

Embodied Subjectivity in Merleau-Ponty's Ontology of *La chair*

Gaganjot Kaur

Abstract

This paper examines the structure of embodied subjectivity in Merleau-Ponty's *The Visible and the Invisible* with a particular interest in the implications of reversibility as the ontological principle. Beginning with the idea of reversibility or chiasm and its constitutive non-coincidence, the paper argues that its implicit asymmetry forms the foothold for subjectivity in the ontology of *la chair* or *flesh*. However, the same open channels for critical concerns regarding intersubjective encounters about the uniform and anonymous nature of *la chair*, risking the assimilation of particularities in the generality of *la chair*. The paper engages with one such critique raised by Beata Stawarska and responds by drawing on Merleau-Ponty's notions of *identity-and-difference*, *dehiscence*, and the *invisible*, which, together, not only preserve but enable genuine plurality within the common *la chair*.

Keywords: Merleau-Ponty, embodied subjectivity, reversibility, *la chair*

Introduction

The trajectory of Merleau-Ponty's thought is often traced as his shift from the *body-subject* of *Phenomenology of Perception* (*PP* hereafter) to *la chair*¹ or *flesh* of *The Visible and the Invisible* (*VI* hereafter).

*Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy, Kamala Nehru College, University of Delhi; Email id: gkaur@knc.du.ac.in.

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¹ Merleau-Ponty uses the term *la chair* in his *Le visible et l'Invisible* (1964) for what he identifies as the ontological principle in his account of reversibility, which is standardly translated as 'flesh'. The French term *chair*, much like the English term 'flesh', refers to the outer soft surface of the body, the meat in the case of an animal, and the pulpy part of a fruit. However, Merleau-Ponty's intended meaning and use of *chair* go deeper and beyond the confines of the physical surface of the sensory and motor aspects of the body and see it as something not purely corporeal. In his ontology, the term carries a reflexive character. In order to convey the meaning of the term as accurately as possible, the French term *la chair* has been maintained through the paper.

In the earlier work, Merleau-Ponty centralised the body as our medium of being in the world and being as perspectival, that is, perception as the very condition of experience of the world. In the latter work, he radicalised this insight further by transforming it into a fold within a primordial fabric called *la chair*, which is the heart of the ontological thought Merleau-Ponty was developing during his last years. By now, he had realised that the problem of Cartesian Dualism could not be resolved or, rather, disqualified as long as the distinction between consciousness and object was maintained. This, of course, implied a reorientation of the understanding of the self or the embodied subjectivity once the said distinction was let go of.

Following the development of *la chair* in *VI*, the self was no longer grounded in consciousness; instead, it emerged from within the fabric of *la chair*, where the ontological structure of sensing and being sensed becomes manifest. Subjectivity or self, here, is a relation, not a substance. There is no pure consciousness or mind, no “inner man”²; that is, there is no awareness which occurs behind the material wall of the body while the body alone is exposed to the external world of objects. The inner and the outer overlap in an intertwined manner rather than being mutually exclusive. This has implications not only for how the self relates to itself and to the world but also to the other, which this paper seeks to examine. What happens to subjectivity once *la chair* has been established as the common tissue of the sensing and the sensed? Does it coincide with the uniformity and the generality of *la chair*, or does it mark a distinction in another form?

² Merleau-Ponty uses St. Augustine’s expression “inner man” in his *PP* to challenge the Cartesian idea of the self that exists by himself and separate from the external world. Instead, he posited man *toward* the world, and inhabiting which he knows himself. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London and New York: Routledge, 1962), xii.

Reversibility and Chiasm

Reversibility is a key feature of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, appearing in his works over two decades of his thought. In his early works, such as *PP*, he advanced a strong critique of the Cartesian account of the world as understood through the dualism of object and subject. However, by the time he is writing his *VI*, not only has the critique become more robust, but his own ontological imagination has also begun to offer an alternative. This alternative, *la chair*, in his own words, "had no name in traditional philosophy"³. The reversibility thesis of Merleau-Ponty is the view of reality in terms of a mutual and dynamic intertwining between the perceiver and the perceived, the touching and the touched, the self and the world, and the self and the other. This ontological structure precedes thought and language and is what one learns to return to in phenomenology.

In the fourth chapter of *VI*, "The Intertwining – the Chiasm", Merleau-Ponty extensively discusses the nature of *la chair* and its ontological principle of reversibility. He uses the phenomenon of the two hands touching each other and being touched back at the same time, without coinciding. The two hands belong to the same body – they are identical in that sense; they have that uniformity – but they still generate a double sensation of touching and being touched. They remain distinct as well as in relation with one another – the experience is inevitably reversible or chiasmic. Chiasm, which comes from the Greek letter chi (χ), refers to the crisscross and crossover arrangement of two lines. In anatomy, this crossover occurs between two optic nerves. When Merleau-Ponty uses the term chiasm, it can be argued that he does so in both the rhetorical and the anatomical sense. Fred Evans and Leonard Lawlor think that although the rhetorical sense was preferred by Merleau-Ponty, English commentators observe the anatomical meaning to be the one intended by

³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 139.

him.⁴ Moreover, a close reading of his works reveals that this intertwining was not only spatial but also temporal.

The reversibility persists between an embodied subject and a tree as much as between two embodied subjects. It is important to note here, though, that this reversibility is not symmetrical; the way I see a tree/chair, the tree/chair, even when in a reversible seeing-seen order with me, does not see me back in the same way. Reversibility does not essentialise symmetry. Moreover, the reversibility also escapes the dialectical culmination of the seeing and the seen; it is imminent and is never fully realised. There is always a subtle slipping away, dodging identity and complete closure. As Merleau-Ponty writes in the “Working Notes” of *VI*, reversibility is always imminent and never in fact realised.⁵ This imminence, or *écart*, is a significant detail of the ontological structure as understood by Merleau-Ponty, thereby distinguishing it from a dialectical position.⁶

The Body as the Exemplar Sensible

Within the redirection of his philosophy, there was a redirection to his account of the body. Although Merleau-Ponty was no longer using the vocabulary of dualistic distinctions, the body did not disappear from his ontology. The body was now the exemplar sensible of *la chair* which, Merleau-Ponty says, “offers to him who inhabits it and senses it the wherewithal to sense everything that resembles himself on the outside...”⁷ He brings a certain uniformity to the body without

⁴Fred Evans and Leonard Lawlor, “The Value of Flesh: Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy and the Modernism/Postmodernism Debate,” in *Chiasms: Merleau-Ponty’s Notion of Flesh*, ed. Fred Evans and Leonard Lawlor (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 18.

⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 147.

⁶ As an alternative to the approaches of intellectualism, empiricism, and intuition, Merleau-Ponty preferred dialectical reasoning. However, even with the dialectic, he was wary of what he called the “bad dialectic” – the thetic and positivistic thought of rigid structures. He proposed, instead, the “good dialectic” or the *hyperdialectic* – that which is committed to philosophical interrogation and is willing to lose itself for the sake of truth. Imminence, as a characteristic of reversibility, is in alignment with the *hyperdialectic* – instead of collapsing into a finality, the reversibility always overcomes itself.

⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 135.

superimposing one over the other, but makes it identical enough that interiority and exteriority are not foreign to each other. He writes:

We understand then why we see the things themselves, in their places, where they are, according to their being which indeed more than their being perceived – and why at the same time we are separated from them by all the thickness of the look and of the body, it is that distance is not contrary of this proximity, it is deeply consonant with it, it is synonymous with it.⁸

Martin C. Dillon explains this in terms of a continuity between one's body and the things surrounding it in the world that one inhabits. For Merleau-Ponty, we can touch the worldly things *because* we ourselves are worldly things.⁹ In *VI*, Merleau-Ponty engaged with the question of being more directly. While *PP* centralised the body, implying a reorientation of the question of being, *VI* decentralised being itself by placing it within the reversibility and intertwining of everything. The body is both the sensible and the sentient – that which is sensed and that which senses. It is only through the body as a “sensible for itself” that we have access to the things themselves. It stands for the paradoxical nature of being – that which has double belongingness – to the order of the objective and the order of the subjective. This, in turn, reveals unexpected relations between them.¹⁰ It is paradoxical because something is not supposed to belong to both these orders; it is either an object or a subject. But that is exactly where the subversion has occurred with phenomenology, which was fundamentally transformed in Merleau-Ponty's ontology of *la chair*.

The being in Merleau-Ponty's ontology is understood through carnality – “...carnal being, as a being of depths, of several leaves or several faces, a being in latency, and a presentation of a certain absence, is a prototype

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Martin C. Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology* (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 159.

¹⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 137.

of being...”¹¹. The depth of this carnal being makes it more than the objective, material body – it gives it the extension of history and culture and also creates possibilities for action; depth is not a dimension of measurement of an object but what makes things remain distinct within the common fabric of *la chair*. In his discussion and examination of carnality in “Carnal Hermeneutics”, Richard Kearney remarks that Merleau-Ponty takes the phenomenology of touch to a new level with his chiasm between the self and the world. He notes the radical gesture of the intertwining between sensation and language, quoting him, “The same fundamental phenomenon of reversibility which sustains both the mute and perception and the speech... manifests itself by an almost carnal existence of the idea, as well as by a sublimation of the flesh”. *Flesh*, Kearney says, is the cradle of both perception and the word.¹² The embodied subjectivity in *VI* surpasses being only a point of view towards the world; the perception of the world and one’s relationship with it find expression through language and art.

***La chair*, Reversibility, and Intersubjectivity**

Given that everything occurs and emerges within the framework and structure of *la chair*, a further question presents itself: how does an embodied subject interact with another embodied subject? In the generality of *la chair*, how does and can one know the other as another and as distinct from oneself? What does one see? This question is notoriously difficult not only for Merleau-Ponty and the

¹¹ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 136.

¹² Richard Kearney, “What is Carnal Hermeneutics,” *New Literary History* 46 no. 1 (John Hopkins University Press, 2015), 111.

Carnal Hermeneutics is the philosophical approach that takes the body and embodied experience as central in the understanding of and interpreting the world. It challenges the traditional practice of hermeneutics limited to texts and language and makes sensory and bodily experience integral to the philosophical practice of interpretation. Richard Kearney’s name is most closely associated with the approach and works including the essay, “What is Carnal Hermeneutics?” and the edited volume *Carnal Hermeneutics* are key to the growing interest in its development.

Ibid.

Richard Kearney and Brian Treanor, eds., *Carnal Hermeneutics* Eds. (USA: Fordham University Press, 2015).

phenomenological tradition but for philosophy itself. The question of the other does not begin with cognition but with the body, now that Merleau-Ponty has shifted the centre. When the self is not an interiority but a fold within the fabric of *la chair*, all selves are that and connected in the very same medium. The boundary between my embodied self and the other is not a sharp opacity but is somewhat porous and reversible. This is the structure of intersubjectivity or intercorporeity in Merleau-Ponty's ontology of *la chair*. How does one account for the differences and particularities in such an arrangement?

In her critical analysis of Merleau-Ponty's reversibility thesis, Beata Stawarska questions the use of the intra-corporeal experience of the right hand touching the left hand as a paradigm for intercorporeal experience. Merleau-Ponty does not limit the inherently reversible nature of bodily sensations to one body itself; it is extended to reversibility across bodies. Stawarska says that the intra-corporeal model cannot hold for the intercorporeal experience since the latter is more complex and involves a break from the intra-corporeal reversibility. However, in fact, if the flesh is uniform and anonymous in both intra- and intercorporeal reversibilities, another problem is the collapsing of particularities into this universal flesh. She argues that the uniform character of *la chair* and reversibility as its dynamic principle lead to a reduction of the intersubjective experience to a reflexivity that operates intrasubjectively and within the *body proper* [the lived-body]. The basis for this reduction is the intrasubjective experience of the embodied subject taken as the paradigm for intersubjective relations. Consequently, there is a *bracketing* of the other, and particularities seem to get misplaced.¹³ It is quite reasonable to have these concerns, especially when Merleau-Ponty writes:

¹³ Beata Stawarska, "Reversibility and Intersubjectivity in Merleau-Ponty's Ontology," *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 33 no. 2 (2002): 155.

The I, really, is nobody, is the anonymous; it must be so, prior to all objectification, denomination, in order to be the Operator, or the one to whom all this occurs. The named I... is an object. The primary I, of which one is the objectification, is the unknown *to whom* all is given to see or think, to whom everything appeals...¹⁴

The anonymous and impersonal character of *la chair* has been challenged, primarily by the difficulty of accounting for independent and non-identical selves. With embodied subjectivity reconceptualised in terms of *la chair*, how are two selves to be distinguished? With the reversibility model, Merleau-Ponty must have hoped to solve the problem of the other, but, on the contrary, it became a focal point of many objections. Dan Zahavi notes that “rather than solving the problem of intersubjectivity, [Merleau-Ponty’s model] threatens to dissolve it by annulling every plurality”.¹⁵ Whether intracorporeal or intercorporeal, the sensations felt are contained within the same body. As Stawarska says, it is “witnessed in the *body proper* only”.

To respond to Stawarska’s objection, I would refer to the idea of imminence or dehiscence, which is characteristic of Merleau-Ponty’s reversibility. The relation between the self and the other is characterised not only by the fundamental intertwining but also by their non-synthesis. It is the escape from the reduction of one into the other which protects the distinction from getting lost in the anonymity of *la chair* and the ambiguous reversibility. In *PP*, Merleau-Ponty says of the phenomenological reduction that it is never complete, it is never fully realised.¹⁶ In alignment with that, he maintains the non-reductive character of reversibility, qualifying reversibility with dehiscence. Regarding this, Stawarska’s concern would be this break between two selves, which raises questions about the uniformity and continuity of

¹⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 246.

¹⁵ Dan Zahavi, *Self-Awareness and Alterity: A Phenomenological Investigation* (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2020), 238.

¹⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, XV.

flesh. Stawarska prefers Sartre's account of the I-Other relationship as he discusses in "The Look"¹⁷ since the distinction he maintains between the body-for-itself and the body-for-others is more tenable for the accommodation of pluralities. But it is an important consideration here that Merleau-Ponty's *la chair* and reversibility were his vision for a non-reductive ontology. And that is exactly why he was critical of Sartre's distinction between the body-for-itself and the body-for-others, which, he thought, was a kind of *bad dialectic*.¹⁸

Returning to Stawarska's concern about the assimilation of the particularities within the identity of *la chair*, this can be avoided by attending to Merleau-Ponty's expression "identity-and-difference" used in reference to the overlapping and fission – the dehiscence – of *la chair*. There exists synergy among different organisms, but it does not belong to a single consciousness. Identity-and-difference casts a ray of light which illuminates all flesh and not merely its own.¹⁹ Stressing the ontological significance of this, Dillon contends that the coincidence of self-perception is what offers a ground for the radical bifurcation of the interior and the exterior, and an absolute disjunction of perceiving and being perceived leads to a discontinuity between the subject and the object. Merleau-Ponty's fundamentally ambiguous identity-encompassing-difference standpoint is, according to Dillon, the only way that such a trap of polarisation can be evaded.²⁰ Having said that, Renaud Barbaras expresses doubt about the actual success of Merleau-Ponty's alternative ontology of *la chair*. He is not sure whether the latter fully casts off the presuppositions of the philosophy of consciousness, especially given that the work was interrupted by his death. Barbaras sees a lack of radicality in Merleau-Ponty's thought rather than excess.²¹

¹⁷ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003).

¹⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 94.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 142.

²⁰ Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, 159.

²¹ Renaud Barbaras, *The Being of Phenomenon*, trans. Ted Toadvine and Leonard Lawlor (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004), xxiv.

Embodied Subjectivity Expressed through the *Invisible*

The embodied subjectivity of Merleau-Ponty is not a passive, in-itself mass of matter; it is a dynamic phenomenon in action. This action is, of course, variable, and its development is determined by its chiasmic relations. In *PP*, Merleau-Ponty writes in terms of the movement and intentionality of the *body-subject* to describe the body as active and illustrates it with the Schneider case. Patricia Cañas says that the phenomenological contribution of Merleau-Ponty was not limited to establishing the body's presence in experience. Rather, and as established by scholars like Dan Zahavi and Shaun Gallagher, it brought to our attention the degree to which our experience of the world, our ego, and the other were formed and influenced by our corporeality.²² In *VI*, Merleau-Ponty writes in terms of the visible and the invisible – that which is directly perceived by the senses and that which is latent. Latency here is, of course, not absolute or a mysterious space beyond the reach of human comprehension, lying in another realm of the world. The latency is *of* what is perceptible:

When I say that every visible is invisible... that to see is always to see more than one sees – this must not be understood in the sense of a contradiction – It must not be imagined that I add to the visible perfectly defined as in Itself a non-visible (which would be only objective absence)... – One has to understand that it is the visibility itself that involves a non-visibility--²³

The invisible or the depth is what brings about the distinction of things. In the ontology of *la chair*, *things* are what they are because of their depths and ideas. Merleau-Ponty illustrates this with the example of “the little phrase” in Marcel Proust’s *Swann’s Way*. “The little phrase” was an objective manifestation of Swann’s love for Odette and, through it, became

²² Patricia Moya Cañas, "The Understanding of the Body and Movement in Merleau-Ponty," *Trans/Form/Ação* 42, no. 1 (January/March 2019): 201–226.

²³ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 247.

communicable even to those who did not know this love. It is the invisible that is mediated through the visible/sensible, but the latter is not superficial. Merleau-Ponty acknowledges music, literature, passions, and culture, in general, as explorations of the invisible. At the same time, he does not exclude the visible from this exploration. Neither the sensible nor the intelligible is over the other; we understand one through the other because they are made up of the same element. Especially when considering *la chair* as an *element* and Merleau-Ponty's exploration of the visible and the invisible in the same light, being seems to *emerge* through the intersections of these.

In a further response to Stawarska's objection to the uniform and anonymous character of *la chair*, one may say that "the Little Phrase" expresses Swann's love for Odette – it is a musical piece that is distinct from what music itself is yet is inseparable from music. Particularities are known and identified as such in terms of their existential character and in the existential scheme of Merleau-Ponty; an individual has embodied and actively engaging lived experiences that become the site for the creation of meaning. The very reversibility of the structure in which one finds oneself is a facticity that facilitates the expression of a person's situational freedom.

Conclusion

The paper began with the question of what would become of subjectivity in Merleau-Ponty's ontology of *la chair* once the principle of reversibility had been established. The response traced the non-coincidence, non-reduction, and asymmetry of intertwining or chiasm, the body as the exemplar sensible, the intercorporeal structure of *la chair*, and the invisible aspect or depth of embodied being. Embodied subjectivity, as it turns out, is neither preserved in the Cartesian form nor merged and assimilated with the anonymity of *la chair*. Instead, it reemerges as a fold and a perspective from what remains invisible – the depth of being. Merleau-Ponty's own expression of identity-and-

difference makes it possible for individual beings to hold their distinctions within the shared being of *la chair*. Despite being perennially intertwined, there is always a gap between them; they never collapse into one another. If thought of in Kearney's way, *la chair* is both a site of sensation and meaning, and, by that, embodied subjectivity is an opening, a possibility for the expression of this meaning. Hence, even if Barbaras is reasonable in reserving doubts about the success of Merleau-Ponty's ontological imagination, it is also equally reasonable to see his attempt as impactful enough in marking a shift in the history of philosophy.

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*Kamala Nehru College
Department of Philosophy,
University of Delhi.*