in the gift of the believer. Belief comes to us whether we like it or not and we do not decide what we believe.[642] Hence, a committed religious practitioner who becomes sceptical about their religion cannot make themselves believe, however much they might like to. Our approach to freedom within an ontology of flesh questions the universal applicability of this kind of epistemology. Clearly, in some cases, one *can* choose what to believe. That is, by engaging in the practice, one is able to modify one's beliefs. This does not mean that I can choose to believe something new, simply by fiat. Nevertheless, our religious doubter may indeed be able to make themselves believe again if they are able to find the right kind of affective practice that could reconfigure their plausibility structure towards religious belief.

This conclusion will be no surprise to many religious practitioners for whom spiritual practices strengthen faith. In one essential aspect, however, conversion appears to differ from these examples of spiritual practices. As we have seen, conversions are communal

[642] Jones refers to this position as 'doxastic involuntarism'. Jones, 'Religious Conversion, Self-Deception, and Pascal's Wager', 173. See also Williams, 'Deciding to Believe'; Winters, 'Believing at Will'; Ward E. Jones, 'Explaining Our Own Beliefs: Non-Epistemic Believing and Doxastic Instability', *Philosophical Studies* 111, no. 3 (2002): 217–49.

processes and involve the influences of other people and institutions. Thus, even if we are content to call an individual's fostering of new beliefs through private contemplation free, this does not mean that all conversion processes are similarly free. Two points may help us here. First, we must be careful not to draw too strong a distinction between individual spiritual practices and the communal processes of conversion. Spiritual practices are often passed down through tradition and aim at producing a certain kind of religious response. There is thus a closer correlation with the processes of conversion than it might first appear. Second, even if we recognise the social aspect of conversion experiences – and even accept that there are some people and groups who do set out to manipulate others – many, if not most, conversion experiences involve people following a path which feels natural and right to them. For many converts, personal flourishing can be achieved within the religious group they have joined and so conversion opens up many new possibilities. At the very least, my conclusions indicate the importance for philosophy of religion for continuing to prioritise research into understanding religion as it is lived by its practitioners.

Clearly, it is important that we are able to distinguish between coercive manipulation and free religious expression and spiritual development. We are not yet in a position to do that but I would suggest that future research in this direction would first need to re-examine our concepts of freedom and how these can be integrated with contemporary understandings of human embodiment and non-dualist ontologies. What we can say is that the affective and embodied aspects of conversion are not by definition coercive. We have been able in this thesis to map out some of the affective pathways through which the processes of conversion operate while resisting the reductive urge to describe conversion as nothing more than these physiological processes. This has left us with important questions about freedom and authenticity in religion; I hope that my research will resource future attempts to answer these questions.

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