

## **From *Body-Subject* to *Flesh*: An Overview of Merleau-Ponty's Reconceptualisation of the *Body***

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### **Abstract**

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and philosophy, in general, are grounded in the lived and embodied experience. He made consistent and resolved attempts to depart from the Cartesian dualism and the objective body of the empirical sciences. Merleau-Ponty is most known for his contribution to phenomenology with his reconceptualisation of the body which took shape over years and through several works from *Structure of Behaviour* to *Phenomenology of Perception*, to his later works like *Eye and Mind*, and his work-in-progress *The Visible and the Invisible*. This paper traces the development of the notion of body in Merleau-Ponty's thought focusing, firstly, on his departure from the mind-body dualism, and secondly, his progress on the idea within the phenomenological tradition.

Keywords: Phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty, Embodiment, Body, Flesh

### **Introduction**

Embodiment was a dominant theme for 20<sup>th</sup>-century phenomenological thinkers including Husserl, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty, and has, thereafter, continued to remain an important topic of philosophical inquiry. Within the phenomenological tradition, the notion of the body underwent revisions and reformulations with certainly a significant breakthrough with Merleau-Ponty's body-subject in *Phenomenology of Perception* (*PP* hereon) first, and then *flesh* in his *The Visible and the Invisible* (*VI* hereon). His primary contention in *PP* was that our existence was essentially incarnate, that this was our only mode of existence, and that perception is essentially a bodily experience/phenomenon. The phenomenal body of Merleau-Ponty

was not a mere object among other things but was a subject – he made the consciousness carnal and carnality intelligent in *chiasm* with one another. Gradually and coherently, Merleau-Ponty further reformulated the notion of the *body-subject* to the *flesh (la chair)*. However, flesh, as his central ontological element only became explicit in its denotation in *VI* while its connotation was implicit in his earlier works.

Our century has erased the dividing line between “body” and “mind,” and sees human life as through and through mental and corporeal, always based upon the body and always (even in its most carnal modes) interested in relationships between persons. (Merleau-Ponty, 2007, 191).

### **Departure from the Cartesian Notion of Body**

One of the most cited instances of Merleau-Ponty’s account of the phenomenal body is Schneider’s case of the phantom limb that he examines in *PP*. Phantom limb is the condition where a person experiences sensations in a limb that no longer exists. Johann Schneider suffered a brain injury from a shell-splinter while serving the German army which caused him a few neurophysiological impairments including alexia and agnosia. Due to these impairments, there is a major change in Schneider’s ability to perform the otherwise most regular bodily movements. He can perform actions that are more “habitual” or concrete and of grasping/touching type. But abstract movements become almost impossible: for example, Schneider can get hold of his nose when asked, but when asked to point at it with a ruler, it becomes an impossible task. Merleau-Ponty explains, “The patient is conscious of his bodily space as this matrix of habitual action but not as an objective setting”. (Merleau-Ponty, 2005, 119) When we act, we act with our body only; action makes sense only when it is embodied, and our embodied action is not a performance of an objective body but of the phenomenal body that inhabits the perceptual field in which it is situated.

Descartes, with his incommensurability of mind and body, rendered the body as merely physical and functioning on mechanical principles. For

him, the body could be thought of as something divisible and as having parts, while the mind could not be conceived of in the same manner. This makes the two wholly distinct from each other (Descartes, 1998, 100-01). Merleau-Ponty offered his body-subject – the incarnate consciousness – as an alternative to the merely physical and extended body of Descartes. The consciousness of Merleau-Ponty was intentional, that is, it is being-towards-the-thing through the intermediary of the body. Moreover, the body and the world formed a continuum as a practical system, or what he also calls *body schema*, in which the embodied self performed action. And this action is not performed in a space or a world to which the self is not related. Movement of the body or *motility* is an intentional act. Merleau-Ponty's notion of the consciousness or mind is not stated in terms of 'I think' but is a matter of 'I can'. With Schneider's case, Merleau-Ponty offers a clarification of the lived-action, that is, an action performed with intentionality, and spatiality – that one's experience of the space and the world is navigated through the body and, hence, when a part of the body ceases to exist or function, the intentionality towards the world does not simply disappear. The body, within itself, and in relation with the world and the other is an organic unity. This organic unity develops into his related notions of flesh and reversibility. He writes:

..by thus remaking contact with the body and with the world, we shall rediscover ourself, since, perceiving as we do with our body, the body is a natural self and, as it were, the subject of perception. (Merleau-Ponty, 2005, 239).

It may be argued that with the advancement in neuroscience, conditions like phantom limb syndrome no longer remain relevant to argue for the phenomenal body of Merleau-Ponty. Especially with VS Ramachandran's treatment of the condition with Mirror Therapy, is the key examination of the phantom limb in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological inquiry into the body now in limbo? Not really. In his 2016 essay, "Merleau-Ponty on Embodied Cognition: A

Phenomenological Interpretation of Spinal Cord Epidural Stimulation and Paralysis”, Brock Bahler takes up Dr. Susan Harkema’s case study from 2014 of four paralysed patients who regain voluntary movement in their toes without receiving complex signals from the brain. On one hand, this opens more avenues to re-evaluate the relationship between the brain and the body, while it also seeks more experiential accounting. Bahler argues, regarding Merleau-Ponty’s embodied cognition, that the body is essential to the understanding of our experiences – whether simple or complex (Bahler, 2016). In cartesian accounts, the body is distinctly defined, limited, and even eventually suspended from the discourse either as not essential or as an impediment to the pursuit of the ontological being. However, in the alternative that Merleau-Ponty was devising, the body is critical and makes it possible to address the environmental and spatial contexts in which it exists and acts.

Harkema observes that the movement in the bodies of the patients happened due to the intelligence of the body and not the brain. The spinal cord in the case of the paralysed patients was reorienting the brain to be able to learn new neuronal pathways, which means that in the relationship between the brain and the body, the former alone was not the “prime mover”, so to speak (Bahler, 2016, 82). There was, between the two, a reversible, correlative, and reciprocal alliance. The use of epidural stimulation in Harkema’s patients not only showed some ground-breaking results but also challenged the dualistic understanding of the mind-body relationship. Bahler explains that Harkema’s case study has brought into light a significant intersection of phenomenology and empirical sciences and thereby presents a defence of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological account of the body which could otherwise be discounted as being just another theory (Bahler, 2016, 85).

Taylor Carman notes that Merleau-Ponty’s alternative was a response to two phenomenologically inadequate accounts of the subject – first, perception as a disembodied cognition/experience, and secondly, the objective and impersonal stance of the physical sciences (in both

Schneider and the four paralysed patients' cases). Merleau-Ponty's phenomenal body or what Carman calls, *the bodily point of view*, was the *via media* between the two. This bodily point of view is the perception of the world as we see it ordinarily – as embodied subjects. It is a first-person point of view but not merely a subjective one, which the traditional understanding of perception would dismiss as unreliable. Rather, the bodily experience does have an impersonal character (Carman, 2020, 89-90). Perception has an impersonal character in a scheme of things where there is generality and anonymity. In his earnest and consistent attempts to be non-reductive, Merleau-Ponty was trying to formulate a notion of the self that was neither body *per se* nor consciousness *per se*, which was neither objective *per se* nor subjective *per se*. The body-subject of his *PP* gradually became a larger enterprise for him and by the time he was writing some of his last works, he was devising a new ontology. A most important aspect of his ontology was his idea of *flesh* of which, he says, there is no corresponding name in traditional philosophy (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, 139).

The flesh was general and anonymous, and that, of which, everything was made – the self as well as the world. The flesh was physical but was not matter, it was self but not “pure consciousness”: “flesh is not matter, it is not spirit, it is not substance” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, 139). Merleau-Ponty found the old term ‘element’ as a more appropriate way to understand what flesh designates: “the midway between the spatiotemporal individual and the idea, a sort of incarnate principle that brings a style of being wherever there is a fragment of being. The flesh is in this sense an “element” of Being” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, 139). By the time Merleau-Ponty was writing *VI*, he had realised that the perennial problems caused due to metaphysical dualism of mind and body, subject and object could only come close to a resolution when he suspends the categories of such dualistic thought including the language connoting “consciousness-object” distinction.

In *VI*, Merleau-Ponty rigorously exerted not only to create a new ontology but, more primarily, to devise a method that would be conducive towards the realisation of that and of the suspension of dualistic categories completely. The first three chapters of *VI* are strongly critical of philosophical methodologies of reflection, dialectic, and intuition, and assert the need for a new mode of philosophical thinking. This new mode was *interrogation* or, more distinctively for Merleau-Ponty, *hyperdialectic*. As he had already noted in the Preface to *PP*, there is an inherent incompleteness to phenomenological reduction, he presented hyperdialectic as the appropriate method of inquiry. The essence of hyperdialectic is that it never fully completes its project but is an expression of Being, which is a phenomenon – it is the reversibility that is constantly occurring intercorporeally without ever a complete coincidence of the interacting bodies. While they are always in interaction with one another, their reversibility is characterised by *dehiscence (écart)*, that is, there is a “gap” between the self, the world, and the other that allows the non-coincidence of one and the other even when they are made of the same flesh.

### **Development of the *Body* Within the Phenomenological Tradition**

Discussion on the body in the phenomenological and existentialist traditions was not merely a matter of its ontological status and value but was intricately related to the matters of action, freedom, agency, ethics, and politics. And, these are matters that emerge especially in our relationships with others. *Intersubjectivity* is one of the central themes in the phenomenological writings and the tradition has been fairly very just to the significance and relevance of the topic. Both Sartre and Merleau-Ponty took up the discussion on intersubjectivity and they both understood that the Other was also an embodied self and not “another mind”. However, the two differed on a crucial aspect of the perceptual exchange that takes place between the self and the other. Sartre contends, “The Other is originally given to me as a *body in situation*. Therefore,

there is not, for example, first a body and later action. But the body is the objective contingency of the Other's action." (Sartre, 2003, 369)

Despite their varied ideas on the body in intersubjectivity, both Sartre and Merleau-Ponty (and even later phenomenologists) have a common basis, to begin with, in Husserl. Much like Merleau-Ponty himself and before him, Husserl's *lived-body* was a precondition to the possibility of experience, mobility, action, and interaction of the selves in the world. While the lived-body was not one of the material objects in the world, there was an objectification of this body in the space in which it is situated. Husserl accounts for the connection between the lived-body and the body-object, that is, the body as a thing among other things with the phenomenon of *double sensation*. Dan Zahavi explains the double sensation of Husserl as this "ambiguous setting in which the hand alternates between two roles, that of touching and that of being touched" (Zahavi, 2003, 104) – when my left hand touches my right hand, there is a reciprocity between the sensations of touching and being touched. Zahavi further explains that even when the body-as-touched has certain properties in common with objects in the world, as a field of the localisation of kinaesthetic and tactile sensations, the body remains distinct from the rest of the objects (Zahavi, 2003, 104).

Merleau-Ponty further developed Husserl's idea of *reversibility* or double sensation arguing for there being a reversible relationship across senses, within oneself, and across selves. However, Husserl maintained this double sensation was limited to touch: "And in the case in which the part of the Body becomes equally an external Object of an other part, we have the double sensation (each part has its own sensations) and the double apprehension as a feature of one or of the other Bodily part as a physical object. But in the case of an *Object constituted purely visually we have nothing comparable.*" (Husserl, 2000, 155) On the other hand, Merleau-Ponty's understanding of this reciprocity and reversibility was not limited to one sense or one realm. He did not agree with Husserl on

the primacy of touch over vision because the tactile and the visible, and touch and the vision were also intertwined with one another. He asserts:

We must habituate ourselves to think that every visible is cut out in the tangible, every tactile being in some manner promised to visibility, and that there is encroachment, infringement, not only between the touched and touching but also between the tangible and the visible, which is encrusted in it, as, conversely, the tangible itself is not without visual existence. (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, 134).

While Husserl and Merleau-Ponty maintained double sensations, although varyingly, Sartre did not find reversibility to be an essential feature of the body in the objective and subjective domains. Rather, he places the two in separate realms. In the chapter on Body in *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre argues that *to touch* and *to be touched* exist in two “incommunicable levels” and are two distinct species of phenomena. Interestingly, for him, in case of a morphine shot to one’s leg can make the touching-touched reversibility dissolve (Sartre, 2003, 328). This is not something that bothers Merleau-Ponty, though, because he does not necessitate absolute, symmetrical, and uniform reciprocity between things or bodies. A crucial reason for this is his ontological framework where flesh is the basic element that constitutes everything including the leg which has been given a morphine shot. In Merleau-Ponty’s scheme of chiasmic relations, too, there is not a complete coincidence of what Sartre calls, *being-for-itself* and *being-for-others* because of dehiscence or fission. But they do communicate and, after all, the two belong in and co-exist in the same world. Martin C. Dillon makes two defining observations on Merleau-Ponty’s points of departure from the Sartrean notion of the body: first, the *tacit cogito* or the pre-thetic sense of the consciousness is defined in terms of the bodily self-consciousness, and does not require a bridging of the discontinuous entities of consciousness and body; secondly, while Sartre saw being-for-itself as being disjunct from the world of objects, Merleau-Ponty held an inseparability between the body and the world (Dillon, 1974, 157). The intrinsic character of the



double sensation of flesh in Merleau-Ponty was only a contingency for Sartre.

Merleau-Ponty's reassessment of the body in *PP* was already breaking away from the cartesian accounts but with his *VI*, he was formulating a radical new ontology by suspending (almost completely) any dichotomy of the consciousness and the body. He was now interested in understanding the body in terms of Being and his notion of flesh can be seen as an ontological explication of his phenomenological pursuit. His Being was *wild* and *brute* – as pre-thetic, *vertical* – as having depths, it was *visible* – as having a texture, and also *invisible* – as having possibilities of meaning. He writes in *VI*:

When we speak of the flesh of the visible, we do not mean to do anthropology... Rather, we mean that carnal being, as a being of depths, of several leaves or several faces, a being in latency and presentation of a certain absence, is a prototype of Being, of which our body, the sensible sentient, is a very remarkable variant, but whose constitutive paradox already lies in every visible. (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, 136).

While his body-subject was the incarnate consciousness in which consciousness of the bodily sensations was fundamental to one's being in the world, with flesh, this was no longer essential. This is to say that flesh had *decentered* the being – it was not localised in a purely subjective entity or an “inner man” (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, xi-xii) where the Being is conceptualised nor was it another object among objects; rather, it was indivisible to any such categories especially with the perceiver-perceived landscape becoming less dichotomous with one always encroaching on the other. The sensibility and the sentience of the body in reversibility was a model of how one inhabits the world – that is the principle of being-in-the-world. However, this reversibility in the self-world and the intersubjective relations is not necessarily uniform – referring once again to the case of Schneider's experience of the phantom limb, the ontological ground on which the body rests, including the non-

existing limb – is flesh and a conscious experience in the body was not essential. What began with examining embodiment as essential to talk about any experience, had refined itself and had become more abstract, general, and fundamental in Merleau-Ponty's flesh. The flesh was a kind of topography; it was a reconceptualization of *nature* as he elucidates in his lectures at Collège de France in the late 1950s. These lectures ran parallel with the progress of *VI* and, hence, hold an important value in understanding and examining his thought, especially towards the (untimely) end of his life.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The development of Merleau-Ponty's idea of the body had a crucial transition when it evolved from body-subject, which was more concrete, into the ontological element of flesh. Flesh, in the last phase of Merleau-Ponty's philosophical thought, further reoriented the idea of nature. His notions of flesh and reversibility were implicit in his initial works even when they focused on psychology and perception but a new ontology was in anticipation from the beginning. His interest continued to get more directed, focused, and holistic and marked one of the most significant benchmarks in contemporary philosophy which is exemplified in the range of application of his thought in areas of psychotherapy, gender, sexuality, art, politics, medicine, and more. However, there may also be a certain limitation to his idea of flesh in terms of its universal and ambiguous character. It may be challenging to justify the accommodation of diverse bodily experiences which are also determined socially and culturally while Merleau-Ponty sees the habitual movement of the body in the space it inhabits fundamental.

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## Notes and References

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