

## EMBODIMENT, INTERSUBJECTIVITY, REVOLUTION

### AN EXPLORATION OF PHENOMENOLOGICAL ETHICS OF FREEDOM

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#### ABSTRACT

While criticising the notion of privileging consciousness in constructing the unity of objects, Merleau-Ponty tries to establish a third dimension by locating perception in the embodiment within the lived experiences. The body that inhabits the world with its situational spatiality is in living relation with its surroundings; however, the world that is inhabited by the body has a prehistory even before the body is enclosed in it. It leads to the understanding that the realisation of freedom is conditioned. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological description of freedom offers valuable insights into the ways in which oppression/discrimination/marginalisation/exclusion are experienced by the embodied self.

#### KEY WORDS

Perception, Embodiment, Intersubjectivity, Freedom, Revolution

#### INTRODUCTION

In his *Preface to Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty is occupied with the basic philosophical problem "to understand man and the world by beginning from their "facticity"" (*Phenomenology of Perception* lxx). The facticity is explored variously as 'milieu' or 'social space' or 'perceptual field' or 'schema of the world' in his works. The philosophical problem of understanding a human in a holistic sense was accentuated by the history of philosophy with its emphasis on the basic distinction between essence and existence, mind/consciousness and body/matter, and the subject and object. Though different philosophical schools of thought tried to address the unity of essence and existence/consciousness and body/subject and object in various ways, still one could find that either of them is privileged over the other in their explications. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological project of the unification of body, consciousness, world and the others has to be understood in the background of the intellectual climate that gave prominence to the Cartesian tradition's mind-body dualism (*Phenomenology of Perception* xxxii-

iii). This problem of the Cartesian dualism is described by Merleau-Ponty thus: "The Cartesian tradition has taught us to disentangle ourselves from the object: the reflective attitude purifies simultaneously the common notions of body and of soul by defining the body as a sum of parts without an interior and the soul as a being directly and fully present to itself... The experience of one's own body, then, is opposed to the reflective movement that disentangles the object from the subject and the subject from the object, and that only gives us thought about the body or the body as an idea, and not the experience of the body or the body in reality... But for Descartes, this strange knowledge that we have of our body thanks to the mere fact that we are our body remained subordinated to knowledge through ideas because behind man, such as he in fact is, stands God as the rational author of our factual situation." (*Phenomenology of Perception* 204-5)

By criticising the articulation of the dichotomous relationship between various aspects of reality, Merleau-Ponty reaches the unity of the subject and object through the notion of embodiment in the lived/perceived world. "The perceived world is the always presupposed foundation of all rationality, all value and all existence. This thesis does not destroy either rationality or the absolute. It only tries to bring them down to earth" (*The Primacy of Perception* 13). Having been influenced by Husserl's phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty delves deeper into the issues involved in perception and consciousness. However, his phenomenological understanding of perception takes into account his wider pursuits ranging from Gestalt psychology to Marxism. In this process, he redefines certain phenomenological notions, bringing into the phenomenological description of perception the 'exceptional' relation between the subject and body and its world. In this process, Merleau-Ponty finds phenomenology to be a philosophy that "places essences back within existence" (*Phenomenology of Perception* lxx).

In his philosophical research laced with philosophical anthropology, the Cartesian dualistic analysis of the body and mind has been overcome through a critique of the shared assumptions of empiricism and intellectualism. According to him, empiricism and intellectualism or realism and idealism drifted the philosophical analysis of the phenomenon in the direction ofthetic/nomothetic understanding of reality, without understanding the phenomenon synesthetically as embodied perception; where the materiality of the embodiment was swept under the carpet, by privileging consciousness as the active side of the embodied perception. This problem of the divide between materialism and idealism has been discussed by Marx in the first thesis of his *Theses on Feuerbach* too (Engels 63). However, Merleau-Ponty developed a radical description of embodied experience with a primacy given to embodiment.

Donald A. Landes says, "Empiricism includes any theory that privileges reductive explanations based upon externally related causes, and thus takes the body as one object among others, as an object *partes extra partes* (parts outside of parts). Intellectualism, on the other hand, encompasses

for him (Merleau-Ponty) any naïvely reflective theory that, although recognizing the importance of internal and meaningful relations, nonetheless privileges the role of consciousness in constituting the unity of objects (including one's own body) and of experience more generally, substituting for *causes* an equally "objective" understanding of *reason*. For Merleau-Ponty, this classical dilemma between a "pure exteriority" and a "pure interiority" obscures "the insertion of the mind in corporeality, the ambiguous relation we entertain with our body and, correlatively, with perceived things" (*Phenomenology of Perception* xxxiii).

While elaborating how Merleau-Ponty arrives at his notion of 'phenomenal field' by critiquing classical empiricism and intellectualism, Landes says that both traditions attempt for "constancy hypothesis" according to Merleau-Ponty; by constancy hypothesis, he means that both make "a constant connection between the points of stimuli on the sensory organs and the elementary perceptions" in a determinate way, rather than allowing the perception as an indeterminate positive phenomenon figured in the background of the lived world (xxxviii-ix). Though empiricism tries to cross the problem of constancy of perception through the introduction of notions such as association or projection of memories, it does not accommodate the intuitive and motivational/intentional factors associated with perception. "Objective thought is unaware of the subject of perception. This is because it takes the world as ready-made or as the milieu of every possible event and treats perception as one of these events", says Merleau-Ponty (214). By severing the ties between the subject and object and thereby constituting the object as in-itself and the subject as pure consciousness (334), the objective thought fails to grasp the phenomenon in its entirety – in its lived relation with objects.

Critiquing such nomothetic understanding of the world by the empiricism and the intellectualism, he brings together the cleavages in the philosophical analysis by introducing the notion of embodied perception. Merleau-Ponty does it by bringing the notion of consciousness within the phenomenal field of embodied perception. For Merleau-Ponty, existential analysis "goes beyond the classical alternatives between empiricism and intellectualism, or between explanation and reflection" (138).

While criticising the lop-sided notion of privileging consciousness in constructing the unity of objects in mind, he tries to establish a middle way or a third dimension or a common ground, by locating perception in the embodiment within the lived experiences, where the dualistic analysis of matter and idea, body and mind, object and subject, activity and passivity, autonomy and dependency will cease to be contradictory moments of reality. While trying to answer the question, "what is phenomenology?" in his preface to the *Phenomenology of Perception*, he goes a step

further to say radically that “the most important lesson of the [phenomenological] reduction is the impossibility of a complete reduction” and “the unfinished nature of phenomenology and the inchoate style in which it proceeds are not the sign of failure; they were inevitable because phenomenology’s task was to reveal the mystery of the world and the mystery of reason” (lxxvii, lxxxv). By establishing the problems in classical theories of perception, Merleau-Ponty aims to return to the ‘phenomenal field’. Phenomenal field is the place of our “living communication with the world that makes it present to us as the familiar place of our life” (53), where “fundamental philosophical act would thus be to return to the lived world beneath the objective world” (57).

In this paper, we shall attempt to see how Merleau-Ponty tries to avoid the pitfalls of philosophical analysis that severed the inextricable relation between various aspects of reality through his phenomenology of perception, especially through the notions of embodiment as a constituting body in a constituted world. We shall also try to explore his notions on freedom – as a way out of the suppressive living conditions – as a way to understand the phenomenological ethics of Merleau-Ponty. And by extension, we shall see how Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* can offer us the necessary tools for approaching the problem of various forms of discrimination, oppression, marginalisation and exclusion through his phenomenological ethics of freedom.

## PHENOMENOLOGY OF PERCEPTION

It is Husserl who first opened up the discussion of embodiment in phenomenological sense. In his Second Volume of *Ideas*, Husserl discusses about the body as constituting the correlations between the experiencing and the experienced, criticising the assumption of body as psychophysical entity. While elaborating embodiment as kinaesthetic consciousness, he says that the experiencing gets embodied in the body as a localised object existing among other objects in the world. For Husserl, “embodied experience is geared into the world as a communal nexus of meaningful situations, expressive gestures, and practical activities” (“Edmund Husserl”). Merleau-Ponty develops this notion further in his *Phenomenology of Perception*. While Husserl tried to understand phenomenon in its epistemological sense, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty gave the ontological turn to it.

In his *Translator’s Introduction to Phenomenology of Perception*, Landes sums up the Husserlian influence on Merleau-Ponty, thus: “This exposure to Husserl’s late work – that is, the shift from static and transcendental phenomenology to something of a genetic phenomenology – is clearly influential in *Phenomenology of Perception*. But despite this new immersion in Husserlian phenomenology, his major thesis provides no direct exegetical study of Husserl’s texts and, notwithstanding the Preface (written after the project had been completed), it contains no systematization of phenomenological doctrine. Beginning from a glimpse at the richness of

Husserl's late and unpublished work, Merleau-Ponty presents his own study of perception and his own insights into the centrality of embodiment toward an original contribution to the phenomenological tradition" (*Phenomenology of Perception* xxxvi). Even though Husserl discussed about embodiment, there is still a lapse on the part of phenomenologists who give over-emphasis to consciousness as the constitutive principle of the experiencing body within a phenomenon. However, Merleau-Ponty, by emphasising the embodiment in his phenomenological description, gives its due in the subject-object dialectics within a phenomenon.

While mentioning the accomplishment of phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty states that it has "joined an extreme subjectivism with an extreme objectivism through its concept of the world or of rationality" (lxxxiv). Further, while explaining what he means by rationality and its relation to the world, he says in *Primacy of Perception* that "all consciousness is perceptual" and that "the perceived world is the always presupposed foundation of all rationality, all value, and all existence" (13). And he goes on to say that "perception is a nascent *logos*; that it teaches us, outside of all dogmatism, the true conditions of objectivity itself" (37). In the above descriptions, one could find that how elegantly Merleau-Ponty combines the supposed to be dichotomies of reality, such as subject and object, subjectivity and rationality, and mind and matter.

While declaring that "Consciousness is originally not an "I think that", but rather an "I can", he conjoins the perception with *praxis* by clarifying that "motricity as original intentionality" (*Phenomenology of Perception* 139). The consciousness is not a presuppositionless or vacuous signifier, but it "projects itself into a physical world and has a body, just as it projects itself into a cultural world and has a habitus" (139). The consciousness as embodiment is located in a particular social milieu with its economic, political, cultural, legal, moral and religious entanglements. He says, "Thought is the inter-human life such as it comprehends and interprets itself. In this voluntary taking up, in this passage from objective to subjective, it is impossible to say where the forces of history end or where ours begin, and strictly speaking the question is meaningless, since history only exists for a subject who lives through it and a subject only exists as historically situated. History has no single signification; what we do always has several senses, and this is how an existential conception of history is distinguished from both materialism and spiritualism. But every cultural phenomenon has (among others) an economic signification and, no more than can history be reduced to economics, history in principle never transcends economics either. The conception of law, morality, religion, and economic structure are co-signified in the Unity of the social event" (177). In the present academic parlance, his methodology of the phenomenology of embodied perception could be called as an intersectional methodology too.

While explaining his philosophical anthropology that “I perceive with my body” (341), he further says that “every perception is a communication or a communion” (334). When the embodied self perceives, it communicates with the world, the Other and the differences. This notion is further explained through his notion of intersubjectivity which shall be discussed in the later part of this paper. His notion of perception, however, as communication or communion can be further understood through his conception of ‘perceptual field’. According to him, the perceptual field is “a surface of contact with the world or a perpetual rooting in it; it is because the world ceaselessly bombards and besieges subjectivity just as waves surround a shipwreck on the beach” (214-5).

The perceptual field is not limited to the ‘natural world’, but it is also related with the ‘social world’. Merleau-Ponty says, “Our relation to the social, like our relation to the world, is deeper than every explicit perception and deeper than every judgment. It is just as false to place us within society like an object in the midst of other objects, as it is to put society in us as an object of thought, and the error on both sides consists in treating the social as an object. We must return to the social world with which we are in contact through the simple fact of our existence, and that we inseparably bear along with us prior to every objectification” (379). In this conception of the communion with the world and the social world, the human is not a passive receiver of the significations, but he/she is in “virtual communication with them”. Moreover, this communication is an aspect of intersubjectivity too, as the other is not treated as an object with which the self is in dialogue with. For he says, “I must already grasp around my absolute individuality something like a halo of generality, or an atmosphere of “sociality”” (474). Even before Merleau-Ponty, the French sociologist, Emile Durkheim, talked about the coupling of the individual and the social in a human, by saying that “man is double” (Durkheim 16). Though Durkheim called the human as an individual organism and social at the same time, Merleau-Ponty understood the human as an embodied self where “the social exists silently and as a solicitation” (*Phenomenology of Perception* 379). As he places phenomenological exercise within the framework of ‘social space’, its economic and cultural sphere of the lived world, he tries to bring the entire of gamut of lived world – time and space, self and embodiment, the objective world and the phenomenal field – within the phenomenological description of reality.

In this context, it would be pertinent to see what Merleau-Ponty means by history too. In his inaugural lecture at the College de France in January 1953, he explains it further. His notions on history is more of Marxist stuff, though he concurs that the elements of phenomenology can be found in Marx too (lxxi). Merleau-Ponty says, “Marx, therefore, does not transfer the dialectic into things; he transforms it into men, understood of course with all their human equipment as being engaged, through work and culture, in an enterprise which transforms nature and social relations. Philosophy is not an illusion. It is the algebra of history” (*In Praise of Philosophy* 51).

John Wild and James M. Edie, in their *Preface* to Merleau-Ponty's *In Praise of Philosophy*, state that "Merleau-Ponty views man as an essentially historical being and history as the dialectic of meaning and non-meaning which is working itself out through the complex, unpredictable interaction of men and the world" (xix). However, he slightly deviates from Marxist understanding (of history as the history of class struggle) to give prominence to the lived world. Merleau-Ponty says, "Historical meaning is immanent in the interhuman event, and is as fragile as the event... Every appeal to universal history cuts off the meaning of the specific event, renders effective history insignificant, and is a nihilism in disguise... It is in history that philosophy learns to know this philosophical negativity, to which one vainly opposes the finished completeness of history" (51-3). He does not only give prominence to the lived world in understanding history, but he also relates history with philosophy; he continues to say, "Philosophy is in history, and is never independent of historical discourse... It is never content to accept its historical situation... Hence it is no more possible to set up a one-to-one correspondence between the historical event and the conscious philosophical interpretations of this event, than between the event and its objective conditions" (57). He opines the same in the *Preface* to *Phenomenology of Perception* also (lxxxv). Since "history is always lived history" (*Phenomenology of Perception* 475) emerging from the lived world, philosophical discourses happen as an event in a historical milieu though there is no one-to-one relation between them. Merleau-Ponty finds such an ambiguity in all kinds of relations too.

Simone de Beauvoir sums up Merleau-Ponty's notions on perception in her *Review of The Phenomenology of Perception*, published in *Les Temps Modernes* in 1945, thus: "Sensation is neither a quality nor the consciousness of a quality; it is a vital communication with the world, an intentional network... The "thing", then, first denies itself not as a resistance but, on the contrary, as the correlative to my existence: it is a "structure" accessible to inspection by the body, and it is why reality seems to us to be full of human significations... Thus, perception is not a relationship between a subject and an object foreign to one another; it ties us to the world as to our homeland, it is communication and communion, "the taking back into ourselves of a foreign intention", or inversely, "the exterior accomplishment of our perceptual powers"" (Beauvoir 162).

## PRIMACY OF BODY IN PERCEPTION

"Merleau-Ponty embraces Marcel's claim that "*I am my body*", and the rigorous phenomenological exploration of this declaration is one of the key engines of *Phenomenology of Perception*" says Donald A. Landes (*Phenomenology of Perception* xxxiii). Here, the Cartesian dualism of the mind and body, in which the consciousness is privileged, gets solved through the notion of embodiment. When Merleau-Ponty invokes "my own body" (93), it is not in the sense

of owning or possessing the body as an object or a psychophysical entity known to the third person; it is not a spatial entity that occupies a certain space in the world. Rather he suggests it as a lived body that is mine which constitutes the already constituted world. It "promises to establish *"for-us an in-itself"*". Hence, the perceiving embodied subject escapes totalisation and the embodied subject is "that by which there are objects" whose "permanence is a metaphysical one, not a factual one". (xl-i). It overflows itself being a psychophysical entity; it is 'metaphysical' as it is intentional, carrying "the intentional threads that unite it to its surroundings and that, in the end, will reveal to us the perceiving subject as well as the perceived world" (74).

Body is not of incoherent parts or senses, but it is the inter-sensory unity of a "world" (139). What Merleau-Ponty means by this unity? How is this unity achieved through his notion of embodiment? How does this unity dissolve the knowledge-motion or the consciousness-motricity dichotomy? He compares the body's unity with the 'work of art', as a kind of *poesis* in the Heideggerian sense. He says, "A novel, a poem, a painting, and a piece of music are individuals, that is, beings in which the expression cannot be distinguished from the expressed, whose sense is only accessible through direct contact, and who send forth their signification without ever leaving their temporal and spatial place. It is in this sense that our body is comparable to the work of art" (153). The body's unity as a work of art is loaded with hermeneutical possibilities with no eternal significations; it is a knot of living significations; it comprises 'existential modulation' but still locked up in its materiality; it is an inter-human event where the obsession with the 'purity' of the subject and object has been erased; It is a 'single gesture' of sensory unity where different segments perform together as cogs within a wheel (152-3). Body's unity is a lived integration among its parts and among its regions of experience in which the parts are understood in relation to the meaningful whole, and in this sense the body's unity is comparable to the unity of a work of art. "In the organism–environment relation and between the levels of behavior themselves (physical, vital, and human), there is a *dialectical* relation of *sense* not reducible to its *mechanical* or causal factors, a whole not reducible to its parts" (xxxiv), says Landes. In other words, one might say that the whole is more than the sum of its parts. In this way, his phenomenological exercise avoids the pitfalls of reducing reflection to mere sensations, by incorporating various moments of existence within the field of embodied perception.

This notion of body's unity is expressed by Merleau-Ponty simultaneously as 'total existence' and 'a provisional sketch of total being'. That is to say that body's unity is not a unity of psychophysical entities or psychosomatic unity, but the unity is hermeneutically loaded with ontological or existential unity of the self, its embodiment and its lived world. Merleau-Ponty says, "The body expresses total existence in this way, not that it is an external accompaniment of it, but because existence accomplishes itself in the body. This embodied sense is the central phenomenon of



which body and mind, or sign and signification are abstract moments" (169). He further states that "I am my body, at least to the extent that I have an acquisition, and reciprocally my body is something like a natural subject, or a provisional sketch of my total being" (205).

The body's unity is also the synthesis of unity of senses, as unity of senses is possible only through the body and not consciousness, according to Merleau-Ponty. The motion or movement becomes possible through unity of senses; and through the unity of senses, the speech and the gestures/actions are entangled. He says, "This synthesis (unity of senses) cannot be understood as the subsumption of the senses beneath an originary consciousness, but rather through their never completed integration into a single knowing organism (body)... Movement, not understood as objective movement and shifting of locations in space, but rather as a movement project or as "virtual movement," is the foundation of the unity of the senses... The speech and the gesture communicate through my body, just as the sensory appearances of my body are immediately symbolic of each other because my body is precisely a ready-made system of equivalences and of inter-sensory transpositions. The senses translate each other without the need for an interpreter; they understand each other without having to pass through the idea" (242-4). This description sums up what he means by body's unity with all its ambiguity. Moreover, the body's unity needs to be understood in terms of the 'existential unity of the thing'. The existential unity of the thing is 'burdened with anthropological predicates' as the relations among the things are mediated by the body; hence, "the setting of our own life must in fact be all of nature; nature must be our interlocutor in a sort of dialogue" (333-4). In summary, one can understand that Merleau-Ponty's notion of body's unity is a complex matrix of senses, actions, self, lived world and experiences.

Merleau-Ponty uses the term 'body schema' to denote the 'body's unity'. Even though the term was commonly used as a summation of body functions and bodily experiences, he provides a different signification to it. While explaining the need for the introduction of this new term into his phenomenological explication of perception, he says that "it was in order to express that the spatial and temporal unity, the inter-sensorial unity, or the sensorimotor unity of the body is, so to speak, an in principle unity, to express that this unity is not limited to contents actually and fortuitously associated in the course of our experience, that it somehow precedes them and in fact makes their association possible." In his usage, body schema suggests that one holds one's body as an 'indivisible possession', still it is full of ambiguity. The body schema is "a manner of expressing that my body is in and toward the world" (101-3). Though the body schema is ambiguous, it has its own inner logic conceived with the embodiment in a lived world and experience. "To have a body is to possess a universal arrangement, a schema of all perceptual

developments and of all inter-sensory correspondences beyond the segment of the world that we are actually perceiving. Thus, a thing is not actually *given* in perception, it is inwardly taken up by us, reconstituted and lived by us insofar as it is linked to a world whose fundamental structures we carry with ourselves and of which this thing is just one of several possible concretions. Although lived by us, the thing is no less transcendent to our life, because the human body, along with its habits that outline a human environment around itself, is crossed by a movement toward the world itself" (341).

While elaborating his understanding of the body schema, he says, it is not merely a matrix of spacio-temporal unity, inter-sensory unity and sensorimotor unity. The body schema is a 'theory of perception'; it is about the 'rediscovery of oneself' as "one perceives with the body, then the body is a natural myself and, as it were, the body is the subject of perception" (213). It is about ontological and hermeneutical possibilities. It is "an open system of an infinity of equivalent positions in different orientations... this immediately given invariant by which different motor tasks are instantly transposable... that it gives a motor sense to the verbal instructions" (142).

When Merleau-Ponty talks about the sensorimotor unity and transposing of verbal instructions to motor tasks, he says that motricity is the original intentionality (139). While discussing about the conditions of a patient's body, especially about the conditions of apraxia, the body is available to the patient as an 'amorphous mass'; "even if the instructions have for him an *intellectual signification*, they do not have a *motor signification*, they do not speak to him as a motor subject"; and the instructions are not operative with the 'motor power', 'motor project' and 'motor intentionality'. But in the case of the normal person, there is an inextricable relation between movement and the consciousness of the movement which combine them to make it as "moments of a single whole" (112-3). This indissoluble link between the intellectual signification and the motor signification is what he terms as motor intentionality, by concretising the phenomenological notion of intentionality in the embodied self. By motor intentionality, he means "the life of consciousness – epistemic life, the life of desire, or perceptual life – is underpinned by an "intentional arc" that projects around us our past, our future, our human milieu, our physical situation, our ideological situation, and our moral situation, or rather, that ensures that we are situated within all of these relationships. This intentional arc creates the unity of the senses, the unity of the senses with intelligence, and the unity of sensitivity and motricity. And this is what "goes limp" in the disorder" (137).

His notions on 'motricity', 'motor intentionality' and embodiment as a moving toward the world abrogates phenomenology merely as descriptive science, by leaving behind the dichotomy of consciousness and practice and the usual pitfall of privileging consciousness or intentionality (as a mere function of consciousness) as mover of the body. Though phenomenology, in its

epistemological and ontological senses, tries to solve the consciousness-practice dichotomy, Merleau-Ponty's introduction of terms such as motor intentionality and embodiment makes it concretised.

When Merleau-Ponty explained the body schema as "a manner of expressing that my body is in and toward the world", the relation between the body and the world needs a little elaboration. He says, "One's own body is in the world just as the heart is in the organism: it continuously breathes life into the visible spectacle, animates it and nourishes it from within, and forms a system with it" (209). The relation between the body and the world is a 'living relation' (216), out of which the lived world and lived experiences emerge. He explains this notion further by bringing in the categories of space and time. In this way, he reveals the manner in which body is related to the world with his radical pronouncement that "we must not say that our body is *in* space, nor for that matter *in* time. It *inhabits* space and time" (140). Continuing this radical position, Merleau-Ponty says, "I am not in space and in time, nor do I think space and time; rather, I am of space and of time; my body fits itself to them and embraces them. The scope of this hold measures the scope of my existence; however, it can never in any case be total. The space and time that I inhabit are always surrounded by indeterminate horizons that contain other points of view" (141). What he means is that there is an inextricable relation between the body and the world, with their indeterminate number of hermeneutical possibilities of lived experiences within the lived world that the body inhabits. However, the lived world cleaves from the natural world of objects.

He clarifies further that "How the body inhabits space (and time, for that matter) can be seen more clearly by considering the body in motion because movement is not content with passively undergoing space and time, it actively assumes them, it takes them up in their original signification that is effaced in the banality of established situations" (105). As the body is toward the world as a movement, it changes the original signification of the (natural) world through its situatedness. Hence body's spatial-temporality is not a 'spatial-temporal sensation', but it is a "*situational spatiality*" (102). The 'bodily space' is also the 'intelligible space' which cannot be separated from the 'oriented space' (104). Hence the spatial-temporal inhabitation of body in the world becomes a 'homogeneous space' through the embodied perception. On the other hand, Merleau-Ponty maintains the autonomy of the natural world too by saying that "The world has its unity without the mind having succeeded in linking its sides together and in integrating them in the conception of a geometrical plan" (342).

While commenting on Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the relation between the body and the world, Simone de Beauvoir says in her *Review of The Phenomenology of Perception* that "Our body

is not first posited in the world the way a tree or a rock is. It lives in the world; it is our general way of having a world. It expresses our existence, which signifies not that it is an exterior accompaniment of our existence, but that our existence realizes itself in it... And this body is not enclosed in the instant but implies an entire history, and even a prehistory" (Beauvoir 161-3). By incorporating the world of objects into the schema of body and by bringing them to the non-metaphysical side of any interpretative distance, the embodied subject carries forward the fore-structures of its past by restructuring the perceived world, and reconfiguring its own body schema in a dialectical process.

Merleau-Ponty emphasized the body as the primary site of perceiving the world, whereby he tried to rectify the long philosophical tradition that places consciousness as the source of knowledge; and he tried to elaborate that the body and that which it perceives cannot be disentangled from each other, though the objective world exists beneath the perceived world. The articulation of the primacy of embodiment led him away from phenomenology towards what he was to call "indirect ontology" (*The Visible and Invisible* 179) or the ontology of "the flesh of the world" (*la chair du monde*) (84, 123), seen in his final and incomplete work, *The Visible and Invisible*, and his last published essay, *Eye and Mind*.

## BODY SCHEMA AND THE SCHEMA OF THE WORLD

So far, the aspects of perception, embodiment and body's relation with the world have been discussed. The body's inhabiting the world raises certain issues regarding the notion of freedom from the point of view of phenomenological ethics. The body that inhabits the world with its situational spatiality is in living relation with its surroundings. However, the world that is inhabited by the body has a prehistory even before the body is enclosed in it. Here, one can witness the problem of freedom as the body inhabits the world that is prior to itself and hence the realisation of freedom is conditioned. Whereas Sartre claimed that man is condemned to be free, for Merleau-Ponty, however, the freedom is conditioned as the body inhabits the space and time that are prior to itself, though the body is in living relation with the world. Also, as a constituting embodied self in relation to the constituted world, its freedom is conditioned.

His insights on sexuality can give us the glimpse of an understanding as to how the freedom of the embodied self is conditioned due to the conditioning lived world. While talking about sexuality, he opines, "Sexuality is neither transcended in human life nor represented at its core through unconscious representations. It is continuously present in human life as an atmosphere" (*Phenomenology of Perception* 171). If the body or the embodiment is considered to be the natural power of expression and of perception, how the gendered body or the cultural body could be explained in the phenomenological description of perception and expression? Merleau-Ponty says,

“sexuality can motivate privileged forms of my experience without being the object of an explicit act of consciousness. Thus understood as an ambiguous atmosphere, sexuality is coextensive with life... There is osmosis between sexuality and existence, that is, if existence diffuses throughout sexuality, sexuality reciprocally diffuses throughout existence, such that it is impossible to identify the contribution of sexual motivation and the contribution of other motivations for a given decision or action, and it is impossible to characterize a decision or an action as “sexual” or as “nonsexual”” (172).

Merleau-Ponty identifies an intricate living relation between the self and the sexuality in the body schema. This opens up the issues related to how one exists coextensively through certain socially constructed categories or biological differences which affects the perception and lived experiences. This notion can be extended to racial and colour discriminations too, as certain body features like complexion and morphology can affect the way of perception according to the lived experiences one gains through the schema of the constituted world in which one inhabits. Further, this may help us for the phenomenological description of perception related to culturally constructed identities, like caste, language, region, gender, etc., through Merleau-Ponty’s notions on embodiment. In this sense, Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological understanding of embodiment would help us to navigate the ethical issues involved in the dialectical living relation between the body schema and the schema of the world.

It is very much necessary to emphasise the fact that the schema of the world that one experiences from one’s situatedness is not a hallucination, nor a perverted consciousness, nor a wishful imagination, nor a distorted perception, according to Merleau-Ponty. This point has to be emphasised as there is a common sense among the dominant conservatives that the consciousness of the suppressed embodiment, due to one’s situatedness as Black, woman, third gender, Dalit, tribal, minority, etc., is such a distorted perception of reality. However, Merleau-Ponty was very much emphatic to clarify, while talking about how class consciousness pervades the embodiment of the proletariat, that “The chief of police may indeed see history this way” (471); as the police official is the embodiment of the state administrative machinery that constitutes his lived world – which wants to maintain the status quo of the existing power relations in the already constituted capitalist economic schema of the world against the emancipatory interests of the workers – the police official may perceive the emancipatory interests of the workers as distorted perception. This can be extended to how a male chauvinist or the dominant male looks at the feminist interests of the woman toward her freedom; how an embodied White perceives the emancipatory interests of the Blacks; how a casteist embodiment perceives the emancipatory interests of the Dalits and the tribals.

Further, in order to explicate the inner ambiguous dynamics of body and consciousness, he explains it through sexuality. Here, he underscores the point that how culture transforms the lived world and experiences. For Merleau-Ponty, "Its unity is always implicit and confused. It is always something other than what it is: always sexuality at the same time as freedom, always rooted in nature at the very moment it is transformed by culture; it is never self-enclosed but never transcended" (205). The sexuality is implicit and confused in the body schema, since it is other than what it is but culturally rooted and transformed. Even though Merleau-Ponty does not make the difference between sexuality and gender typically – sexuality as a biological component rooted in the body as a physical entity, and gender as a socio-cultural construction – he expresses the same theory of gender without using the two different technical terminologies explicitly. The nature is transformed by the culture and the culture becomes the second nature or the transformed nature. This helps us to penetrate into the nexus between the communal existence which coexists with embodiment of the self.

By asking the question "in what sense sexuality expresses existence", he ventures into the phenomenological description of sexualised embodiment of the self through the psychological case of aphonia. In the case of aphonia of a young woman who has been forbidden by her mother to see the person of her love, the young woman loses her appetite, sleep and her ability to express her inner tensions in a hostile life-world. In this case, "Aphonia, then, represents a refusal of coexistence, just as a fit of hysterics is, for other patients, a means of fleeing the situation. The patient breaks with the relational life of the familial milieu. More generally, she tends to break with life itself: if she can no longer swallow food, this is because swallowing symbolizes the movement of existence that allows itself to undergo events and assimilate them. The patient is literally unable "to swallow" the prohibition that has been imposed upon her... But if the body constantly expresses the modalities of existence, we will see that this is not in the same manner as the stripes signify an officer's rank or as a number designates a house. The sign here does not only indicate its signification, but is also inhabited by it" (163-4). But when the condition is reversed by her mother, the young woman might enter into a normal life within the coextensive lifeworld. This psychological case of aphonia is not merely a symptom of psychosomatic coordination of mind and body; rather it is the case of embodied self which refuses to coexist with its communal/familial environment when its freedom to choose is denied and conditioned.

This intricate living relation between the embodied self and the schema of the world becomes a little more clarified in his *Note on the Existential Interpretation of Dialectical Materialism*. In this part of his book, *Phenomenology of Perception*, he raises a basic question and tries to explain the problem of the living relation between the embodied self and the schema of the world. He asks, "If economic relations are not expressed in the mode of *Mitsein* [being-with], then is not the mode

of *Mitsein* expressed in economic relations?" and he answers, "Just as our entire life, as we have said, breathes within a sexual atmosphere, without our being able to identify a single content of consciousness that would be "purely sexual" or that would not be sexual at all, so too the economic and social drama offers each consciousness a certain background or again a certain *imago* that it will decode in its own manner, and, in this sense, this drama is coextensive with history" (176-77). The self in its embodiment is inextricably linked to its historical, economic, social, cultural and political milieu; its lifeworld is inextricably constituted by the influence of these 'exterior' forces of the world even if the embodied self struggles against the social drama and its lived world. This explains basically how one feels as a man or woman, a bourgeois or proletarian, an 'upper' caste or 'lower' caste, a White or Black, a majority or minority from the lived experiences one gains from the 'situational spatiality' of one's embodiment.

### INTERSUBJECTIVITY, FREEDOM, REVOLUTION AND PHENOMENOLOGICAL ETHICS

The living relation between the embodied self and the world schema opens up the intrinsic problems associated with freedom, in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological exercise. It opens the floodgate of issues of freedom in which the existential phenomenologists like Sartre took a different call to underlie the notion of human freedom as an unconditioned one, in spite of one's situatedness. In a sense, such descriptions of unhindered and unlimited freedom of the self keeps the self away from the milieu and it locates the self in an a-historical paradigm, by relieving the ontology away from the historical environment in which the self inhabits. Such 'metaphysical presence' (Derridian sense) in ontological description of freedom is plenty in the 'Indian' philosophical systems of thought too. However, Merleau-Ponty's understanding of freedom gives us the hope to look at the freedom project being situated in a historical milieu. For this, he takes up both the phenomenological tools and Marxism to explicate what he understands by freedom of the embodied self.

As we have seen already that the self *inhabits* the world, and not merely *in* the world, the inhabitation of the self in the world is inextricably related to the socio-historical space and time. Hence, Merleau-Ponty arrives at the understanding that freedom is limited/conditioned because of this facticity, by questioning the notions of absolute freedom. If the embodied self is not outside of space and time, nor it is merely the subject of them, the notion of freedom has to be approached within the existential situatedness of the embodied self, and not intellectually as an epistemological problem. However, as we have seen above, the relationship between the body schema and the world schema is an ambiguous matrix, the freedom needs to be explained in relation to one's historical situatedness. Hence, "Merleau-Ponty argues that the classical

distinction between determinism and absolute freedom fails to capture our conditioned and situated freedom, which is required given our being as the taking up of the past and present toward a future" (xlvi). Merleau-Ponty makes it clear that freedom cannot be analysed in an idealistic determinist sense nor as an intellectual project, but from the phenomenological notion of intersubjectivity and as a future project emerging out of the present situatedness of the embodied self.

While discussing about how one gains a class consciousness either as a bourgeois or as a proletarian in the modern capitalistic socio-economic situatedness, Merleau-Ponty says, it is the "way of being in the world within this institutional framework... I am born and that I exist in order to experience my life as difficult and constrained – I do not choose to experience it this way. But things might well stay right there without my reaching class consciousness, understanding myself as a proletarian". Still one might ask how an embodied self within the capitalistic milieu understands its situatedness as proletarian, not as free and equal individual? Merleau-Ponty says that this consciousness of the embodied self is derived from one's own lived experiences. For, "[As a worker], I have a certain style of life: I am at the mercy of unemployment and prosperity; I cannot do with my life whatever I please; I am paid on a weekly basis; I control neither the conditions, nor the products of my labor. And as a result, I feel like a foreigner in my factory, my nation, and my life. I am accustomed to dealing with a *fatum* [destiny] that I do not respect, but that must be humored. Or perhaps I work as a day-laborer: I have no farm of my own, nor even any work tools; I move from farm to farm, renting myself out during harvest season; I sense a nameless power hovering over me that turns me into a nomad, even when I would like to settle down" (469).

The worker's consciousness of him as a worker emerges out of the world schema in which he inhabits; it is not a perverted intellectual attitude of the proletarian toward the other as the bourgeois or a police officer thinks of him. This same phenomenological description about how the embodied self feels itself as a suppressed, unfree and unequal self may very well help for the understanding of discrimination/domination/suppression/marginalisation of a group of people within a particular milieu, in terms of race, gender, religion, caste, language, region, etc. That is, the embodied self feels an alienated existence that emerges from the milieu in which the self is situated. Here, Merleau-Ponty takes the clue about the notion of alienation or the alienated existence of the self from the Hegelian-Marxist tradition (McLellan 117-32).

This consciousness of the embodied self that emerges out of its own matrix of relation with the world and with the others is not a 'second order operation' nor a wilful thought by the embodied self. Merleau-Ponty says, "we need not wonder why the thinking subject or consciousness catches sight of itself as a man, an embodied subject, or an historical subject, and we should not treat this apperception as a second-order operation that the subject would perform beginning from his



absolute existence. The absolute flow appears perspectively to its own gaze as “a consciousness” (or as a man or an embodied subject) because it is a field of presence – presence to itself, to others, and to the world – and because this presence throws it into the natural and cultural world from which it can be understood” (477-8).

That is to say that freedom is not an individualised project; but it is also about the complex matrix of the structure which inhabits the embodied self. That is the reason why Merleau-Ponty claims that “My actual freedom is not on this side of my being, but out in front of me, among the things” (479). However, Merleau-Ponty quickly adds that it is not a deterministic understanding of the world; but a process that happens simultaneously in a dialectical way. He quips and answers thus: “What then is freedom? To be born is to be simultaneously born of the world and to be born into the world. The world is always already constituted, but also never completely constituted. In the first relation we are solicited, in the second we are open to an infinity of possibilities. Yet this analysis remains abstract, for we exist in both ways *simultaneously*. Thus, there is never determinism and never an absolute choice... In this exchange between the situation and the one who takes it up, it is impossible to determine the “contribution of the situation” and the “contribution of freedom”... Freedom is not without supports within being. It is not ultimately a bare consciousness that resists pain... which is again to say a certain mode of *Mit-Sein* [being with]... ” (480). Such an understanding is neither because of the network of determinism nor because of the purely individualistic desire; thus, Merleau-Ponty’s account of freedom avoids the pitfalls of absolute freedom.

As “freedom is always an encounter between the exterior and the interior”, and as “we are mixed up with the world and with others in an inextricable confusion”, “the idea of a situation precludes there being an absolute freedom at the origin of our commitments and, for that matter, at the end” (481). From Merleau-Ponty’s point of view of phenomenological ethics, freedom is not an individual project, nor it is due to the exteriorly constituted world, but it is a ‘being-with’; which means that “if he (a comrade) is committed to this action, if he ties himself to his comrades or clings to this morality, this is because the historical situation, his comrades, and the world around him seemed to him to expect this particular behavior from him” (480-1). The ambiguity of freedom is that it is a being-with the comrades who have the similar experiences of the lived world, which is due to the alienated existence one gains through his/her situational spatiality within the lifeworld.

We have already seen that according to Merleau-Ponty, class consciousness is not a second order operation. Still Merleau-Ponty clarifies a little more about the formation of class consciousness in

the embodied self. It was already discussed how Merleau-Ponty looks at the class consciousness as emerging from the institutional framework. He says that the generality and the individuality are inter-penetrative. "Generality already intervenes, our presence to ourselves is already mediated by it. We cease to be pure consciousness the moment that the natural or social constellation ceases to be an unformulated "this" and is crystallized into a situation, from the moment it takes on a sense, in short, from the moment we exist" (476). However, he adds that the generality and individuality are anonymities too. "Each of us must be at once anonymous in the sense of an absolute individuality and anonymous in the sense of an absolute generality. Our being in the world is the concrete bearer of this double anonymity" (474). This double anonymity is what he terms otherwise as intersubjectivity.

With the inter-penetration of the generality and the individuality from within the inextricable schema of the body and the world, the class consciousness gets reified and it leads to the polarisation of the social space out of which there is the birth of revolutionary changes. "For class is neither simply recorded, nor established by decree; just like the *fatum* of the capitalist machine and just like the revolution, class is – prior to being conceived – lived as an obsessive presence, as a possibility, as an enigma, and as a myth" (472). Out of this obsessive presence which makes a cleavage among the selves as one who owns the means of production and one who sells his labour because of the lack of means of production, "Social space begins to become polarized, and a region of "the exploited" appears. Upon every upsurge, coming from any point on the social horizon whatsoever, the regrouping takes shape beyond different ideologies and trades" (470). Out of the 'valuation of the present', the 'free project of the future' is established through the network of embodied selves adhering to a morality that emerges from the shared feeling of intersubjectivity.

The revolutionary project towards freedom and equality is not due to mechanistic or causal equations of thought; nor it is due to the deliberate judgment or propaganda; nor it is 'spontaneous, instantaneous and unmotivated valuation'. The revolution "was prepared for by a molecular process, it ripens in coexistence prior to bursting forth in words and relating to objective ends". The 'relaxation of demands of life' and the 'room for a new life project' emerges out of the revolution on the basis of 'a certain ground of coexistence', according to Merleau-Ponty (471). While relating the freedom with history, he says, "having taken hold of history, an individual directs it (at least for a time) well beyond what seemed to be its sense and commits history to a new dialectic... We are not claiming that history has a single sense from beginning to end, any more than an individual life does. In any case, we mean that freedom only modifies history by taking up what history *offered* at the moment in question, and it does so by a sort of shift or slippage" (476). As 'history is always lived history', it is the coexisting humans who "give history its sense, but not

without history offering us that sense" (468, 475). Almost Merleau-Ponty's notion of history and freedom resembles that of Marx's famous statement that "Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past" ("The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte").

Now, it would be pertinent to see what Merleau-Ponty means by intersubjectivity and how intersubjectivity becomes possible. Already, it was discussed that intersubjectivity is a double anonymity, according to him. If so, how could one "experience the near presence of others in a veil of anonymity"? (363). For this, Merleau-Ponty answers that "The other is neither necessarily, nor even ever fully, an object for me... The-Other-as-an-object is only an insincere modality of the other, just as absolute subjectivity is only an abstract notion of myself. Thus, even in my most radical reflection, I must already grasp around my absolute individuality something like a halo of generality, or an atmosphere of "sociality"" (474). As discussed already, the generality is individuated in the embodied self; hence, the 'social exists silently and as a solicitation' (379) to the individual, which makes the intersubjectivity possible among the individuals. The generality and the individuality of the subject are "two moments of a single structure" (476-7). He further states, "why the experience of each one fits with that of others. The question itself, however, must be put into question, for we are not given a fragment of time followed by another or an individual flow followed by another, but rather each subjectivity taking itself up, and subjectivities taking each other up in the generality of a nature, or the cohesion of an intersubjective life of a world. The present actualizes the mediation between the For-Itself and the For-Others, between individuality and generality... I am everything that I see and I am an intersubjective field, not in spite of my body and my historical situation, but rather by being this body and this situation and by being, through them, everything else" (478).

The relation between the *I* and the *Other* or the *I* and the *general I* is possible because of phenomenological perception together with the embodiment in the world and the historical situation. In this manner, he suggests that the transcendental subjectivity of Husserl can be the basis of intersubjectivity (lxxvi). Because, "The phenomenological world is not pure being, but rather the sense that shines forth at the intersection of my experiences and at the intersection of my experiences with those of others through a sort of gearing into each other. The phenomenological world is thus inseparable from subjectivity and intersubjectivity, which establishes its unity through the taking up [*la reprise*] of my past experiences into my present experiences, or of the other person's experience into my own" (lxxxiv). In this manner, Merleau-Ponty explores the notion of intersubjectivity phenomenologically, as individuated generality of

double anonymity. He ends his book, *Phenomenology of Perception*, with a quote from Saint-Exupery that "Man is knot of relations and relations alone count for man" (483).

## CONCLUSION

In the above elaboration, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological description of perception, embodiment, schema of the world, intersubjectivity and freedom were discussed. For Merleau-Ponty, the main task was how to understand the different moments of reality as formatting an inchoate, ambiguous but still a meaningful whole within a particular milieu; how to understand the parts of the whole as a matrix of relations. For this, phenomenology of Husserl and others offered him the much needed tools. In this process, he revisited the existing notions concerning consciousness, self, body and world in his own way combining different schools of thought such as phenomenology, Gestalt Psychology, Marxism and others. It is quite interesting to say that Merleau-Ponty's views on embodiment, freedom, intersubjectivity and historical change have close resemblances with that of Marx's materialist conception of history as expounded by him in his *Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (Marx 19-23). It is quite possible to interpret that he combed through the historical materialism with a phenomenological spirit of understanding the reality; and in that process, he combines the elements of various philosophical and psychological trends with the phenomenological acumen.

His notions of embodiment, freedom and intersubjectivity are particularly striking as it does not only help to revisit the existing philosophical/phenomenological understandings of the self, but it offers the vantage point to look at the embodied self through sociality. It offers valuable insights into the way how history makes sense in the present because of the constituting embodied self in the already constituted world; and how the embodied self is always a movement towards the future with the possibilities of experiencing more freedom than that is accessible in the present. In this sense, his phenomenology of perception is a way forward in the realm of phenomenological ethics of freedom.

In an extensive way, his phenomenological ethics of freedom offers valuable insights into the ways in which various forms of oppression, discrimination, marginalisation and exclusion are experienced by the embodied self in the milieu of the lived world. Such polarised experiences of the subjectivities – whether it is related to gender, race, caste, religion, colour, etc – are related to the ways in which the sociality gets constituted. In this particular sense, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception is a useful tool for deciphering the modalities by which the scheme of things and beings operate and to address the ethical issues related to it. Simone de Beauvoir used the phenomenological insights of Merleau-Ponty to address the ethical issues involved in the constitution of gender relations (Beauvoir 153-7). Sundar Sarukkai used the phenomenological

studies of Merleau-Ponty to decipher the way untouchability and caste discrimination operate in Indian context, in his book *The Cracked Mirror* co-authored with Gopal Guru. In short, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological description of perception related to embodiment and culturally constructed identities, like gender, race, colour, caste, language, region, religion, etc., would help us to navigate the ethical issues involved in the schema of the world and to address them.

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