**The Logic of Expression in Philosophy of Religion: Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty**

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**Introduction**

As I am writing this, an alien life grows elsewhere in my house: *Pleurotus citrinopileatus*, otherwise known as the yellow or golden oyster mushroom.

It came in the form of a kit. Inside a plastic wrapper, within an outer canvas bag, there is a substrate block. The block comes ‘fully colonised’ with the mycelium from which the mushrooms will grow. As is well known, the fungi we normally see are only the fruiting bodies of a vast underground mycelial network, a fungal web. This web forms complex, often mutually beneficial relationships with the plants and soil around it.

On the one hand, the growing mushroom is a surface phenomenon, the tip of a subterranean fungal mass. Each mushroom has its own singular, contingent, individual profile. And yet, the visible mushroom is not separate from the fungal web from which it forms, and whose reproduction it serves.

One might say that the mushrooms are ‘expressions’ of the mycelium. They grow out of it, extend its reach, exteriorise it. And then they decay back into the earth, to become part of the substrate from which new mycelial webs will be spun. As expressions, these fruiting bodies are *both* exposed externalities *and* integral functions of a differential, interconnected web.

Starting with this fungal growth might seem an odd way to begin a paper on philosophy of religion. And yet it helps give flesh to the conceptual vocabulary I will use and interrogate. I will explore the potential of ‘expression’ as a way of understanding and working with questions of God’s relationship to the world. In order to make this task both manageable and productive, I will localise my investigation, thinking alongside the pivotal role played by expression in the work of Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty.

My guiding question is, Can God be *expressed* in the world? This question touches on problems of divine essence and agency as much as on issues of religious language. How is it possible for God to express Godself without compromising the absoluteness of God or the veracity of the expression? And yet, without such expression, reference to or experience of ‘God’ seems to lack all sense. This is a problem that has engaged philosophical theology throughout its history. There are any number of instances: Aristotle’s unmoved mover; Aquinas’ notion of God as pure act; Neoplatonic emanation; Karl Barth’s radical refusal of any natural sense of God’s revelation; romantic and process attempts to trace the evolving entanglement of God and the world. We could go on.

The point of focusing on expression is to link this history to the concerns of modern continental philosophy, in order to give us a new language and perhaps a new sense of what God is in relation to the world. Through tracing the logic of expression at key moments in the work of Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty, we can find resources to address this issue.

The scope of this exploration is, as suggested, necessarily limited. The structure it follows will not pretend to an exhaustive account of expression in our chosen thinkers, let alone their wider philosophical milieu. I will seek to do justice to their key problematics and conceptual moves, but my primary intention is not to try and settle questions of interpretation of their texts. Rather I aim to make constructive use of their concepts, which I argue offer distinctive approaches to the implications of expression for issues of immanence and transcendence.[[1]](#footnote-1)

In reading them together, this essay will argue that the logic of expression can help philosophical theology reconcile the immanent self-expression of God with the non-sufficiency of any finite expression, the necessary silence and the openness of texture that inhabits and shapes the word and our lived experience of the world.

The sections that follow will shape the argument. First, I offer a justification for my choice of expression as a focal point, and for the approach taken to selected texts by Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty. I then examine the ‘logic of expression’ as identified by Deleuze in his work on Spinoza, and how it is intertwined with his analysis of the logic of sense. I will argue that this Deleuzian starting point offers us a rich, immanent understanding of how the unconditioned is expressed and re-expressed in the finite, preparing the way for his future affirmation of a ‘pure’ difference.

I then follow Renaud Barbaras’ argument that expression is a key moment in Merleau-Ponty’s thought towards his later ontology. My claim will be that Merleau-Ponty’s account of the dynamic genesis of sense in expression offers a way of holding together immanence and transcendence without collapsing one into the other. This expression is rooted in the body as primordial expression, a body that is always in incarnate relationship with its more-than-human ‘soil’. At the same time, expression is an opening to the other yet to come, to the advent of senses which cannot be known prior to their articulation.

Finally, I will summarise how I think this exploration can apply more directly to an understanding of God’s relationship to the world. My claim will be that expression can help us avoid the projection of transcendent hierarchy yet hold to the unconditioned reality of the divine; and that it can suggest ways of understanding the mutually affecting relation of created agency to its divine grounds.

**The pivotal role of expression**

Expression and sense become important concepts in the early twentieth century, both in the analytical approach of Frege and the phenomenological work of Husserl. Expression marks a site where the nuances of sense and meaning are explored, albeit in different ways by different thinkers. When considering the ‘sense’ of a proposition, for example, Frege realised that different expressions in different languages could share the same sense. Leaving aside the details of his analysis, sense comes to occupy a curious position in theories of meaning and being. What kind of thing is sense, and where is it ‘located’ if it is not simply what is expressed?

The term ‘expression’ (and similar terms in other languages, such as the German *Ausdruck*) can be used in various ways; broadly, however, it implies an *externalisation* of a inner meaning or reality. Often - as with Frege and, arguably, the early Husserl - priority is given to the inner, intended or ideal sense rather than to the process of expression itself. If so, expression as externalisation represents a risk to the clear communication of meanings.

However, this model is complicated when we come to Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty. For both, in various ways, expression is not merely an extrinsic act, but a dynamic process whereby meaning is *constituted*. Moreover, this process is not simply a matter of human beings inventing meanings from nothing. Expression comes to have significant ontological ramifications, relevant to the philosophy of religion.

For each thinker, expression is a pivotal idea, one that articulates their developing account of the nature of things. For Deleuze, it allows him to arrive at an idea of immanent causation which retains its links with the idea of an ‘unconditioned’, though not in the sense of a transcendent being. Rather the unconditioned is a differential and immanent medium within which the expression of meaning becomes possible.[[2]](#footnote-2) For Merleau-Ponty, expression leads him from a phenomenological starting point to ask about the ontological grounds of perception and meaning; about a more-than-human sense of things, in which our own creative expression takes root. In each case, expression is a dynamic and productive process, but one which takes us beyond the limits of ontic or human properties.

For Deleuze, this is most obviously present in his work on Spinoza, where the concept of expression plays a decisive role. It engages directly with Spinoza’s project of articulating God, conceived as an infinite substance, expressed in its attributes and the immanent cause of its finite modes. Expression is directly linked to a logic of the infinite and a philosophy of immanence. The ramifications of this are felt in *The Logic of Sense*, as well as work developed with Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*. As we will see, Deleuze deals with issues of central importance to philosophy of religion in *Expressionism*, notably in his critique of analogical predication.

Merleau-Ponty’s own distance from religious questions is shaped by his acceptance of Heidegger’s critique of onto-theology, as much as by his phenomenological method. Nevertheless, he is deeply engaged with questions of genesis, logic and incarnation which resonate with fundamental ontological concerns present in philosophy of religion. Expression is a concept that opens the question of the origin of meaning, as both found within things themselves and yet necessarily linked to the creative, incarnate process of its articulation.

In these ways, the role of expression is entwined with other ways of articulating the relationship between the infinite and the finite, not least creation, emanation and incarnation. In each case, similar problematics emerge. Can we refer to and describe the infinite in language derived from the finite, from creatures? In attributing properties to God, do we end up projecting anthropomorphic qualities upon what defies comprehension and predication? Or is the link between God and creation severed, so there is simply nothing of the infinite to be found within the finite?

With these questions in mind, we will deceive little further into the role of expression in Deleuze’s Spinozist phase.

**The Logic of Expression: Deleuze**

In his analysis of Spinoza’s *Ethics*, Deleuze argues that the ‘logic of expression’ plays a fundamental role in Spinoza’s thought. The relationship between the one, infinite and necessary substance of God, and the attributes and modes of that substance, is defined by this: ‘We everywhere confront the necessity of distinguishing three terms: substance which expresses itself, the attribute which expresses, and the essence which is expressed.’[[3]](#footnote-3)

This logic is used by Spinoza to address the age-old question of the relationship between the One and the Many. As Deleuze puts it:

Expression is on the one hand an explication, an unfolding of what expresses itself, the One manifesting itself in the Many…Its multiple expression, on the other hand, involves Unity. The One remains involved in what expresses it, imprinted in what unfolds it, immanent in whatever manifests it: expression is in this respect an involvement.[[4]](#footnote-4)

There are two important aspects to note here. First, the One is ‘immanent in whatever manifests it’. Secondly, there is no contradiction between the unity of the One and its ‘multiple expression.’ These two points link to ongoing concerns that Deleuze will take into his future work. In many ways, he can be seen as a transcendental philosopher, that is, as one who is seeking to set out the conditions which make things and experiences possible. However, he refuses a transcendent condition for both metaphysical and ethical reasons. A transcendent condition fails to account for the reality of finitude and becoming. It subjects them to a dominating principle which seeks to judge and govern differences and becoming from a height. Transcendence, in this sense, is a reactive idea, a secondary product of the primary and affirmative play of differences. What he seeks, then, is a transcendental principle of becoming which genuinely allows for multiple expression. This principle cannot be severed from the differences it articulates. The question becomes, then, ‘What sort of distinction can one introduce into what is absolute, into the nature of God?’[[5]](#footnote-5)

The stakes of this can be traced in Deleuze’s treatment of analogy later in the book, in the chapter ‘Expression in Parallelism’. He is discussing Spinoza’s claim that God produces as he understands himself - that God’s infinite existence is necessarily infinitely productive and knows itself as such. Deleuze grounds this claim in expression: ‘The notion of expression plays here a decisive role. In his self-expression. God understands himself. In expressing himself formally in his attributes he understands himself objectively in an idea.’[[6]](#footnote-6) The key claim here seems to be that expression involves self-relation: attributes express the essence of the divine nature in formal ways (as thought, or extension); but this would be a merely external relationship, if the infinite substance did not also perceive and understand the attributes as its own expression.

We have to tread carefully here. As Deleuze goes on to argue, Spinoza does not have in mind anything like an anthropomorphic concept of ‘understanding’ or perception or will in God. It is not that God has an idea and *then* acts on it or expresses it in the attributes. Indeed, it is this anthropomorphism that Deleuze targets as an inadequate idea of the divine nature. ‘God,’ writes Deleuze, ‘does not produce things because he wills, but because he is. He does not produce because he conceives, conceives things as possible, but because he understands himself, necessarily understands his own nature.’[[7]](#footnote-7)

Deleuze uses the idea of expression to explore critically both negative and positive predication of divine properties. Deleuze argues that ‘divine names relate to manifestations of God’ - that through which God is made known, and which grounds true speech about God.[[8]](#footnote-8) For Deleuze, expression is a dynamic process: ‘What conceals also expresses, but what expresses still conceals.’[[9]](#footnote-9) However, this dynamic creates issues both for classical accounts of negative theology and for the alternative analogical approach to speaking of God.

A negative theology which claims we can only say what God is not conceals a positive understanding of God: ‘How would one know what must be denied of God as essence if one didn’t first of all know what one should affirm of him as cause. Negative theology can therefore only be defined by its dynamics…’[[10]](#footnote-10) Equally, however the attempt to secure positive predications of God on the basis of an analogical proportion between God and creatures - typified by Aquinas - is also complicated. As much as it seeks to speak of God’s nature, the mode in which attributes such as goodness are predicated of God must remain unknown to us, given God’s absolute simplicity. God is literally and eminently good, but not in the way that any finite creature is. The negative and positive ways thus oscillate around one another; neither can be maintained in its purity.

Deleuze argues that this is due to a confusion, in which various properties - love, goodness, power - are seen as candidates for predication of God. For Spinoza, such predicates ‘express nothing of the nature of God.’[[11]](#footnote-11) They are external determinations of God, disguised imperatives which relate to commands or rules for human life. They cannot define the nature of God, negatively or positively.

What does then express the nature of God? The attributes of thought and extension, the common forms of all things in nature. This should not be taken as implying that God is ‘a’ body or ‘a’ mind. Rather God is the unconditioned substance whose expression supplies the essential, formal basis for anything else whatsoever to exist. Extension and thought are subject to no intrinsic limitation. In this sense, they are univocally predicated of God and creatures.[[12]](#footnote-12)

This is a complex and nuanced area, subject to much debate, not least in Spinoza scholarship. We are not trying to resolve those issues, but follow the logic Deleuze develops, whatever its merits as an interpretation of Spinoza. However, it is worth dipping into debates about Spinoza’s meaning in order to draw out some implications.

First, for all that Spinoza is described by Deleuze as a pantheist, there remains a distinction of essence between God and creatures, or finite modes. Yes, modes are not substances in their own right, but modifications of the one infinite substance. And yet they are distinct from God. God’s essence is to exist; it is not the essence of a finite mode to exist. It follows that modes each have their own essence. It is the very insubstantiality of modes that means they have their own essential reality.[[13]](#footnote-13)

The second point to make is about formal causation. Attributes, expressing substance as thought and extension, are the formal causes of modes. What does this mean? Stephen Zylstra has persuasively argued that we need to understand this term as used by Spinoza differently to an Aristotelian formal cause.[[14]](#footnote-14) For Aristotle, formal and efficient causes were different in kind. However, in Spinoza’s context and usage, forms could also be efficient causes. For example, a rational soul could be the form of a human being - what makes something a human being rather than anything else - but also the efficient cause of human ways of acting.

Finite modes, then, are not just to be assimilated to God as properties of a substance. They are efficiently caused by God, through the formal causality of attributes; and the modes are essentially distinct from God.

How then, are modes still understood to be immanently caused by God? At one point, Deleuze says that attributes are affirmations of God, *logoi* or true divine names.’ (E, 61). His point here is that the attributes are not ideas that we project on to God, and which inevitably limit each other and the divine nature. Rather, as expressions of an infinite substance, they are constitutive of God’s nature and provide the principles for anything else to exist.

This interestingly connects with the recent work by Jordan Daniel Wood on the theology of Maximus the Confessor. We cannot do justice the full argument here, but Wood wants to take Maximus at his word when he talks about creation as the incarnation of the Logos. The logic of the incarnation of Christ applies equally to creation; and this is the only way to make sense of creation’s call to become deified, to itself become divine.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Wood points out that, in Christ, there can be no confusion of the divine and human natures. The uncreated and created have nothing natural in common. At the same time, these natures are abstractions, not individuals. Their identity is brought about through the Logos, the ‘hypostasis’ which acts as a principle of union and individuation. And the same is true of creation (Wood even argues that the distinction between created and uncreated natures is generated by the Word’s incarnation): created things are brought into being because of the *logoi*, the presence of the Logos as their individuating principle. Creation and incarnation follow the same logic.

Wood also argues that this logic is distinct from an analogical path of participation in God. Instead, there is a radical *identity* of God and world in the Logos, which is only possible through the radical *dissimilarity* of created and uncreated natures.

For all Deleuze and Maximus may seem to be on different planets, this is not the case. Deleuze’s logic of expression is centrally concerned with disputing the emanationist, participatory and analogical paths of Neoplatonic and Thomas thought. And yet, the affirmation of one infinite substance, the immanence of its causal relationship to finite modes and the univocity of the attributes never obscures the essential distinction between God and modes, or the asymmetry of their causal relationship. What we cannot do is read into this essential distinction any lack of identity, or any separation in fact, or any projection of a hierarchy, according to our own intra-worldly logics of discontinuity and exclusion. To echo Meister Eckhart, it is only God’s indistinction from creatures that makes God distinct from them.

**Expression and Ontology: Merleau-Ponty**

In the previous section, I have tried to establish the potential of Deleuze’s logic of expression in philosophy of religion. If offers a way of thinking about the relationship between the unconditioned and the conditioned, the infinite and the finite, in which the immanence of expression does not preclude a distinction of essence. Finite modes or creatures are those whose essence does not involve actual existence; and yet their informing principle is ontologically identical with the self-expression of God. The unconditioned or positive infinity of God expresses itself in differences without limit and is constituted by this expressive self-differentiation. There is no God over and above the *Logos* as multiplied in the *logoi* of existing things. Their act of being is one, not by analogy or even participation, but univocally. As Deleuze reads Spinoza, all things ‘express’ God, because they have no other substance but God’s. But their actual existence is not simply deducible from God. This raises acute questions about the determinism in Spinoza’s system, the necessity which seems to govern relations between substance, attributes and modes. As we will see, Merleau-Ponty offers a way to think expression in relation to Being which does not fall into this deterministic stance.

When we turn to Merleau-Ponty, the Deleuzean-Spinozist atmosphere of metaphysical speculation and rational deduction seems a world away. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, expression is explored in relation to embodied perception. However, Renaud Barbaras argues that expression is the hinge which enables Merleau-Ponty to move in a more ontological direction in his later work.[[16]](#footnote-16)

*Phenomenology* concerns a ‘power of meaning, of escape, this sense always already at work’ in things.[[17]](#footnote-17) This ‘sense’ transcends objectification, transcends the ‘given’. It is always coming into being in the very acts which constitute it. Perception, then, is not simply a subject’s grasp of a world laid out before it in discrete objects. It is a dynamic process of encounter, an interplay of interpretation and expression, in which sense is shaped.

However, Barbaras argues that expression is not thought radically enough in the early works. There is a lingering separation between nature and culture. The conscious human subject is still central to the way in which meaning emerges. Hence the need to think this emergence of meaning, not as the conscious operation of a human subject, but ‘as the very advent of sense’.[[18]](#footnote-18) We can leave aside whether or not Barbaras’ is just in his interpretation of *Phenomenology.* What does seem evident is the importance of expression, even in this earlier work, for pushing us beyond an anthropocentric ontology.

In his chapter on ‘The Body as Expression,’ Merleau-Ponty is clear that ‘In trying to describe the phenomenon of speech and the specific act of meaning, we shall have the opportunity to leave behind us, once and for all, the traditional subject-object dichotomy.’[[19]](#footnote-19) Language is not simply a system of representations, in which signs somehow mirror the world or make available an inner idea.

For Merleau-Ponty, the fact that ‘thought tends towards expression as its completion’ is crucial.[[20]](#footnote-20) It shows that speech ‘does not translate ready-made thought but accomplishes it’.[[21]](#footnote-21) There is a creative *genesis* of sense, in which thought does not really know what it thinks until it expresses itself. And this takes us beyond language, narrowly conceived. Already, in the body’s gestures, we are in a realm of intentionality and involvement with the world: ‘I become involved with things with my body, they co-exist with me as an incarnate subject.’[[22]](#footnote-22)

Here, as well as disrupting the subject-object dichotomy, we find the nature-culture duality also undermined: ‘It is impossible to superimpose on man a lower level of behaviour which one chooses to call ‘natural’, followed by a manufactured cultural or spiritual world.’[[23]](#footnote-23) The world emerges in and through my incarnate interaction with it and expression of it, as a world already latent with meanings.[[24]](#footnote-24) And since I am incarnate alongside and within that world, this cannot be reduced to a human, cultural construction of meaning and projection of it on to the blank canvas of nature.

Signs are not transparent containers of meaning. There is an essential opacity and nonpresence of sense in expression: ‘Expression is such that, in principle it cannot be complete.’[[25]](#footnote-25) However, this is not merely an absence, pointing towards a lack of sense, or its completion in a transcendent realm. It is intrinsic to the genesis of sense. As Barbaras puts it, ‘The signs already transcend themselves toward a sense which is not then different from them.’[[26]](#footnote-26) Sense here is a kind of *disruptive immanence*.This is a disruption of the subject as much as the sign, for each are entangled with the world they express: ‘Expression reveals therefore a subject that possesses sense only insofar as the subject is dispossessed by it.’[[27]](#footnote-27) There is a shift to ontology here, to a sense of the world as ‘infinite *arche*’, the universal as that which ‘feeds expression’: ‘to situate the world in the dimension of expression is not to dissolve it into ideality but to recognize, on the contrary, its transcendence. Because it is always already expression, the world is never fully expressed.’[[28]](#footnote-28) Rooted in the ‘soil of expression’, this articulation of the world demands a re-evaluation of the more-than-human, of (in Spinozist terms) the infinite substance of God or nature.

Merleau-Ponty undoubtedly shifts the tenor of his interpretation of expression and language as his work evolves, but there are important lines of connection too. In the late essay, ‘On the Phenomenology of Language’, he refers to the ‘fecundity of expression’.[[29]](#footnote-29) The essay embraces the insights of Saussure, that linguistic signs are defined in and through their differential relation to one another, rather than each term possessing its own innate positive meaning. However, far from this making language a self-enclosed system within human culture, Merleau-Ponty emphasises the excessive nature of expression, whose fundamental feature is ‘a surpassing of the signifying by the signified which it is the very virtue of the signifying to make possible.’[[30]](#footnote-30) Formed meaning does not precede expression; and yet the sense of things is not created from nothing. Creative expression makes possible its own surpassing. It takes up and articulates meanings already present virtually within things, and it opens them to new articulations. What is expressed is never finalised. It never simply captures a given, defined meaning. Its fecundity is always a reactivation of that genesis of sense, and its openness to the advent of new meanings.

It is significant here that we are dealing with the genesis of expression. This links with Deleuze’s inquiry in *The Logic of Sense*. Deleuze distinguishes a number of ways of understanding sense: the denotation of a state of affairs, the expression of a person’s intent, the way a proposition implies and relates to other propositions. However the focus of his own concern is something else: the *dynamic genesis* of sense. In other words, tracing how sense emerges from the inchoate flux of bodily drives and desires, prior to its organisation in any system.[[31]](#footnote-31)

We cannot pursue this line of thought here, but the genetic approach taken by each thinker is suggestive of an expressive ontology of sense. What makes sense possible, and what gives it dynamic life, is this origin in a more-than-human field of relationships, intensities, prehuman and preindividual ‘singularities’. As Lambert puts it, ‘what this sense expresses is the event of sense itself as a frontier that runs between propositions and things, statements and bodies, as the extra-being that first expresses their relation, a relation that does not exist outside the genesis of the expression.’[[32]](#footnote-32) For Deleuze, expression simultaneously conceal and reveals; the infinite substance of God is not simply laid bare, but is expressed and re-expressed, affected by its own expressions in infinite ways. We are touching here on a sense of the unconditioned ground of sense which does not sit at an ontological distance from its effects, even as it remains - as infinite, unconditioned - distinct in essence from any conditioned state of affairs.

One possibility here would be to connect this to the nascent ontology of flesh in Merleau-Ponty’s later work. That is certainly a fruitful line of investigation, but space prevents it here.[[33]](#footnote-33) Instead, I want briefly to consider another later essay, ‘Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence’. Here we find both confirmation of some of the insights of *Phenomenology* but also significant development.

Merleau-Ponty again signals acceptance of Saussure’s account of the differential nature of signs, but it is notable how the emphasis is changed from synchronic relationships to dynamic genesis, where we find ‘meaning arising at the edge of signs.’[[34]](#footnote-34) Speech, he argues ‘is always only a fold in the immense fabric of language.’[[35]](#footnote-35)

As the essay unfolds, it builds on Merleau-Ponty’s earlier analyses. Language is not simply a tool or technique, manipulating predefined meanings. It is inherently ‘indirect or allusive.’[[36]](#footnote-36) It is rooted in our dynamic, interrogative bodily involvement with the world - language is to thought as a footprint to the movement of a body.[[37]](#footnote-37) We cannot understand language without engaging with it in the process of its becoming. To understand an expression is to consider how it felt its way towards its particular form, how it displaced and resonated with all the other possible expressions which could have taken its place: ‘In short, we must consider speech before it is spoken, the background of silence which does not cease to surround it and without which it would say nothing.’[[38]](#footnote-38)

This silence is not simply a blank, a void, an absence, It is the virtual potentiality of sense, in which latent expressions solicit one another within the world, the ‘world of teeming, exclusive things,’ of ‘inexhaustible being’ which crystallises into form - and note how this is distinguished from expression as the act of a Godlike being able to dominate meaning from a distance and simply choose one as an act of will.[[39]](#footnote-39)

It is striking how Merleau-Ponty invokes religious themes here. On the one hand, meaning occurs as an ‘advent’, which is not simply derived from events and facts.[[40]](#footnote-40) On the other, ‘The meaning of the expressive gesture . . . is in principle a meaning in genesis.’[[41]](#footnote-41) As Foultier puts it, Merleau-Ponty sees the task of phenomenology as developing ‘a new kind of thinking, which can capture the meaning of the world as it comes into being, *à l’état naissant*.’[[42]](#footnote-42) Advent and genesis mark an unanticipated newness, disrupting the idea that meaning is ‘eternal’ or fixed, whether by God or by ‘facts’.

This transcendence - ‘Advent is a promise of events’[[43]](#footnote-43) - is nevertheless an immanence, rooted in the body as ‘primordial expression.’[[44]](#footnote-44) It is taken up in incarnate acts of expression. In a brief aside, Merleau-Ponty dismisses the ‘vertical transcendence’ of God, but this is not a rejection of God *per se*:

the Christian God wants nothing to do with a vertical relation of subordination. He is not simply a principle of which we are the consequence, a will whose instruments we are, or even a model of which human values are only the reflection. There is a sort of impotence of God without us, and Christ attests that God would not be fully God without becoming fully man . . . Transcendence no longer hangs over man: he becomes its privileged bearer.[[45]](#footnote-45)

Here, in their different idioms, Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty again come within touching distance. There is an ontology at play here, where ‘the distinction between language in the strict sense and the layer from which it proceeds can no longer be made; the world is already in language, or rather is already language, primordial expression. It is this originary source that requires expression and yet draws it back into its opacity.’[[46]](#footnote-46) Tracing the dynamic genesis of expression, they approach an unconditioned being which is not merely a past, but also the opening of a future.

A dynamic genesis is also a disruptive immanence, in which statements about God are necessarily complicated. In a working note from 1959, Merleau-Ponty considers how to define an ontology that would dispense with the subject-object dichotomy. It would have to involve ‘an elucidation of philosophical expression itself’ which he specifies as ‘the expression of what is before expression and *sustains it from behind.*’[[47]](#footnote-47) This ontological concern is echoed throughout these notes and late works. In one, he explores alternative spatial models for Being. One such model - Euclidean space - offers an abstract grid of extrinsic relationships, an infinite space ripe for the dominating gaze of the ‘*ens realissimum*’ of classical ontology. Topological space, by contrast, is textured by relationships of proximity and envelopment. It is this model which alludes to a being that is ‘older than everything’, to a Being that resists assimilation into abstract space, a ‘perpetual *residue*’. Merleau-Ponty writes’ that this Being ‘is constitute of life and finally it founds the *wild* principle of Logos - It is this wild or brute being that intervenes at all levels to overcome the problems of the classical ontology (mechanism, finalist, in every case: artificialism).’[[48]](#footnote-48) In another note, he contrasts the Being that can be represented with ‘the polymorphism of the wild Being.’[[49]](#footnote-49)

In setting themselves against a vertical transcendence, neither Deleuze nor Merleau-Ponty reduce their ontology to one of human projection. They bring us to the edge of signs, to the bubbling, transformative surface of expression, where the Spirit hovers over the face of the waters and the wild Logos becomes the constitutive genesis of all that is.

**Conclusion**

Making sense of how transcendent God acts or is known within the world is a core question for philosophical theology. Answering it is fraught. It is easy to anthropomorphise God, to attribute to God a voluntaristic will, to make God into a subject over against the world as object. To make God into something finite.

There are ways of responding to this question from within the resources of a theological tradition. But they come with the risks of theological overreach, a self-legitimation of theology that rules out any role for rational critique.

Throughout this article, we have explored the links between expression and ontology in the hopes of finding a way towards an alternative vocabulary which is not simply tied to the authority of a specific tradition. I have argued that, despite their differences, Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty offer a way of thinking these connections in ways that can bear fruitfully upon philosophy of religion.

Of course, the essay has may limitations. I am not trying to do justice to the overall project of these two thinkers, not can I hope to settle the detailed interpretative debates that surround the questions we have explored. Nevertheless, I have sought to establish the pivotal role of expression in their work as they try to work out an adequate understanding of being and becoming.

In each case, the logic of expression leads us to an alternative ontology. Whether we speak of the infinite substance, the unconditioned or wild Being, we are addressing a reality that transcends any given sense, while immanently inhabiting and soliciting all expression. This Being is not other than the differences to which it gives rise; nor is it merely the sum of those differences. It gives itself to expression, because it is always already an identity of differences.

What is expressed conceals and reveals at the same time. The expression is not just laying bare something already existing but veiled from us. It is a real process of birth, a modification of the one infinite substance as it communicates itself. As it is expressed, so it this polymorphous Being is affected by its expressions, and new forms are evoked, new folds explicated from the silence.

And is this true? I would argue that it is: that it does justice to the experience of expression as well as to the ontological quest for what grounds all conditioned and articulated things. But truth here cannot be a simple matter of representation and correspondence. It cannot be specified in abstraction from the dynamic logic of which it is part. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, ‘It is essential to what is true to be presented first, last and always in a movement which throws our world out of focus, disbands it and draws it towards fuller meaning.’[[50]](#footnote-50)

1. For related constructive use of these thinkers in theology and philosophy of religion, see, for example Orion Edgar, *Things Seen and Unseen: The Logic of Incarnation in Merleau-Ponty’s Metaphysics of Flesh* (Eugene: Veritas, 2016); Christopher Ben Simpson, *Merleau-Ponty and Theology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014); Mary Bryden, ed. *Deleuze and Religion* (London: Routledge, 2001); Daniel Barber, *Deleuze and the Naming of God: Post-secularism and the Future of Immanence* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For more on the unconditioned in Deleuze and its implications for philosophy of religion, see Steven Shakespeare, “The Unconditioned in Philosophy of Religion,” *Palgrave Communications* 4 (2018) https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-018-0172-y (accessed on 4 June 2024). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Gilles Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Zone Books, 1992), 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., 101. Cf Thomas Nail, “Expression, Immanence and Constructivism: ‘Spinozism’ and Gilles Deleuze”, *Deleuze Studies* 2, no. 2 (2008): 205: ‘Substance and attribute are distinct but only insofar as they express the essence of the other. This mutual expression of God and creatures stands opposed to the necessity of a God remaining beyond His creatures and creating them by emanation or analogy.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid., 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid., 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. In discussing how Deleuze negotiates the relationship of the finite to the infinite, Duffy notes the influence of Lautman, for whom ‘finite and infinite are two ‘genres of being’; between which there exists a relationship of imitation or ‘expression’. Simon Duffy, “The Logic of Expression in Deleuze’s *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*: A Strategy of Engagement,” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 12, no.1: 55-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. This argument is set out fully by Thomas Ward, “Spinoza on the Essences of Modes,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 19, no. 1 (2011): 19-46. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Stephen Zylstra, “Spinoza, Emanation, and Formal Causation,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 61, no. 4 (2023): 603-625. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Jordan Daniel Wood, *The Whole Mystery of Christ: Creation as Incarnation in Maximus the Confessor* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2022). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Renaud Barbaras, *The Being of the Phenomenon: Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology*, trans. Ted Toadvine and Leonard Lawlor (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004). See also Donald A. Landes, *Merleau-Ponty and the Paradoxes of Expression* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 3: ‘Moving deﬁnitively beyond the realm of language, the paradoxical logic of expression is the thread that unites Merleau-Ponty’s diverse investigations as the very style of his questioning.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Barbaras, *The Being of the Phenomenon*, 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid., 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 1962), 174. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid., 177. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid., 178. Cf. Hayden Kee, “Phenomenology and Ontology of Language and Expression: Merleau-Ponty on Speaking and Spoken Speech,” *Human Studies* 41, no. 3 (2018): 417. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid., 185. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Ibid., 189. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. ‘Primary expression is motivated both by these vibrating appearances and by the contingencies of the life of the human expressing it. In retrospect, the expression will have been of what the things as well as that particular human being “wanted to say” or meant.’ Anna Petronella Foultier, ““The First Man Speaking”: Merleau-Ponty on Expression as the Task of Phenomenology,” *The Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 46, no. 3, (2015): 201-2. See also Landes, *Paradoxes of Expression*, 153. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Barbaras, *The Being of the Phenomenon*, 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid., 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Ibid., 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Ibid., 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, trans. Richard C. McCleary (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Ibid., 90. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester (London: Bloomsbury, 2013). See Daniel Smith, “The Concept of Sense in Gilles Deleuze’s Logic of Sense,” *Deleuze and Guattari Studies* 16, no.1 (2022): 3–23. See also Gregg Lambert, “Expression” in *Gilles Deleuze: Key Concepts*, ed. Charles Stivale (London: Routledge, 2014), 36: ‘Sense would be irreducible to all these determinations, signalling an extra-being that belongs neither to the order of words nor to the order of things. This dimension is called expression.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Lambert, “Expression,” 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. See Veronique M. Foti, *Tracing Expression in Merleau-Ponty: Aesthetics, Philosophy of Biology and Ontology* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2013), especially chapter 7: “The Irreducibility of Expression: Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology and its Wider Implications”, where Foti emphasises the inherent expressiveness of flesh and nature. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Ibid., 42. Another future line of research opens up here as we consider Deleuze’s own exploration of the fold, of implication and explication. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Ibid., 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Ibid., 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Ibid., 46.Cf. Glen A. Mazis, *Merleau-Ponty and the Face of the World* (New York: SUNY Press, 2016), 9: ‘There is an insistence throughout Merleau-Ponty’s work that access to Being and uncovering of an emergent sense of the world within the layers of perception require philosophy to make room for a meaning-laden silence.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Ibid., 50. Compare Sean Bowden’s account of expression in Deleuze and Guattari: ‘In terms of being, expression means that the expressed (the intention) is ontologically inseparable from its concrete expression—that is, the unfolding, situated, and reality-trans- forming action it animates. In terms of knowing, expression means that the expressed intention is made manifest or intelligible, for the agent as much as for others, in the expressive action itself: in other words, we discover something about what we intend by our experimental actions only in and through those actions. And from the final point of view, expression means that the intention expressed in the action is the creative accomplishment of that action, which is to say that the intention is dynamically assembled and produced, or actualized and specified, by the situated experimental activity and its effects over time.’ Sean Bowden, Assembling Agency: Expression, Action and Ethics in Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus*,” *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 58, no. 3 (2020): 398. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Ibid., 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Ibid., 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Foultier, “The First Man Speaking”, 196. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Ibid., 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Ibid., 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Barbaras, *Being as Phenomenon*, 62. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 167. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Ibid., 211. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Ibid., 253. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, 78. Cf Foultier, “The First Man Speaking,” 206, on the need to forge new concepts that are themselves ‘expressive acts’. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)