Malabou, Plasticity, and the Sculpturing of the Self

Hugh J. Silverman
Department of Philosophy
Stony Brook University, U.S.A

Abstract
In What Shall We Do With Our Brain? (2004), French philosopher Catherine Malabou returns to the traditional philosophical mind-body problem (we do not experience our mind as a “brain”) and introduces the concept of a difference or “split” between our brain as a hard material substance and our consciousness of the brain as a non-identity. Malabou speaks of the brain’s plasticity, a term which stands between (as a kind of deconstructive “indecidable”) flexibility and rigidity, suppleness and solidity, fixedness and transformability, identity and modifiability, determination and freedom. This means seeing the brain no longer as the “center” and “sovereign power” of the body—as it has been seen for centuries, at least in the West—but as itself a locus and process of self-sculpting (self-forming) and transdifferentiation, as being very closely interconnected with the rest of the body. Malabou also speaks of our own potential to sculpt or “re-fashion” ourselves, and (by further extension) to reform our society through trans-differentiating into new and potentially freer, more open and more democratic socio-political forms. In this bold project Malabou still remains close to her Hegelian roots, and she is also influenced by Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the body-subject and Nancy’s alter-mondialisation (other-worlding) as an alternative to globalization.

Keywords
brain, plasticity, non-identity, self-decentering, transdifferentiation, entre-deux altermondialisation, sculpting the self, Hegel, phenomenology
... la capacité de se reformer. N’est-ce pas la meilleure définition possible de la plasticité: le rapport qu’un individu entretient avec ce qui, d’un côté, l’attache originellement à lui-même, à sa propre forme, et ce qui, de l’autre, lui permet de se lancer dans le vide de toute identité, d’abandonner toute détermination rigide ou fixe?
—Malabou, Que faire de notre cerveau? 160

... the capacity for self re-form. Is this not the best possible definition of plasticity: the relation that an individual entertains with what, on the one hand, attaches him originally to himself, to his proper form, and with what, on the other hand, allows him to launch himself into the void of all identity, to abandon all rigid and fixed determination?
—What Should we do with our Brain? 80

You are your synapses.
—Malabou, Que faire de notre cerveau?

The history of European philosophy has been marked since at least the 17th century by a rift between continental European “rationalism” and British (more recently Anglo-American) “empiricism.” Thus, for example, while Descartes began with the mind of the subject, with cogito ergo sum, Je pense, donc je suis, “I think, therefore I am,” and thought of the physical or objective world as being that which was “knowable by the mind,” Locke said that “knowledge begins with experience” and began from the impressions made by physical objects on the mind in the act of perception—or, as his fellow Englishman Hume would later put it, that “Every idea is a copy of a sense impression.” Today in the graduate philosophy departments of universities this rift is still clear. In the USA many such departments still tend to emphasize the empirical and logical-analytic tradition more, which includes philosophy of language and (a sometimes cognitive psychology or psycholinguistics oriented) philosophy of mind, while some are known to emphasize the Continental humanistic-metaphysical tradition. In the 20th century

---

1 Subsequent citations from Malabou’s book “Que faire de notre cerveau?” (What Should we do with our Brain?) will be from Rand’s English translation, designated as “Eng.” A better translation of the title might be the more open What to Do with our Brain?
the latter tradition came to include not just existentialism and phenomenology but also, more recently, French post-structuralism.²

Similarly, empirical psychology, e.g. strict behaviorism but also biological-physiochemical brain research, has traditionally tended to be in the Anglo-American tradition whereas “humanistic” psychology, for example Freudianism or “existential psychology” with its roots in Heidegger among others, tends to be part of the Continental European tradition. Hence a strict behaviorist, believing that we can only know about the personality or inner “self” of a person by analyzing many of his/her responses to specific stimuli—the external acting-out of his/her personality—may tend to think subjectively-based theories of personality, or for that matter most of Freud’s theories, are metaphysical conceptions rather than scientific theories, if not outright myths or fantasies. Yet the humanistic or phenomenological psychologist or Freudian may think strict behaviorism reduces us to nothing but a machine with no “human self” or “mind” or “soul.” This brings us back to Descartes, who thought we were minds or souls inside of machine-bodies, and the old mind/body problem in philosophy, as well as to phenomenology: if our “mind” is really nothing but our bio-physio-chemical “brain” then why do we not “experience” it this way?

Kant then combined Descartes and Hume by claiming that scientific knowledge depends on both the logical categories of our understanding and the empirical sense impressions from outside, on the union of the two. But this left the problem that the subject and object were split, for in Kant’s view the subject (mind, understanding) can never know the “things in themselves” that lie behind the sense impressions, nor can it even know itself insofar as it lies beyond the domain of sense impressions. Thus the German idealists tried to overcome this subject/object split, which Hegel does by saying that the world is a large “Subject” or “Mind” (Geist) which is gradually becoming self-conscious through history. Hegel reflected on the dialectic between our own consciousness (Bewusstsein) and the object of which we are conscious: once we are aware that the object is just an object-of-(our)-consciousness, Hegel says in his 1807 Phenomenology of Mind (Geist, Spirit), we also become aware (through a further step of self-reflection) that our consciousness of ourselves (self-consciousness) constitutes us as an “object” on another level. Hegel thus begins from concrete (physical, material) sense

² Phenomenology, a philosophical practice or “science” founded by Husserl in the early 20th century, attempts to get back to the Dinge sich, the “things themselves”—to describe the world (including ourselves) exactly as it appears to us (phanomai means “to appear”), that is, exactly as we perceive it, without being guided or blocked by any pre-existing models or preconceptions.
experience, reflection upon which, through an ongoing dialectical process, inevitably brings us to the level of abstract thought.

French philosopher Catherine Malabou is also interested in the old question of the (seemingly paradoxical) mind/body “difference,” and more generally with the problem of the relation between concrete materiality (e.g. the bio-physio-chemical brain) and human consciousness (the mind, thinking). Malabou has long been engaged in the study of Hegel and the practice of dialectical self-reflection. She was also influenced by the 20th-century phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the body-subject—which already suggests an interface or interplay between intellectual mind and material body (including the brain)—and his view that our body, our mind and the physical world are all embedded together, enmeshed, interfolded within the “world” of our perception, where the act of perception equally involves all three: mind, body and physical world. The early Merleau-Ponty was influenced by the Continental Gestalt psychology of his day as well as by Hegel and Husserl’s phenomenology. In The Structure of Behavior he claimed that we actually perceive (this may be most obvious with visual perception) “physical objects” not as specific points, things, objects but rather as somewhat more indeterminate or undefined patterns or Gestalts (patterns, forms), and tied this back to Hegel’s insight that even when we try to grasp (greifen, grip) concrete particulars (things) in themselves we end up grasping them, on a higher “dialectical level,” as generalized ideas or concepts (Begriffe).

In Que faire de notre cerveau (2004), Malabou returns to the traditional philosophical “mind-body problem,” the paradoxical “difference” between our empirical brain and our mind or consciousness. She preserves this difference but with a “difference” as now, moving to another (in a sense more empirical or materialist) level of reflection, Malabou speaks of our awareness or consciousness not of the world in general but of our brain itself. While one can appeal to the (to our) consciousness of a rock, or of a sculpture, or of one’s actions, or of one’s own hand, she wonders, what does it mean to ask about the consciousness of the (or our) brain?

On what we might call this higher (dialectical) level of reflection Malabou then introduces the notion of a difference or “split” between the brain as a hard material substance and our consciousness of the brain as a non-identity. Therefore, while on the one hand remaining well aware of the extreme empiricist position according to which “our mind is nothing but our physiochemical brain”—and she gives us several careful accounts of recent brain research in her book—on the other hand she also moves away from those neurobiologists or neurologists who do not
see any difference between the brain and our *understanding of* the brain, and who thus reduce the brain to a merely objective and self-identical objective phenomenon of the human body.

**Plasticity, Transdifferentiation, De-centering**

For Malabou, the key to understanding the consciousness of the brain is her concept of “plasticity.” This notion of plasticity is not new to her writings, but its implications for understanding the brain are new. Plasticity is a kind of “indecidable” between flexibility and rigidity, suppleness and solidity, fixedness and transformability, identity and modifiability, determination and freedom. Plasticity is thus *not* the mere suppleness of elasticity, for it has an element of rigidity and so is not complete elastic, not indefinitely (or even infinitely) modifiable. The brain is plastic in the sense that it can “differentiate itself” or even “transdifferentiate.” This is a term that Malabou introduces in order to demonstrate the ongoing self-differentiation that the brain experiences or enacts in relation to itself, and here we see perhaps a more “material” variation on the Hegelian model, with its levels of self-reflection.

Malabou speaks of three plasticities: (1) the formation of neuronal connections, (2) modulational plasticity, and (3) reparative plasticity. Each of these plasticities demonstrates an understanding of the brain that has a position between determination (rigid, pre-figured, con-figured in advance) and freedom (supple and transformative). In (1) the formation of the brain’s neuronal connections, an interlacing of “spider’s webs” or “arborizations” is constitute over the course of an individual’s development. This neuronal genesis and development is what Malabou calls the brain’s plasticity. In this process of ongoing development, some brain cells die off (apoptosis) as the genetic program is executed: Malabou compares this process to the “work” of the sculptor’s chisel as it “progressively sculpts the form of the system by fitting nerve fibers to their targets” (Eng 19). In short, the brain sculpts its “genetic program” just as the plastic art of sculpture can shape a form, and this metaphor of the sculptor at work, shaping and modifying a mass of fixed material, is a crucial one for Malabou. Then with (2) the modulation of “synaptic efficacy” we have the working out of “the processes of adaptation, learning, and memory” in the life of the brain (Eng 23). A key point here is that although brains have a similar structure, no two brains have the same experience and history. And just as the brain develops and modulates (itself), it is also (3) capable of self-repair
and self-renewal. The brain can regenerate itself and compensate for losses caused by lesions (Eng 25).

Given these features of development, (self-) modulation, and (self-) reparation, the plasticity of the brain can be understood philosophically, even when we take “philosophy” in its broadest sense. “The concept of plasticity,” Malabou writes, “has an aesthetic dimension (sculpture, malleability), just as much as an ethical one (solicitude, treatment, help, repair, rescue) and a political one (responsibility in the double movement of the receiving and the giving of form)” (Eng 30). Thus what at first seems this philosopher’s rather technical, scientific, “empirical analysis” of the brain’s development—or of its “life,” and here it may help to recall that Hegel’s Phenomenology speaks of the self-development or “growth” or in a sense “life” of absolute Geist, mind, spirit—in its fuller manifestation (and again perhaps through the force of the “sculpturing” metaphor) comes to “embody” philosophy itself. We may be wondering just how central a role poetic language is playing (the trope of metaphor, or are these “leaps” more metonymic than metaphoric?) when Malabou speaks of the “ethics” of the brain’s self-repair (its “solicitude”) or the “politics” of its “responsibility,” but then we recall that the primary function was the aesthetic one—and in a sense poetic one in the broader sense of poiesis as “making”—of self-sculpturing.

This alternative reading of the brain and its plasticity has significant political implications. Malabou devotes a whole chapter to the understanding of the brain as a “central power.” This is of course the conventional (and traditional biological-empirical) view of the brain as the central organ from which all other activities of/in the larger body-organism are generated. However, Malabou makes it clear that an alternative way to think about the brain is to see it as a nexus of relations without any centrality. Here she appeals to Deleuzian notions of the brain as an “acentered system” (Eng 36). Of this decentering of the brain she states: “the functional plasticity of the brain deconstructs its function as the central organ and generates the image of a fluid process, somehow present everywhere and nowhere, which places the outside and the inside in contact by developing an internal principle of cooperation, assistance, and repair, and an external principle of adaptation and evolution” (Eng 35).³

Such fluidity suggests that there is no centrality even for the brain and its functioning, but rather that the “brain” is distributed (plastically) throughout the body. Malabou deconstructs the brain’s position as the point of emanation of all

---

³ Such fluidity might again suggest the anti-oedipal, rhizomal model of Deleuze-Guattari, their notions of “maps of consistency” and “bodies without organs” in A Thousand Plateaus.
neuronal activity and understands the brain rather as a fluid process that is (to cite Merleau-Ponty) “partout et nulle part” (everywhere and nowhere). Once deconstructed, the whole idea of “sovereignty” (of a central government) becomes distributed, disseminated. Rather, for Malabou the brain—le cerveau—exhibits the internal principle of “cooperation, assurance, and repair” and the external principle of “adaptation and evolution.” And so, citing Marc Jeannerod, she writes: “The brain would thus no longer be an organ that transfers the commands of the mind to the body, a kind of controller working from the top down, but rather a system that continuously proposes solutions compatible with our history and our needs” (Eng 35-36).

In fact, Malabou does not really need to reject the notion, already presupposed by Norbert Wiener and other cyberneticists of the 1940s and 1950s, that our brain is similar to a computer. Here she does not go back to Dreyfus’s groundbreaking What Computers Can’t Do (which draws upon Merleau-Pontean models of perception), but rather appeals to Dennett’s Consciousness Explained. She writes: “Dennett presents the computer as itself a plastic organization, with multiple and supple levels of command. The comparison between brain and computer rests on this plasticity, which serves as analagon” (Eng 37-38). She then cites Dennett: “A computer has a basic fixed or hard-wired architecture but with huge amounts of plasticity thanks to the memory” (Eng 38).

Malabou also mentions the computer Hal, who is aboard the spaceship flying from the earth to Jupiter in Stanley Kubrick’s classic film 2001: A Space Odyssey, as a useful example in the context of her non-sovereign view of the brain. Hal receives commands from the two still-aware crew members and responds to those commands, but when necessary he also proposes solutions compatible with the “history and needs” of the spaceship and its occupants, and so he no longer fits the simple model of what Malabou calls a “central telephone exchange.” But Hal at

---

4 Like Deleuze, who also gives a certain priority to works of art including paintings, cinema, literature and music, Malabou occasionally uses films to explicate her theory. For example, she reads Alain Renais’ films not as bizarre elaborations of consciousness on the Freudian “aboresent” model, where deep meaning can be derived from an articulation of some deep-seated and often inaccessible unconscious drives, but on their (perhaps rhizomic) “surfaces.” Renais-Robbe-Grillet’s L’Annee derniere a Marienbad is perhaps more paradigmatic of these deep, “Freudian” films than those that Malabou cites because it seems to be an exploration and elaboration of the dimensions of human consciousness at work. Interestingly, Malabou does not choose to discuss Kubrick’s A Clockwork Orange, with its rich interrogations of how behavioral techniques can be employed to transform mental faculties—perhaps because this is actually a more “traditional” film than the futuristic Space Odyssey and is concerned with a Pavlovian and Skinnerian, strictly empiricist psychological model.
some point along the way becomes “power-mad” and seizes absolute control of the ship—or we might say “it” becomes too “human,” that is, too much like a human brain in our traditional conception of it.\(^5\)

The fluid, de-centered, non-sovereign brain, then, for Malabou exhibits the qualities of network, delocalization, and adaptation. In Plato’s *Republic* the harmony of the three parts of the soul (appetitive, rational, and spirited), when they are effectively working together, is manifested as the whole society’s *dike*, its guiding operational principle of “justice,” and Malabou too sees a connection between the cerebral and the political, social and economic spheres. Though her account of the socio-political implications of the “plasticity of the brain” remain largely tentative, exploratory, suggestive, Malabou does say that “on the one hand, neuronal functioning as it is described today quite closely resembles a democracy: mutual support (reparation), freedom of choice (one somehow constructs one’s own brain), a crossing point between the public and the private (the interaction of the outside and the inside), belonging to many spheres, mobility, openness, availability, autonomy, absence of hierarchy between the network elements, and equality of function” (Eng 53).

This array of qualities that apply to both the brain, as Malabou presents its plasticity, and to a democracy raises intriguing questions about which has priority in her formulation. But what is clear in her account is that just as we are able to shape or sculpture ourselves, to overcome rigidities and limitations, so too a democratic society can develop, by further extension, in terms of its brain-like de-centeredness and natural activity of self-forming, and thus in terms of systems of mutual support, freedom of choice, harmony and justice, a crossing-over between public and private and a “belonging to many spheres.” Here in one sentence, Malabou brings together the key point of her whole essay: *we can do politics with the brain*, for the brain (properly understood) can be a model for a viable political system. That is, we do have the potential to construct such a political system,

\(^5\) Ironically, Hal does really seem to become “too human” in Kubrick’s film. After the earlier stages of the very long flight Hal is not receiving very many commands, so that it may be feeling bored and even lonely (as a human would) and/or it may start to imagine that (as it is receiving no commands) it now has total and absolute power to give commands to others. In any case Hal suddenly seems to experience some sort of glitch or breakdown which seems human-like inasmuch as it is more emotional than rational. He now assumes total command, like a sort of mad “sovereign,” and suddenly shuts down the life support system of most the crew members, who are in a state of suspended animation, killing them instantly. Then he sets about trying to kill the remaining two crew members using the weapons available to him; one of these two survives and manages to shut down Hal.
Indeed it would be the most “natural” of systems for us to construct for it would be merely a sort of repetition, on another scale, of the model of our own brain(s).

**Self-Fashioning and Altermondialisation**

To say that this is what we can do with our brain answers the question stated in the book’s title: *Que faire de notre cerveau?* The English title *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* with its implicit imperative, its assumption that we “must do something” (perhaps it is also Hal’s problem?), does not catch the full “plasticity” of the French title. For the *Que faire?* can also mean “what can we do . . . ?” quite simply extremely open-ended question: “what to do . . . ?” There is a plasticity to the title that is lost in the English version. There is more interrogation and less command in the French title. “Doing” plays a stronger role in “*que faire de . . . ?*” What shall we do, after all, with our brain other than use it, manipulate it, apply it, adapt with it? In short, how shall we sculpt ourselves by “using our brain?”

Malabou is saying we can sculpt ourselves as individuals but also as a community or society, though of course here the distinction between self and society may be tending to break down. After all, the key refrain in the final chapter of *Que faire de notre cerveau?*—one which perhaps plays with the Lacanian-Žižekian doctrine that “You are your symptoms”—is “You are your synapses.” Inasmuch as our synapses are the “joints” or connecting points between the countless nerve cells in our bodies (most concentrated in brain and spinal cord), this implies, once again, that “we” are de-centered. If our brain is no longer seen as occupying the central, authoritative position within the body (or more broadly within the self or within one’s concept of oneself) that at least in the West it has held for centuries, if it is now seen to be de-centered, differentiated, working in cooperation with the various channels or flows going in and out of “it,” then it means our concept of “ourselves” will also be changed.

But how can we really experience this new understanding of ourselves? This is where Malabou’s fundamentally Hegelian standpoint comes into play. The point is that we are always evolving, developing as human beings through a kind of ever-evolving, ever-expanding self-reflection. Here “self” includes body and brain (or mind), indeed includes a myriad of “synapses,” such that self-reflection increasingly means the expanding awareness of ourselves as just such a multiplicity of synapses, of interconnections. These interconnections are within us but they are also interpersonal and socio-political. In other words, in some respects like the early Merleau-Ponty, Malabou is taking Hegelian self-reflection in a more immediate and
empirical, or material, sense as self-sculpting or self-fashioning, and her point is also that the biological elements, parts or forms of which we consist, as well as ourselves as such forms, themselves “explode” into new forms—rather than moving “upward” through, say, the sort of idealized “self-negation” that drives Hegelian dialectical aufheben or sublation.

[The] threat of the explosion of form structurally inhabits every form . . . [and] one is formed only by a resistance to form itself. . . . [Our] identity is dialectical as it maintains itself in a struggle against auto-destruction. . . . The plasticity of the self supposes that it simultaneously receives and gives itself its own form. . . . [I]dentity is defined no longer as a permanent essence but as a proves of auto-constitution or “fashioning,” to reclaim the term used by Foucault, a process at whose heart a multiplicity of possible figurations unfolds. Today everyone leads multiple lives, at the same time and successively. Self-fashioning implies at once the elaboration of a form, a face, a figure, and the effacement of another form, another face, another figure. (Eng 71)

This praxis of self-fashioning is perhaps less Foucauldian than neo-Hegelian and Deleuzian: we might think here of Deleuze and Guattari’s praxis of “becoming-woman,” “becoming-animal,” “becoming-imperceptible” in A Thousand Plateaus, which is grounded in notions of the radical contingency and multiplicity of the “self.” And as with Deleuze, any such praxis is inevitably already social—“Today everyone leads multiple lives, at the same time and successively”—and political (Eng 71).

The socio-political dimension comes in here most clearly Malabou’s (phenomenological) emphasis on “world” and “worlding”: “the transition from a wired brain to a plastic brain is really the transition from a “brain-machine” to a “brain-world.” Malabou attempts to summarize her project under the banner of what she calls a biological “altermondialisation.” We cannot translate this neologism “altermondialisation” as “alter-globalism” (“other-globalism”); we have already learned from Jean-Luc Nancy that there is a difference between “globalization” and “mondialisation,” that is, between “globalizing” and

---

6 From Marc Jeannerod’s Introduction to Malabou’s book, p. xii.
Husserlian-Heideggerian “worlding.” "Globalism" starts with the globe, seeing it as a whole that is larger than its parts and in some sense as a rational (brain-) “machine” rather than a vital, living “brain-world.” “Mondialization” on the other hand implies the active shaping, sculpting (to use Malabou’s term), forming, worlding that is going and “giving character to” the world.

The basic point for Nancy is that a “world” implies a “human” world, society, culture rather than the formal-rational, non-human, computer-tech model that tends to be assumed by theories of globalization—where here the “machine-brain” is being taken still as the sovereign, the center of power. That is, the term “mondialisation” as it is currently used by Nancy and others—which might fit with the notion of glocalization except that this term is the logical “opposite” and counterpart of globalization—implies a multiplicity of living human cultures rather than a generalized, totalized global one. Thus to speak with Malabou of an altermondialisation or “other-worlding” is to speak of the multiplicity of individual human bodies-brains and its/their ongoing process of self-fashioning as a sort of self-othering, self-re-forming, one through which the myriad of inter-connections (“synapses”) within us becomes increasingly indistinguishable from the interconnected world/society/polis/culture outside of us and in which we live.

That is, the overcoming of the sovereignty (centralized power) implied by a machine-driven globalization depends crucially on this active process of self-overcoming or self-transforming, on its temporality, its event: “Brain plasticity shatters this concept [of Sovereignty]. The machine learns, differentiates itself, reconstitutes itself. Briefly put, it privileges the event over the law.” Malabou says: “plasticity allows us to combine the thought of a sculpture of the self with that of transdifferentiation” (Eng 79). This “transdifferentiation” combines the senses of spatial differentiation and temporal transformation, and Malabou stresses that as we shape our world by sculpting ourselves-and-it through the adaptability of the brain, we are also subject to its limitations. “To exist,” she writes, “is to be able to change difference while respecting the difference of change: the difference between continuous change, without limits, without adventure, without negativity, and a formative change that tells an effective story and proceeds by ruptures, conflicts, dilemmas” (Eng 79).

---

7 Husserl speaks of the phenomenological or experiential Lebeswelt, life-world; Heidegger in Being and Time sees human Dasein (being-there) as in-der-Welt-Sein, “being-in-the-world,” where the latter in particular implies that we are already in-a-world and thus have no essential “self” or “subjectivity” in the traditional philosophical sense.

8 Marc Jeannerod’s Introduction, p. xii.
We shape or sculpt ourselves because of our brain’s plasticity, but this process is never either fully active or fully passive. “Plasticity designates solidity as much as suppleness, designates the definitive character of the imprint, of configuration, or of modification. . . . Plasticity, rethought philosophically, could be the name of this entre-deux [between-two]” (Eng 82)—between activity and passivity, ability to change and to be changed, shaping and being shaped, modifying and being modified, historicizing and being historicized.

**Conclusion**

This praxis of “historicizing” takes us back, once again, to Hegel. Malabou in fact points out that what Hegel called “the natural soul” is what she is calling “the brain.” And Hegel’s constant preoccupation was the transformation of the mind’s natural existence into its historical and speculative being (Eng 81). By reiterating the dialectical character of this relation between the mind’s natural existence and its historical and speculative being, it becomes evident that Malabou’s understanding of plasticity is a reformulation of the Hegelian dialectic, of nature on the one hand and history and speculation on the other, and the tension between the two.

The interconnections between Malabou and the existential phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger’s contemporary, also seem clear. In *Que faire de notre cerveau?* (2004) Malabou helps to clarify her own philosophical “context” by citing the debate between Changeux and Ricoeur in the dialogue *What Makes Us Think?* yet it may surprise some readers that Merleau-Ponty goes unmentioned in her book. Malabou’s claim that “One pertinent way of envisaging the ‘mind-body problem’ consists in taking into account the dialectical tension that at once binds and opposes naturalness and intentionality, and in taking an interest in them as inhabiting the living core of a complex reality” might sound Merleau-Pontean as well as Hegelian (Eng 82). More specifically, to speak of the thrust beyond the stasis of “nature” (“naturalness”) toward change—of that thrust to “re-form” oneself, given the “threat of the explosion of form [that] structurally inhabits every form” (Eng 71)—as “intentionality” sounds explicitly phenomenological and more particularly Merleau-Pontean.

For Merleau-Ponty’s intentionality is always already embodied. He does not use the language of the brain, but certainly the cerebral functionings are part and

---

parcel of the embodied experience of the world that the early Merleau-Ponty of *The Structure of Behavior* stressed. Although he does not use the term “plasticity” our embodiment effectively involves a kind of bi-directional intentionality in which the rigidities of the world are presented and modified by the flexibilities of thinking, perceiving, acting. Could it not be said that Catherine Malabou’s study of the plasticity of the brain and also of “the consciousness of the brain” is in some respects an updating of Merleau-Ponty’s whole enterprise in *Phenomenology of Perception*?¹⁰

If the mind-body difference is a traditional philosophical “problem” that Malabou takes on in this book, so is the issue of determinism vs. freedom. It is not simply that we, as biological creatures with bodies-and-brains that have formed through evolution over the course of many millennia—are totally “pre-determined” nor that we are totally “free.” As with the problem of mind-body difference—our brain might be a fully bio-physio-chemical organ but we do not experience it this way, it does not appear (*phainomai*) to us this way—the “solution” cannot help but “keep” the problem, the paradox, even if it is sublated (*aufgehoben*) to a higher dialectical level. “To exist is to be able to change difference while respecting the difference of change: the difference between continuous change, without limits, without adventure, without negativity, and a formative change that tells an effective story and proceeds by ruptures, conflicts, dilemmas” (Eng 79). This “respecting” of the “difference of change” involves the idea, the necessity of maintaining it, of preserving these various differences including the difference or dialectic or paradox of limit-and-unlimited.

**Works Cited**


---

¹⁰ After all, Merleau-Ponty was also one of the great dialectical thinkers of the twentieth century—perhaps even more subtly and effectively than the great Marxian thinkers such as Lukacs, Marcuse, and Adorno, in that his dialectic also offers an account of the bodily motility, spatiality, sexuality, but also freedom, interworldliness, and embodiment, that form a political theory.

**About the Author**
Email: hsilverman@ms.cc.sunysb.edu

[Received 10 Mar. 2010; accepted 8 June 2010; revised 11 Aug. 2010]