

THE OTHER AND INTERSUBJECTIVITY IN MERLEAU-PONTY'S WORLD OF PERCEPTION

MAN IS A KNOT OF RELATIONS, AND RELATIONS ALONE COUNT FOR MAN

Abstract

By critiquing the philosophical attitudes, such as idealism, rationalism, intellectualism and empiricism, on consciousness, Merleau-Ponty arrives at the notion of 'Being-in-the-world', 'bringing down' the notion of consciousness 'to the earth', as embodied *cogito* and situates it in the world and in its temporality, using Gestalt Psychology, Phenomenology and Marxist notion of *praxis*. As beings exist in the world with their embodiment, they share the world of perception. As the subjects exist in sociality, the world - with which the embodied subjects are in a psycho-physical relation - is a shared world and hence the inter-world between the subjects is possible. This makes the intersubjectivity possible with the accompanying freedom, reciprocity and coexistence of beings. This article deals with Merleau-Ponty's notion of intersubjectivity, with its veil of anonymity and indeterminacy, exploring it through his phenomenology of perception.

Key Words: Embodied *cogito*, Sociality, Inter-world, Perception, Intersubjectivity

Introduction

Maurice Merleau-Ponty ends his *Phenomenology of Perception* with a quote from Saint-Exupery's *Flight of Arras (Phenomenology of Perception 483, 564)*; and the last sentence of the quote has been given as the title of this research paper which deals with Merleau-Ponty's description of intersubjectivity. "Man is a knot of relations" is not a belief or ideal position, for Merleau-Ponty; rather, he describes it with his materialist precision through phenomenological method, unlike a normative ethical philosophical construction. With growing conflicts and hatred towards the 'other' based on

different types of identity and the right wing's avowed project of creation of monolithic society all over the world, the resurgence of interest in the notion of intersubjectivity seems to be relevant within the existing socio-historical climate.

Though humans are social and cultural beings, we find that the interhuman relations are fraught with conflicts, indeterminacies, fragilities and anonymity. Philosophers, as seekers of knowledge, have given their thoughts about the indeterminacies of interhuman relations through their reflections on such events, mostly as objective events as if knowledge is out there to be grasped, detached from the dialectics of subject and the object/other. The importance of Merleau-Ponty, here, is how to understand such interhuman relations as they are lived in their historical situatedness.

"Historical meaning is immanent in the interhuman event, and is as fragile as this event" says Merleau-Ponty; he goes further to say that "As the young Marx said at another time, one "destroys" philosophy as a detached mode of knowing, only to "realize" it in actual history" (*In Praise of Philosophy* 51). The solution to the detached mode of understanding of interhuman events is, if the philosophers have to grasp the real meaning of them, according to Merleau-Ponty, "What Marx calls *praxis* is the meaning which works itself out spontaneously in the intercrossing of these activities by which man organizes his relations with nature and with other men" (50). What we could gain from the above statements is that the interhuman events are conceived as human *praxis*, where "Rationality passes from the concept to the heart of interhuman *praxis*" (51), happening in a particular historical situatedness within a lifeworld; and the job of the philosopher is to describe them as they happen. For this purpose, the phenomenology helps him.

In her review of *The Phenomenology of Perception*, Simone de Beauvoir stresses this point of phenomenological description, saying that "He can live his body, not represent it to himself, which clearly demonstrates that the represented body is a secondary construction that is added on to the reality of the lived body, and which can, in certain cases, become disunited from it.

Our body is not first posited in the world the way a tree or 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” (Beauvoir 161).

However, before venturing into the phenomenological description of intersubjectivity, it is pertinent to observe how Merleau-Ponty identifies the problems of objectivity, which hinders the perceptual unity of phenomenon, in the earlier philosophical attitudes such as rationalism, empiricism, realism and idealism. In a scathing attack, Merleau-Ponty says, “Intellectualism and empiricism do not give us an account of a human experience of the world; they say of human experience what God might think of the world” (*Phenomenology of Perception* 266-7). What he means is that empiricists, rationalists and intellectualists give a very detached account of human experience, as if their own perception is not perceived through their embodiment; as if, the perception is unrelated to their embodied perception.

Further, the disembodied description of perception conceives the phenomenon through the deceptively celebrated notion of causality. “Objective thought is unaware of the subject of perception. This is because it takes the world as ready-made or the milieu of every possible event and treats perception as one of these events... the philosopher describes sensations and their substratum – as one might describe the fauna of a distant land – without noticing that he himself also perceives, that he is a perceiving subject, and that perception such as he lives it denies everything that he says about perception in general” (214). The perceiving subject is also constitutive of perception; however, the constituting subject is presented by the objectivists as an alien in the phenomenon of description, as if the meaning assigned to the phenomenon is not constitutionally related to the perceiving subject in whatsoever manner.

Hence there is a distortion of perception when the empiricists describe a phenomenon. By quoting Cassirer’s analysis of how empiricism distorts the perception from above and from below – that “the impression lacks

instinctive and affective sense as much as it lacks ideal signification” – Merleau-Ponty continues, “It could also be added that to distort perception from below, that is, to treat it straightaway as knowledge and to forget its existential resources, is also to distort from above, since this is to take it as acquired and to pass over in silence the decisive moment of perception: the springing forth of a *true* and *precise* world” (53). This clearly shows that the subject is part of the phenomenon of perception and the embodied perceiving subject is affected in the very act of perception, as in the case of feeling pity or the act of consolation towards the grieving individual. When the intellectualists and empiricists conceive a phenomenon of perception as an objective category of thought, the cohesive, but still indeterminate, unity of consciousness, body, other and the world are conveniently sidestepped in the act of disparate analysis of the event. Due to the perceived indeterminacy in the unity of consciousness, body and object of perception, Advaita Vedanta will go even to the extent of calling the embodied perception as ‘illusion’, it may be remembered.

While delineating between the classical and contemporary psychologists, Merleau-Ponty observes that “Classical psychology unquestioningly accepted the distinction between inner observation, or introspection, and outer observation.... Today’s psychologists have made us notice that in reality introspection gives me almost nothing. If I try to study love or hate purely from inner observation, I will find very little to describe: a few pangs, a few heart-throbs – in short, trite agitations which do not reveal the essence of love or hate. Each time I find something worth saying... because I have succeeded in studying it as a way of behaving, as a modification of my relations with others and with the world” (*Sense and Non-Sense* 52). The process of reflection or introspection of a phenomenon loses the flesh and blood of the act in which body, consciousness and the other coexist with ‘operative’/ ‘motor’ intentionality and makes the very act as passive signification. Reflection/introspection, being a perception about the perception, loses the intricate moments of indeterminate cohesiveness of different elements of phenomenon. Rather the perception of the perception

is explained through the acclaimed principle of cause and effect.

On the other hand, Merleau-Ponty attempts a course correction by taking different traditions, such as Marxism, Gestalt Psychology and Phenomenology to bring the philosophy of perception 'down to earth'. "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). The expression "bring them down to earth" is very significant and enchanting. It predicts his disenchantment with the existing philosophical analyses of perception; secondly, though he accepted the 'transcendental subjectivity' of Husserl, still his phenomenological description is birthed in human existential praxis; thirdly, it proposes the materiality of philosophizing in its historical situatedness.

He explains the birth of his new philosophizing of perception and intersubjectivity thus: "This concrete thinking, which Marx calls "critique" to distinguish it from speculative philosophy, is what others propound under the name "existential philosophy".... Knowledge finds itself put back into the totality of human praxis and, as it were, given ballast by it. The "subject" is no longer just the epistemological subject but is the human subject who, by means of a continual dialectic, thinks in terms of his situation, forms his categories in contact with his experience, and modifies this situation and this experience by the meaning he discovers in them. In particular, this subject is no longer alone, is no longer consciousness in general or pure being for itself. He is in the midst of other consciousnesses which likewise have a situation; he is for others, and because of this he undergoes an objectivation and becomes generic subject. *For the first time since Hegel, militant philosophy is reflecting not on subjectivity but on intersubjectivity.* Transcendental subjectivity, Husserl pointed out, *is intersubjectivity.* Man no longer appears as a product of his environment or an absolute legislator but emerges as a product-producer, the locus where necessity can turn into concrete liberty" (*Sense and Non-Sense* 133-4).

Even though his Marxist leanings are always underwritten by the scholars of Merleau-Ponty, the point needs to be mentioned that his phenomenological moorings helped him to enrich the materialist understanding of perception, in spite of his disenchantment with Stalinist and Korean experiments of communism during post-war period; of course, the recent Marxist ecologists, like John Bellamy Foster, find the resonance between Marx and Merleau-Ponty in the case of sense perception. In the process, he enriched phenomenology of perception by 'bringing it down to earth' by introducing the notion of embodiment, by bringing the avowed consciousness-centric phenomenological endeavours down to the primacy of body in perception.

Unprejudiced by the philosophical accounts of perception by rationalism or empiricism or intellectualism or idealism, Merleau-Ponty's materialistic description of perception hinges on the phenomenological oeuvre; thus, we witness the birth of "a philosophy of intersubjectivity tracing the affinity of consciousness and nature, mind and body, self and society", reconciling the presupposed "antinomies of the philosophical traditions" (Muller 203). In this process, his phenomenology overcame the problems of earlier phenomenologists and Marxists, like Lukacs. "Merleau-Ponty's insistence on the lifeworld as the foundation of phenomenology went further than anything suggested by Husserl and gave his philosophy a strongly empirical bent... His interpretation of phenomenology indeed spared his philosophy the idealist and rationalist overtones still present in the phenomenologies of Husserl and Sartre. While his thought here converged with Heidegger's, Merleau-Ponty avoided the ontological emphasis that characterized *Being and Time*" (205), by emphasizing the embodiment.

Body, World and Perception

As the genius of Merleau-Ponty lies in his emphasis on embodiment and lifeworld/situatedness, as mentioned earlier – which gives him the edge over other phenomenologists regarding the description of perception though the originary traces of these notions can be found in their phenomenological

explications of consciousness – his notions of body, perception and the world and their inextricable interrelatedness need to be sketched out before the enunciation of his notion of intersubjectivity. Though we find the ontological turn in the phenomenological explication of consciousness in Heidegger's existential phenomenology, still Merleau-Ponty found it to be insufficient for the phenomenological description of perception. His introduction into Gestalt Psychology which studied the human behaviour, and his Marxist understanding of human praxis helped him to ground the consciousness in the lifeworld. Moreover, when Gabriel Marcel pronounced “I am my body” in the 1920's, Merleau-Ponty took up this suggestion and grounded the consciousness in its usual concrete location, i.e., body, departing from the earlier studies which emphasised consciousness as a kind of abstract disembodied entity. “Like Marcel, Merleau-Ponty means by “body” neither an object known from without nor a pure subject completely transparent to itself”, say the translators of *Sense and Non-Sense*, in their *Introduction (Sense and Non-Sense xii)*.

With the consciousness as embodied *cogito* situated in the world, Merleau-Ponty arrives at ‘being-in-the-world’, saying, “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” (*Phenomenology of Perception* 209). The body, and hence the embodied *cogito*, are spatially situated in the world (365), constituting the already constituted world. Further, the world is not only a spatial entity, but the situated subject is in a psycho-physical relation with the world and constitutes it. Here one may find the influence of Marxist notion of human praxis, codified in Marx’s *Theses on Feuerbach* (Engels 63-5). “I have the world as an unfinished individual through my body as a power for this world; I have the position of objects through the position of my body, or inversely I have the position of my body through the position of objects, not through logical implication, nor in the manner in which we determine an unknown size through its objective relations with given sizes, but rather through a real implication and because my body is a movement toward the world and

because the world is my body's support" (*Phenomenology of Perception* 366). If one asks what he means by "my body is a movement toward the world", then his answer would be "Consciousness is being toward the thing through the intermediary of the body" (140). James Miller comments, "Through his study of behaviour, Merleau-Ponty hoped to demarcate a primordial locus of meaning bonding consciousness, via the body, to the world" (Miller 198-9).

Unlike the earlier philosophers who proclaimed a dichotomous relationship between body and mind or who proclaimed the pre-eminence of consciousness over the body, Merleau-Ponty keeps the embodied *cogito* as a movement toward the world. The intrinsic relation between the embodiment and the world is further explained by him, "Thus, we must not say that our body is *in* space, nor for that matter *in* time. It *inhabits* space and time" (*Phenomenology of Perception* 140). "If I find, while reflecting upon the essence of the body, that it is tied to the essence of the world, this is because my existence as subjectivity is identical with my existence as a body and with the existence of the world, and because, ultimately, the subject that I am, understood concretely, is inseparable from this particular body and from this particular world. The ontological world and body that we uncover at the core of the subject are not the world and the body as ideas; rather, they are the world itself condensed into a comprehensive hold and the body itself as a knowing- body" (431).

Founding the inseparable, but still indeterminate, relationship among consciousness, body, perception and the world, he makes a radical pronouncement that "Perception is not a sort of beginning of science, an elementary exercise of the intelligence; we must rediscover a commerce with the world and a presence to the world which is older than intelligence" (*Sense and Non-Sense* 52). Further still, his militant description of the interrelatedness among embodied *cogito*, perception and the world will be evident when he says, "The world is entirely on the inside, and I am entirely outside of myself" (*Phenomenology of Perception* 430).

The unity of consciousness, body, perception, subject's situatedness, world, time and space are called as 'intentional arc' by Merleau-Ponty. "(t)he 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 to motricity" (137). This notion of intentional arc provides the cumulative understanding of the lived experience of the embodied subject in its situatedness in the world. The already constituted world exists even before the subject is inserted into it, but the embodied consciousness acts upon it too. While the intentionality was posited on the consciousness by the earlier phenomenologists, Merleau-Ponty inverts it by saying that motricity or motor intentionality is the original intentionality (139). As consciousness is understood as embodiment, this necessary correction of intentionality also becomes necessary. Repudiating the Cartesian claims of *cogito*, he says, "Consciousness is originally not an "I think that" but rather an "I can... it does not unite them by placing them all under the domination of an "I think," but rather by orienting them toward the inter-sensory unity of a "world"" (139). The 'I' is not a passive thinking subject, rather it is an active constituting subject in the constituted world.

Consciousness is always embodied and is historically, socially and culturally located in the world. When philosophers discuss consciousness, they try to understand consciousness in its disunity or in its irreconciled relation with the body and the world. However, Merleau-Ponty tries to locate consciousness as embodied in its situatedness, for consciousness has no presence without the historically situated body, except probably in religious doctrines and abstract philosophical speculations. Marx, in his *Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, would say "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness" (Marx 21), identifying the

dialectical relation between consciousness and the social relations of production. Merleau-Ponty, in his critique of hitherto existing philosophies on consciousness, would say that “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).

It is quite interesting to see that how Merleau-Ponty describes the relation between the embodiment and the world. “The subject, argued Merleau-Ponty, always faced a previously established situation, an environment and world not of its own making. Its life, as intersubjectivity open, acquired a social atmosphere which it did not itself constitute” (Miller 204). Those who have certain basic knowledge about Marx’s materialist conception of history and society would, perhaps, understand the sources from which Merleau-Ponty develops his phenomenological description of lifeworld and arrives at human *praxis*. Merleau-Ponty explains the social world or the social institutions in which humans inhabit, similar to what Marx said, “Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past” (McLellan 137).

The body inhabits a natural world of objects as constituted by the already existing subjects before its inhabitation, before its birth into the natural world. The already constituted world is not just a natural world of objects, but the world of objects has acquired social and cultural significations which are different from the natural objects; hence, the natural world is a socially and culturally constituted world too. Merleau-Ponty says, “Thus, we must rediscover the social world, after the natural world, not as an object or a sum of objects, but as the permanent field or dimension of existence: I can certainly turn away from the social world, but I cannot cease to be situated in relation to it. 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. Objective and scientific consciousness of the past or of civilizations would be impossible if I did not have – through the intermediary of my society, my cultural world, and their horizons – at least a virtual communication with them” (*Phenomenology of Perception* 379).

The subject inhabits the world as its lifeworld; the lifeworld is an already constituted world, historically, socially, economically and culturally. The subject inhabits it with other subjects, with already inhabiting subjects. The inhabitation of the subject along with other subjects makes the natural world as a socio-culturally constituted shared world, which is still historically being constituted by the subject(s). Very interestingly, in the above-mentioned quote, he underscores the relation of objective/scientific thought with the horizons of the socio-cultural life-world in which one is situated, probably following the dialectical scientists of his period who followed the leads emanating from Marx’s notion of ‘double transference’ (Foster, et al. 292-3, 308-12).

What Merleau-Ponty means by social world or cultural world or the life-world of the individual can further be understood through his notion of institution. What Merleau-Ponty means by institution? “One understands here by institution those events of an experience which endow it with durable dimensions, in relation to which a sequence of other experiences will have meaning, forming a comprehensible connection or history – in other words, those events which deposit a meaning in me, not by appeal to survival and residue, but as an appeal to coherence, the requirement of future”, says Merleau-Ponty (Miller 210). Further, he says, “The presence of the individual in the institution, and of the institution in the individual is evident in the case of linguistic change.... Just as language is a system of signs which have meaning only in relation to one another, and each of which has its own usage throughout the whole language, so each institution is a symbolic

system that the subject takes over and incorporates as a style of functioning, as a global configuration, without having any need to conceive it at all... It is in this way, as is also true of logics of behaviour, that the forms and processes of history, classes, the epochs, exist. They are in a social, cultural or symbolic space and is, moreover, supported by it" (*In Praise of Philosophy* 55-6).

The human subject inhabits the socio-culturally constituted world and derives its style of behaviour and functioning out of it; it is its lifeworld. The lifeworld, which the subject inhabits, emanates from the socio-cultural significations and socially constituted institutional frameworks which were already constituted. In other words, the lifeworld of an individual can be described as follows: "Although the individual's existence was informed by tacit social projects, for the most part his social environment remained preconscious and unreflected" (214), as 'pre-personal' and 'connatural'. The lifeworld is "my way of being in the world within this institutional framework" (*Phenomenology of Perception* 469). For example, quoting Merleau-Ponty, it can be said that one's existence as a proletarian is not determined by economy or society as impersonal forces outside of my existence; or, I do not experience myself as proletarian after reading a Marxist theories; I experience myself as a proletarian because "society or the economy such as I bear them within myself and such as I live them" (469-70). This lived experience is not the making of the subject; rather, it lives the experiences from its situatedness that emanate from the already constituted social relations of production.

The social institutions are historically constituted institutions of the world in which humans inhabit and constitute them through their relations with others and with the world; "When equilibrium is destroyed, the reorganizations which take place comprise, like those of language, an internal logic even though it may not be clearly thought out by anyone" (*In Praise of Philosophy* 56). In such a description of the world in relation to the embodied subject, an indeterminacy is always the actuality; there is always an anonymity attached to the relation between the lived world and the situated

subject; this indeterminacy or anonymity, as described by Merleau-Ponty, “is connected with the ‘horizons’ in virtue of which the world ‘outruns’ or ‘transcends’ our representations and hence his insistence on the ‘inexhaustibility’ of the world” (Morris 18 and *Phenomenology of Perception* lxxx-lxxxix); and “the world ceaselessly bombards and besieges subjectivity just as waves surround a shipwreck on the beach” (215).

This notion of indeterminacy or anonymity is often confused with ‘ambiguity’ by idealists, it may be remembered; as the idealism does not accommodate the necessary space, in its theoretical elaboration of the reality, for the constituent changes and the inexhaustible richness accompanied by the constituting subject in the socio-historically constituted world, such indeterminacies are perceived as ambiguities. As the idealists look at the world as a kind of ideal unchanging reality, the horizons of the world are often confused as ‘ambiguity’. At the most, such ‘ambiguities’ will be resolved by them theoretically by dividing the reality into two, such as thing-in-itself and appearance, as did by Kant and others.

Further, this situatedness is not irrevocably constituted one; rather the constitutive subjects (re)constitute the world; just as in the case of proletarian, class consciousness takes the form of “things-must-change” (470). “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; I am never a mere thing and never a bare consciousness” (480). Explaining this process of “strictly bilateral” (Morris 16) relation between the embodied subject and the world, Katherine J. Morris says, “The world is *neither* ‘internal’ nor ‘external’” (11) in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception; “The world is not an ‘internal’ world: it, and others, ‘transcend’ our representations” (12); “The world is not an external world: human beings and the world are internally related, we are being-in-the-world” (13).

Having briefly enunciated the relation between the embodied subject and the world, it is the turn to sketch out the phenomenological description of perception of the constituting subject in the already constituted life-world. This is crucial for the understanding of Merleau-Ponty's notion of intersubjectivity. Merleau-Ponty says, "our body is a being of two leaves, from one side a thing among things and otherwise what sees them and touches them; we say, because it is evident, that it unites these two properties within itself, and its double belongingness to the order of the "object" and to the order of the "subject" reveals to us quite unexpected relations between the two orders. It cannot be by incomprehensible accident that the body has this double reference..." (*The Visible and Invisible* 137). Further he continues, "The quasi "reflective" redoubling, the reflexivity of the body, the fact that it touches itself touching, sees itself seeing, does not consist in surprising a connecting activity behind the connected, in reinstalling oneself in this constitutive activity; the self-perception (sentiment of oneself, Hegel would say) or perception of perception does not convert what it apprehends into an object and does not coincide with a constitutive source of perception" (*The Visible and Invisible* 249).

What do these statements suggest about the intricate relations between human subject and the object of perception? Normally, the philosophers have analysed the relation between the subject and the object as unbridgeable contradictions, extending them into two poles, namely, mind and matter or idealism and materialism. Moreover, as Sartre did, they try to separate the phenomenon of perception itself as pre-reflective and reflective, meaning the perception as different from the perception of perception. But, for Merleau-Ponty, these traditional differentiations between mind and matter and pre-reflective and reflective are bridged in the embodied self as 'pre-personal' and 'connatural' (*Phenomenology of Perception* 223-5) – which the philosophers so far failed to understand or neglected the intersensory unity in the body.

For Merleau-Ponty, the embodied *cogito* is in perceptual unity with its object of its perception, as it perceives itself in and through the perception

of object at the same time; it is not that the body touches the object, but in touching it touches itself; in seeing my friend, I see myself seeing my friend; in smelling, I perceive my own smelling; there is an act of ‘double sensation’ (95), that is, while perceiving, the body perceives that it perceives. These ‘two leaves’ of the same body, this ‘double sensation’ or ‘quasi reflective redoubling’ makes the unity of subject and object as well as the body and the consciousness of the perceiving body possible. Though it is taken for granted in the history of philosophy to separate the consciousness from the perceiving object and to separate the act of perception from the reflection/experience – and to name the perceived experience as secondary perception or as reflection/meditation – Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception unites all these philosophically differentiated acts through embodiment; moreover, this unity of subject and object as well as the unity of perception and of the experience of perception are not a wishful philosophical idealism for Merleau-Ponty; rather, as explained above, such a unity is always there through what he calls ‘intentional arc’. If we extend Merleau-Ponty’s notion of quasi-reflective-redoubling, we can safely even say that there is no separation of pre-reflective *cogito* and reflective *cogito*; for, without the possibility of quasi-reflective act (perception of the perceiving body) happening along with the act of perception, there would be no possibility of reflection about the perception itself; for the body’s access to perception is ‘pre-personal’ and ‘connaturality’ (223-5). Normally, the reflective consciousness is explained as the *posteriori* of the pre-reflective consciousness; but, for Merleau-Ponty, these two moments occur at the same moment.

Whether such a synthetic/dialectical understanding between matter, perception and the experience of perception is new in the history of Western philosophy? A firm ‘No’. Marx had explained this dialectical relation between the body, sense perception and nature through his materialist conception (as explained in 1st thesis of *Theses on Feuerbach* (Engels 63) when he said, “In hearing nature hears itself, in smelling it smells itself, in seeing it sees itself” (Foster, et al. 227). As a historical materialist, Marx

poses this unity of the subject and the object in the dialectical process, whereas Merleau-Ponty, as a materialist phenomenologist, transposes this unity on the embodied subject. Quoting Feenberg's statement that "The early Marx can be seen to approach and anticipate the phenomenological concept of a 'pre-reflexive' unity of subject and object", John Bellamy Foster comments that "the phenomenological" element in Marx's thought derives from his brand of materialism, which sees human existence and consciousness as corporeal, based on the body, the sense organs, and the sense perception. Merleau-Ponty is in accord with Marx when he writes, "The body, (in turn), is wholly animated, and all its functions contribute to the perception of objects – an activity long considered by philosophy to be pure knowledge" (*Primacy of Perception*5)" (Foster, et al. 232, 487).

Subject, Other and Intersubjectivity

The problem of the subject and the other and their relation is an age-old subject matter in the history of philosophy. As long as the subject and the other are conceived as mere consciousnesses, the reconcilability of their relation becomes insurmountable in the history of philosophy. However, in Merleau-Ponty's world of perception, the subject is conceived in its materiality, as 'being-in-the-world'. As the materiality of 'being-in-the-world' is further materialised ('bring them down to earth', in the words of Merleau-Ponty) as embodied being, as embodied *cogito*, the basic problem of the ever-present void between consciousnesses is getting resolved, as a human perceptual *praxis* with all its indeterminacies and fragilities, in his phenomenology of perception.

The 'being-in-the-world' inhabits the shared world of beings; as it is a shared world of beings, it is an inter-world which makes intersubjectivity possible (*Phenomenology of Perception* 373). Though such a solution is presented in a simplistic manner, in the above two sentences, Merleau-Ponty arrives at this very materialistic understanding of the shared way of lived experiences of beings by deconstructing existing notions of subjectivity and 'bringing down the notion of subjectivity to the earth', bringing down the notion of

consciousness as 'knowing subject' to the actual perceptual transactions happening among the embodied beings in the world. In this section of the paper, we shall see how Merleau-Ponty deals with the other and how he tries to resolve the traditional philosophical problem of the relation between the subject and the other through his notion of intersubjectivity.

Having clarified that the subject of perception is not merely consciousness, but being-in-the-world through the body, in his *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty turns his attention towards the relation among human subjects. The main question concerning the problem of intersubjectivity is that how is the subject open to the phenomenon which transcends it, because of its indeterminacy, inexhaustibility and anonymity unfolding in the horizons? The earlier philosophers and phenomenologists, up to Sartre, sorted this out through a fateful dualism of in-itself and for-itself. But Merleau-Ponty unites these dualistic positions with his 'in-itself-for-us' (336) thus: "If I experience this inherence of my consciousness in its body and in its mind⁴, the perception of others and the plurality of consciousnesses no longer present any difficulty. If the perceiving subject appears (to me who is reflecting upon perception) as endowed with a primordial arrangement in relation to the world, drawing with it that bodily thing without which there would be no other things for it, then why should the other bodies that I perceive not be equally inhabited by consciousnesses?" (366-7).

Instead of stressing the plurality of perceptions/consciousnesses as a revelation of horizontal multiplicities, Merleau-Ponty temporalizes them (both perceptions and horizons) in the world as beings-in-the-world cohabiting the time and space. When the bodies cohabit the time and space, and as they are aware of the plurality of consciousnesses, the inter-penetration of consciousnesses is possible, according to Merleau-Ponty. As long as the

⁴ Colin Smith uses the word 'world', instead of 'mind', in his translation of *Phenomenology of Perception*. This makes a better sense than the translation offered by Donald A. Landes of *Phenomenology of Perception* which is used in the citations of this paper. See Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Translated by Colin Smith. London and New York, Routledge, 2005, p. 408.

consciousness is not conceptualised as objectivity but conceived as temporalized subjectivity, the dualisms between in-itself and for-itself, on the one hand, and for-itself and for-others, on the otherhand, disappears; the understanding between spatio-temporally situated multiple consciousnesses is transformed from 'for-itself-for-me' into 'for-itself-for-us'. "(w)e 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 thegenerality 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." (478)

And, most importantly, the 'transcendental subjectivity' proposed by Husserl as an ideal solution to the problems of intersubjectivity is achieved through temporalization of subjectivities, through sociality and corporeality, that makes the subjectivities as permeable and porous, still having the moments of anonymity and indeterminacy. This is made clear by Merleau-Ponty as follows: "From within the perspective of temporalization, the indications that we gave above regarding the problem of others are clarified. In the perception of another person, we said, I overcome in intention the infinite distance that will forever separate my subjectivity from another; I surmount the conceptual impossibility of another for-itself-for-me because I observe another behavior, another presence in the world... But unlike two consciousnesses, two temporalities are not mutually incompatible, because each one only knows itself by projecting itself in the present, and because they can intertwine there. Since my living present opens up to a past that I nevertheless no longer live and to a future that I do not yet live, or that I might never live, it can also open up to temporalities that I do not live and can have a social horizon such that my world is enlarged to the extent of the collective history that my private existence takes up and carries forward. The solution to all the problems of transcendence is found in the thickness of the pre-objective present, where we find our corporeality, our sociality, and the pre-existence of the world, that is, where we find the starting point for

“explanations” to the extent that they are legitimate – and at the same time the foundation of our freedom.” (457)

The longer quotation, mentioned above, provides materialistic answers to the riddles of intersubjectivity, posed by earlier philosophers. The basic problem in such philosophies is that they conceptualise the subject through individualism; through individualism, the subject is understood as a non-permeable compartmentalised consciousness. As individualism understands consciousness as individuated consciousness which does not exactly correspond to the individuated consciousness of the other – as individualism stresses individuation beyond the optimal necessity within a historical epoch, conceiving the process of individuation as transcending the limits of spatio-temporality shared with others – the intersubjectivity itself becomes an insurmountable problem for philosophies that emphasize individuated consciousness. Simply because the philosophers do not realise that individual is social, the problematisation of intersubjectivity occurs as an insurmountable one in their philosophisation. But Merleau-Ponty overcomes this issue very sophisticatedly, as he understands individual subject in its corporeality, in its sociality, though he avers that “The social does not at first exist like an object in the third person” (380). As the social is also historical, embedded in the temporality, the solidity of the sociality is also not possible; and hence, it should be added that sociality is in a flux. Probably, Marxist understanding of individual as “the ensemble of social relations” – the social relations formed out of the mode of production and relations of production of a historical epoch – as conceptualised in Marx’s 6th thesis on Feuerbach (Engels 64), comes in handy for Merleau-Ponty to arrive at this position of sociality of embodied subject/*cogito*. Even the French sociologists, like Emile Durkheim, made it clear that “man is double” (Durkheim 16) as individual organism and social at the same time. Following such leads, Merleau-Ponty says, “the social exists silently and as a solicitation” (*Phenomenology of Perception* 379).

Even further, the temporality of subject, inhabiting the present, connects the past and the future with the present as ‘collective history’; as the world is

pre-existing before the inhabitation of the subject and as the socially shared world is pre-personal and connatural, the link between the past and the future through the present, however indeterminate and inexhaustible it may be, becomes possible for the embodied *cogito*. In this process, one may be able to have a “virtual communication” “through the intermediary of my society, my cultural world, and their horizons” (379) and through my spatio-temporality of subjectivity, however incohesive it might be. “The other person’s experiences, or those I obtain by changing locations, do nothing but unfold what is indicated by the horizons of my present experience, and add nothing to it. My perception makes an indefinite number of perceptual chains coexist, which would confirm my perception on all points and would harmonize with them”, says Merleau-Ponty (354).

But there is a still more complexity involved in the intersubjectivity when the embodied subjects in question are from two different life worlds, especially in the case of distant cultural worlds. In such a milieu, where subjects are of two different or distant cultural worlds, the following questions are raised by Merleau-Ponty, thus: “how can the word “I” be made plural? How can we form a general idea of the I? How can I speak of another I than my own? How can I know that there are other I’s? How can consciousness, which as knowledge of itself is, in principle, in the mode of the I, be grasped in the mode of the You [*Toi*], and thereby in the mode of the “One”?” (364) The questions raised by Merleau-Ponty in the context of the possible intersubjectivity of subjects of two distant life worlds are very relevant, as these questions illuminate the real-life problems of connectivity between them. When the subject tries to understand the other from a distant or different lifeworld through its own cultural categories which are different from its own, how would intersubjectivity be possible? What kind of permeability or porosity, if not hostility, would be possible from the lived experience of the subject towards the cultural other?

Merleau-Ponty tries to address this most contentious issue between cultures, or for that matter any context of intersubjectivity, as the encounters passing through “a veil of anonymity”. He says, “In the cultural object, I experience

the near presence of others under a veil of anonymity. *One* uses the pipe for smoking, the spoon for eating, or the bell for summoning, and the perception of a cultural world could be verified through the perception of a human act and of another man.... I see other men around me putting the tools that surround me to a certain use and that I interpret their behavior through analogy with my own behavior and my own inner experience, which teaches me the sense and the intention of the perceived gestures.... Nevertheless, the analysis of the perception of others encounters the essential difficulty raised by the cultural world because it must resolve the paradox of a consciousness seen from the outside, the paradox of a thought that resides in the exterior and that, when compared to my own, is already without a subject and is anonymous.” (363-4)

As “every perception has something anonymous about it, this is because it takes up an acquisition that it does not question” (247), the intersubjectivity also needs to be understood as riddled in anonymity and indeterminacy. For example, while discussing the experience of reading Descartes, Merleau-Ponty says, “it is true that they do not directly intend my experience and that they ground an anonymous and general thought; but I would not find any sense in them, not even a derived and inauthentic one, and I could not even read Descartes’s text, were I not – prior to every speech – in contact with my own life and my own thought, nor if the spoken *Cogito* did not encounter a tacit *Cogito* within me. In writing his *Méditations*, Descartes was aiming at this silent *Cogito*, which animates and directs all of the expressive operations that, by definition, fail to reach their goal, since they interpose – between Descartes’s existence and the knowledge that he gains of this existence – the entire thickness of cultural acquisitions; but, on the other hand, these expressive operations would not even be attempted if Descartes had not, at the outset, had his own existence in sight” (424). Hence, the anonymity is present in the phenomenon of embodied perception, in spite of its own cohesiveness, and this reflects in the intersubjectivity too.

On the other hand, when talking about the Russian peasants, he says, “Despite their cultural, moral, vocational, and ideological differences, the

Russian peasants of 1917 joined the workers' struggle in Petrograd and Moscow because they sense that their lot is the same; class is lived concretely prior to being the object of a deliberate will" (380). This makes a revelatory claim that existence is the base of all perception; and the anonymity and indeterminacy of perception and intersubjectivity do not take precedence to sociality and corporeality of the embodied subjects when the concrete lived experiences cohere among them.

It would be interesting to know that exactly after 33 years of publication of *Phenomenology of Perception*, a theory, known as *Orientalism*, propounded by Edward Said, based on the study of literary productions of the colonisers, came to the similar conclusion arrived by Merleau-Ponty regarding the problem of intersubjectivity between two different lifeworlds. Especially Said studied how the non-familiar cultural aspects of the colonised masses came to be familiarised by the colonising subjects. Using the notion of 'familiarising the non-familiar', Said says, "Something patently foreign and distant acquires, for one reason or another, a status more rather than less familiar. One tends to stop judging things either as completely novel or as completely well known; a new median category emerges, a category that allows one to see new things, things seen for the first time, as versions of a previously known thing. In essence such a category is not so much a way of receiving new information as it is a method of controlling what seems to be a threat to some established view of things... The threat is muted, familiar values impose themselves, and in the end the mind reduces the pressure upon it by accommodating things to itself as either "original" or "repetitious" ... The Orient at large, therefore, vacillates between the West's contempt for what is familiar and its shivers of delight in – or fear of – novelty." (Said 58-9)

As Merleau-Ponty said, as quoted above, that the culturally other person's actions will be understood through the subject's own cultural categories, and that the paradox of the exteriority of thought conceives it without a subject (*Phenomenology of Perception* 364) – the subject is made into an object – gets reflected in the theory of Said's *Orientalism*. However, *Orientalism*

adds a further layer to the problem of perception and intersubjectivity, when Said introduces the unequal power relations between the colonising subject and colonised object, between the cultural majority and the cultural minority, between the powerful and the powerless, as the reason for the making of subjects into objects. If we look at Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological description of intersubjectivity in the context of two distant cultural worlds, the exteriority of thought makes the subject into object, even without the operation of power in between the subject and the other. This brings us closer to the issue of the relation between freedom and intersubjectivity – if we transpose Saidian theorisation of power relations between the subject and the other into the relation of freedom of the subject and the other. Exploring Sartre's notion of being and freedom would give us a better understanding of Merleau-Ponty's conception of the interrelatedness between freedom and intersubjectivity.

Sartre distinguishes the other into 'other-as-object' and 'other-as-subject' (Morris 100-3). In the case of 'other-as-object', I look at the other and see the other as a physical object which prevents me to connect with the other internally (as in the case of seeing the other expressing anger which I try to grasp through analogy of my angry behaviour), but relate to him/her/them externally. In the latter case of 'other-as-subject', I am aware of being looked at by the other by which I realise myself as the object of other's gaze (as in the case of feeling shamed by the gaze of the other). Here, in the case of Sartre's exposition, "being-seen constitutes me as a defenceless being for a freedom which is not my freedom" (Sartre 267) and hence Sartre avers, through his notion of 'badfaith', that "conflict is the original meaning of being-for-others" (364).

Comparing the notions of freedom and intersubjectivity of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, James Miller comments that Sartre envisioned an absolute freedom, though he properly emphasized subject's freedom; on the other hand, as Merleau-Ponty's notion of freedom is situated in the already established world, the freedom is conditioned in its situatedness (Miller 204). "Taken concretely, freedom is always an encounter between the exterior and

the interior – even that pre-human and pre- historical freedom by which we began – and it weakens, without ever becoming zero, to the extent that the *tolerance* of the bodily and institutional givens of our life diminishes”, according to Merleau-Ponty (*Phenomenology of Perception* 481). In other words, the freedom possible/available in a given situatedness for a subject, along with the bodily reciprocity, makes the conditions for intersubjectivity as an exercise of coexistence.

Emphasising the freedom and coexistence as necessary conditions of intersubjectivity, Merleau-Ponty says, “The conflict between me and others does not begin only when we attempt *to think* others, nor does it disappear if thought is reintegrated into non-thetic consciousness and unreflective life: the conflict is already there when I attempt to live another’s experience [*vivre autrui*], for example, in the blindness of sacrifice. I establish a pact with the other person, and I commit to living in an inter-world where I make as much room for the other as I do for myself. But this inter-world is still my project, and it would be hypocritical to believe that I desire the other person’s well-being *as my own*, since even this attachment to another’s well-being still comes from me” (373). That is, the commitment to live in an inter-world with others is a necessary condition for intersubjectivity, even if such a commitment is based on one’s self-interests. When there is no commitment to live in an inter-world with the other, but only an intention to eliminate the other from its existence, as a condition to exercise one’s unrestrained freedom, there is no possibility for intersubjectivity. This is what we witness in the atmosphere of hatred towards the other, and hence there is no possibility for intersubjectivity in such contexts.

On the other hand, Merleau-Ponty says, “Without reciprocity there is no alter Ego, since one person’s world would thereby envelop the other’s, and since one would feel alienated to the benefit of the other. This is what happens to a couple when the love is not equal on both sides: one commits to this love and stakes his life on it, the other remains free, and this love is for him but a contingent way of living... Coexistence must be in each case lived by each person... my freedom requires that others have the same freedom.” (373-4)

In this case, where the commitment to an inter-life is there in the subject, but if it is not reciprocated by the other, there is a feeling of alienation in the subject whereas the other enjoys the fruits of the commitment without reciprocity. In cases where there is no reciprocity, the intersubjectivity leads to the benefit of the one and to the alienation of the other. In spite of the fact that there is a veil of anonymity in the intersubjective encounters between embodied subjects, such intersubjectivity is possible only on the conditions of situated freedom, coexistence, commitment to inter-world, and reciprocity among the subjects.

Conclusion

Even though Merleau-Ponty expresses the conditions for the intersubjectivity, intersubjectivity is not an ideal unity in his phenomenological description of perception; but a field of experience. For example, in the case of Paul's finger pointing out the steeple to me, there is no pre-established harmony between us; but there is bodily reciprocity between us. "Paul and I see the landscape "together," we are co-present before it, and it is the same for the two of us not merely as an intelligible signification, but also as a certain accent of the world's style, reaching all the way to its *haecceity*. The unity of the world weakens and crumbles according to the temporal and spatial distance that the ideal unity (in principle) crosses without suffering any loss... We will never understand this as long as we turn the world into an object⁵; but we will understand it immediately if the world is the *field* of our experience" (428).

Still, if there is no situated freedom of equality between the subjects involved in the field of experience, if there is no bodily reciprocity or commitment to an inter-world in between them, if one subject emphasizes and cherishes the freedom of itself more than the other, the intersubjectivity

⁵ The translator of *Phenomenology of Perception*, Donald A. Landes, says, "Merleau-Ponty here writes *ob-jet* (in French), thus emphasizing the etymological meaning of the word, namely, "to throw or place in front"" (557).

will manifest its discordant note. Though the anonymity, indeterminacy and inexhaustibility are the part of the field of perceptual experience, the 'tolerance of the bodily and institutional givens of our life' mellow them in the course of the actual experiential encounter where world is understood as the field of experience. However, the already fragile nature of intersubjectivity weakens when the conditions necessary for intersubjectivity, i.e., corporeality/sociality, coexistence, freedom, reciprocity, commitment to inter-world, etc., get weakened. It might lead to majoritarian or supremacist society; as a corollary, one may say that the majoritarian society presupposes the weakened possibility of intersubjectivity, in the absence of the manifest will, commitment and reciprocity to constitutional guarantees towards individual rights and freedom of all.

In a society, which is full of graded inequalities, what kind of intersubjectivity would be possible? And if a society is built on the cultural supremacist notions, which envelops the other to make it as an object, what kind of intersubjective experiences are possible for the other in such a socio-cultural situatedness? And if a subject pre-closes itself wilfully, forbidding itself to open up to the other through its avowed notions of kinds of supremacism, what kind of intersubjectivity is possible for the other? If the subject is rooted in its cultural and denies the possibility to the other whose cultural world is different, what kind of intersubjectivity would be possible between them? These are the questions that we witness today, which he could visualise during his time, possibly as a 'field of experience'. And, such instances are plenty in today's world as a field of experience. In such sense, Merleau-Ponty's contribution to the phenomenological understanding of intersubjectivity is immensely useful.

I shall end this paper with description of a debate between Gandhi and Ambedkar, which clearly shows the problems of intersubjectivity in Indian context, especially in the context of the reality of caste inequality among the human subjects. In his *Annihilation of Caste*, Ambedkar discusses the graded inequality existing in the society, due to the presence of caste system in India,

against the very principles of equality, freedom, fraternity and democracy; he calls the Hindus, in this undelivered Presidential Address to Jat-Pat Todak Mandal – a sister organization of Arya Samaj – which was later published as a book in 1936, to annihilate caste and to reform the religion, by means of critical attitude towards the religious injunctions that promote the caste-based inequality among humans. Gandhi responded to this, through a two-piece article published in the magazine *Harijan* on 11th and 18th July, 1936. In his response, published in *Harijan* on 18th July, 1936, Gandhi says, “It (caste) is a custom whose origin I do not know, and do not need to know for the satisfaction of my spiritual hunger. But I do know that it is harmful to spiritual and national growth” (Ambedkar 326). One can easily grasp the contradiction in these two sentences – which accepts caste as hampering the spiritual and national growth, but Gandhi’s spiritual hunger is not about knowing the origin of caste system. More than this, Gandhi rejects Ambedkar’s arguments by saying, “I am aware that my interpretation of Hinduism will be disputed by many, besides Dr. Ambedkar. That does not affect my position. It is an interpretation by which I have lived for nearly half a century, and according to which I have endeavoured to the best of my ability to regulate my life” (327).

The process of intersubjectivity initiated by Ambedkar has been made a closure by Gandhi here. In spite of the fact that he accepts the caste system to be harmful to nation, he says that his interpretation of Hinduism, emerging out of his lived experience, is different than what Ambedkar understands from his embodied subject as untouchable. Here, the lived experiences of two people are different and contradictory to each other. One wishes to abolish the system which perpetuates inequality among humans, ascribing caste on the humans from their birth; another does not care about it, by saying that his lived experiences are different from that of Ambedkar’s critique of Hindu religious doctrines on which the caste system emerged.

The question remains what intersubjectivity means at such events; where one feels oppression but the other does not feel the urgency to eliminate it, though recognising it; when the intersubjectivity is not reciprocated with a

commitment to the inter-world, but only to continue oppression, revolution can only be a possible answer according to Merleau-Ponty (*Phenomenology of Perception* 468-71).

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