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MERLEAU-PONTY ON EMBODIED SUBJECTIVITY FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF SUBJECT-OBJECT CIRCULARITY

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenological point of view of the body is usually appreciated for having introduced the notion of the ‘lived’ body. We cannot merely analyze and explain the body as one of the elements of the world of objects. We must also describe it, for example, as the center of our perspective on the world, the place where our sensing is ‘localized’, the *agens* which directly executes our intentions. However, in Husserl, the idea of the body as lived primarily complements his objectivism: the body (*Leib*) is an objective *and* mental reality, a ‘double unity’, as he writes. In contrast, Merleau-Ponty’s later considerations of the body in *Phenomenology of Perception* tend to the idea of a *circular* relationship between the objective and subjective dimensions of the body – between the objective and the lived. One of the means to overcome the idea of the body as a site of the correlation between two opposite and complementary realms is, for Merleau-Ponty, the philosophical interpretation of an early neurological notion of ‘body schema’. Body schema is neither an idea nor a physiological-physical fact, it is rather a practical diagram of our relationships with the world, an action-based norm in reference to which things make sense. In the recently published preparatory notes for his 1953 courses, Merleau-Ponty dedicates much effort to further developing the notion of body schema, and interprets fresh sources that he did not use in *Phenomenology of Perception*. Notably, he studies various possibilities of how this practical ‘diagram’ can be de-differentiated (pathology) or further refined (cognitive and cultural superstructures, symbolic systems), which shows the fundamentally dynamic unity of the body. This paper summarizes the basic elements of Merleau-Ponty’s 1953 renewed philosophical interpretation of the notion of body schema, while contrasting it to the more traditional understanding of the body in phenomenology and in recent philosophical texts dealing with body schema.

Keywords: Merleau-Ponty; Husserl; Gallagher; subjectivity; human body; body image; body schema; perception

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INTRODUCTION: OUR IDEA OF THE BODY CO-DETERMINES OUR IDEA OF SUBJECTIVITY

In the second book of his *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology* (1989), Edmund Husserl introduced a perspective on our body that has the potential to bring an entirely new view on subjectivity. Distinguishing ‘one’s body’ (*Leib*), a body intertwined with a ‘soul’, from mere physical bodies (*Körper*), Husserl succeeded in demonstrating the functional characteristics of the living body that cannot be grasped exclusively from a third person perspective. Of course, our body is part of the objective world, it is “integrated into the causal nexus of material nature” (Husserl, 1989, p. 167) and is linked to other objects by causal, physico-chemical relationships. Yet, apart from all the objective properties it shares with other objects, our body possesses a complex of experience-related values that an external object can never have. By opening up this new, ‘phenomenological’ perspective on the body, Husserl made a step that founded the 20th century tradition of an interpretation of subject’s body that breaks with a deeply rooted European tradition of how to understand our subjectivity. Ever since Descartes defined our body as a *res extensa*, pure material extension foreign to the essence of subjectivity (Descartes, 2008, Second Meditation), Western culture has understood the body as irrelevant for subjective processes, or only as their factual limitation. Inversely, a transformation of the idea of our body, as introduced in particular by some of Husserl’s descriptions, also requires a transformation of the definition of the subject – ‘mind’, or ‘consciousness’. If my body is no longer an object among other objects, a machine inexplicably connected to me, but rather the ‘vehicle’ or ‘agent’ of my existence (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 84; Merleau-Ponty, 1968b, p. 171), then the essence of my subjectivity is linked to the way in which I rely on my body, and to my capacity to eventually transform it.

This paper briefly presents how Merleau-Ponty developed the problem of the embodied subject as introduced by Husserl, and how he developed it in a way which, in comparison to other interpretations of the role of the body in experience (phenomenological or not), is original even today. Before getting into the details of how the change of the role of the body led Merleau-Ponty to a transformation of the idea of subjectivity, I will briefly discuss Husserl’s account of the functional characteristics of the body and the paradoxes it opens, and Merleau-Ponty’s interpretation of the neurological notion of ‘body schema’.

Husserl: the body-organ presupposes the body-object

As Husserl describes in the second book of his *Ideas* (1989, § 36), when I touch my left hand with my right hand, the latter experiences a series of objective qualities in the former, such as a particular temperature, hardness, or structure of the surface. Simultaneously, however, the action produces in the left hand a series of sensations of being touched. Husserl stresses that these subjective perceptions do not belong to the objective world, as the objective characteristics experienced by the right hand do. The feeling of being touched does not bring, to the physical thing ‘my body’, a new set of objective characteristics as it would to any object. Rather, the physical body I touch (*Körper*) becomes *someone’s* body, a subject’s body (*Leib*). From now on, this object shows itself as the site of someone’s sensations, as a “bearer of localised sensations” (Husserl, 1989, p. 152; quoted in Merleau-Ponty, 1964).

Husserl furthermore describes (1989, § 41) how we always experience objects from a particular perspective and as specifically oriented (visible from one side or the other, close or far, up or down, right or left, etc.). Interestingly, since I cannot change my perspective on my body as I please, i.e. I cannot, for example, move closer to it or see it from every angle, the range of possibilities of how my body can show itself to me is restricted. My body has an exceptional status in this respect, for its relatively constant orientation towards me serves as the ‘zero point of orientation’ for the perception of objects (Husserl, 1989, p. 165f.). Objects can only be ‘there’, ‘right’, ‘far’, ‘up’, because my body is always ‘here’ and thus constantly serves as a reference point for all the areas of the world that surround me.

Moreover, since I am able to ‘freely’ or ‘spontaneously’ move my body (Husserl, 1989, § 38) and thereby change the reference point of the phenomena around me, I am able to alter their orientation and appearance (with no need to change the objects themselves). Simultaneously, I am able to act upon the objects around me ‘via’ or ‘thanks to’ my body. Thus, both those events ‘conditioned’ by me and those caused from the outside meet in my body. My body is the ‘turning point’ of these two series. My body is simultaneously passive (moved, affected by objects) and active (moving itself, having effect on objects). In this way, my body is not only perceived as other objects are, and influenced by them, it is also the ‘organ’ and the ‘means for all my perception’ (Husserl, 1989, pp. 168 and 167).

Because of these and other similar characteristics, the role of my body in my experience fundamentally differs, for me, from the role any external object can have. My body is not simply an object of my perception, but my organ of perception; it is not only an arbitrary result of experience, but its systematic condition. How does, however, this body-organ *itself* show itself to me? Or in Husserl’s words, how does it acquire its unity for me? Interestingly, if we attempt to combine these two aspects of Husserl’s descriptions – the body serving as organ for my perception and being perceived by me – we will be confronted with a challenging task.

As we have already seen in the example of my two hands touching each other, Husserl claims that my body acquires its unity for me when, on a perceptible object, I ‘co-apprehend’ (Husserl, 1989, p. 163) a series of subjective sensations aroused by my perception of that object. In other words, when I touch my left hand with my right hand, between the series of objective phenomena my active hand perceives and the subjective phenomena my passive hand feels, I observe “consequences [...] in consistent parallels” (Husserl, 1989, p. 162). Husserl stresses that there is no duality in this perception, that I simply perceive my body as a unity. It is, however, not difficult to see that the vocabulary, and the general conceptual framework Husserl relies on, are fundamentally dualistic. The unity of the body is, for him, a unity of co-apprehension of two dimensions, and therefore a ‘double unity’ (*Doppeleinheit*, or a ‘two-fold unity’; Husserl, 1989, p. 170). From this perspective, the body is a ‘sensing thing’ or even a ‘subjective object’ (Husserl, 1989, p. 159; and Husserl, 1971, p. 124; quoted in Merleau-Ponty, 1964).

How are we to combine such an account with the description of the body as an organ of perception? According to Husserl, I can only perceive the phenomenon of my body as organ of perception (*Leib*) by ‘co-apprehending’ subjective sensations on a body as object of perception (*Körper*). But if we claim that the phenomenon of one’s body, the body-organ supposedly constitutive for my perception of objects, presupposes the perception of

a body-object, the two perspectives we are trying to combine are incompatible. (I have developed this argument in more depth in a previous article, cf. Halák, 2014.)

Husserl obviously did not leave his argumentation in such an impasse. In his ontological framework, the paradox can only be resolved to the benefit of transcendental consciousness. The objects are constituted in consciousness, they do not transform the rules of constitution, and since my body is an object (on which another, ‘higher’, unity is built, thanks to the co-apprehension of sensations), it cannot alter the way in which I experience the world. My body (*Leib*), which allows me to see the world from some perspective, is founded, for Husserl, on a reality constituted by the transcendental consciousness, which itself does not have any perspective or localisation, and is itself not corporeal.

In sum, Husserl does not apply his phenomenologically-discovered subjective-functional characteristics of the body to the way we perceive our own body, and thus neither to the ontic unity of the body (*Leib*) nor to embodied subjectivity (here we are interpreting Husserl, 1989, §§ 36–42). Although he did reveal that the body-organ is, at least in some aspects, a *subject* of perception, our body (*Leib*) is ultimately not, for him, something on which our perception is founded, but only a constituted *object* to which a series of subjective sensations is correlated. Due to this tension, the body (*Leib*) remains for Husserl an ontologically paradoxical being endowed with ‘abnormal’ qualities (Husserl, 1989, pp. 63ff.; Husserl, 1973, p. 280): “It is a remarkably imperfectly constituted thing” (Husserl, 1989, p. 167). In spite of such a non-standard status of our body in regard both to our subjectivity and to the objective world, the priority of transcendental consciousness for the constitution of our experience remains unaffected by the role our body has in our experience. In this respect, as other critics have already pointed out (e.g. Carman, 1999, p. 205), despite Merleau-Ponty and Husserl are both labeled as ‘phenomenologists’, there is a clear disparity between them.

The early works of Merleau-Ponty: a living body is not an object

Merleau-Ponty familiarized himself with Husserl’s second book of *Ideas* as early as in 1939, thanks to his visit to the Husserl Archives, which had been established in Leuven shortly after Husserl’s death (cf. Van Breda, 1962). He soon took notice of Husserl’s difficulties with the phenomenon of the body and was aware of the fact that Husserl’s description of the body contradicts the conceptual framework he usually relies on (cf., e.g., Merleau-Ponty, 2000, pp. 303f.; for Merleau-Ponty’s explicit interpretation of the second book of *Ideas*, cf. in particular Merleau-Ponty, 2000, pp. 215–234; Merleau-Ponty, 1995, pp. 104–113; Merleau-Ponty, 1964). What was an obstacle for Husserl, Merleau-Ponty took as the point of departure for his own philosophical project, influenced in particular by Gestalt psychology. It is precisely because we are unable to provide any other than a paradoxical, unsatisfactory account of a subject’s body (and other phenomena related to our corporeality), that we must no longer confront the paradoxes as obstacles or exceptions, but as a point of departure for the development of a new philosophical perspective (cf., e.g., Merleau-Ponty, 1996, p. 380). This was Merleau-Ponty’s crucial insight.

In the body, the transcendental and the empirical dimensions tend to change their mutual role: the body acquires transcendental values and the mind becomes more closely linked to empirical events and their arbitrary transformations. Merleau-Ponty’s goal is precisely

to develop a conceptual framework which would enable us to *combine the third-person (objective, external) and first-person (subjective, reflexive) perspectives on the body, and on human existence in general* (cf., e.g., Merleau-Ponty, 2000, pp. 11–13). If the consciousness were detached from its empirical, corporeal situation, it would be hard to explain how it could ever be tired or ill, how it could sleep, how it could ever be influenced by the objects it experiences. Merleau-Ponty hoped that a renewed understanding of our corporeality would enable us to account for such degenerative phenomena on the one hand, and the possibility of cultural, symbolic sublimation of perceptual life on the other.

In his 1942 first doctoral thesis, *Structure of Behavior*, Merleau-Ponty attempts to show that the living body does not function as a machine, and that it is not simply an object constituted by a disembodied ‘transcendental consciousness’, either. Merleau-Ponty’s positive aim was to describe the relationships of an organism, or a living body, with its environment, and the subject’s relationships with his body. His descriptions in *Structure of Behavior* are made ‘from the outside’, not from the perspective of the living body itself, which is linked to the fact that he grounds his philosophical conclusions on the results of contemporary psychology and physiology. Such an approach allows him to develop significantly the observations of Husserl, whose descriptive method was based on ‘imaginative variation’, a systematic abstraction aiming to discover the core meaning, or the essence, of a set of phenomena given in a first-person perspective.

We have seen that, for Husserl, the living body was an object among other objects, but an object which had some exceptional characteristics, i.e. that of being one-directionally ‘correlated’ to a set of sensations. In other words, it was an exceptional and non-standard object; it was an object *and something more*, with ‘sensations’ correlated to it. Merleau-Ponty’s work in *Structure of Behavior* aims to show precisely that the very assumption that our body is a part of the world of objects, is itself not exact and must be corrected.

If the living body were (for one part) an object, it would be unconditionally inserted into the mechanical processes of the objective world. However, experimental studies has shown that under normal conditions the external stimuli do not simply launch in a living body a pre-established reaction circuit (reflex), as an external force would in a machine. “The organism does not function as a machine” or as a purely physical object (Merleau-Ponty, 2000, p. 14; cf. Merleau-Ponty, 1963, p. 147), and perception is not a mechanical process, for the living body does not respond to stimuli, but rather to specific complexes of stimuli, to situations. Since experiments show that stimuli may vary while the organism reacts similarly and perceives the same situation endowed with the same meaning, and that the reactions and the perceived situation can vary while the stimuli are identical, we cannot use the concepts of physical stimuli and meaningful situation interchangeably. The requisite of a ‘meaningful situation’ for the organism to react implies that the reaction is connected to subject-related conditions. More precisely, the situation must ‘fit into’ a place in the range of the subject’s possible actions. For this reason, we cannot understand the relationship a living body has with its environment only as passive and reactive, but rather as ‘prospective’ (Merleau-Ponty, 2000, p. 38). The organism is ‘prepared’ for and sensitive to only a particular set of situations. As for example Gilbert Simondon explains in his lectures on perception, living organisms have, so to say, categorial understanding of their surroundings rather than concrete understanding, i.e. they do not react to individual objects or events,

but to certain categories or classes of objects and events (e.g. food, danger, shelter), and to nothing else (Simondon, 2006, p. 111). A clear illustration of this idea is given by Uexküll in his well-known text on the surrounding world of a female tick, which, amidst all the richness of the world, is open only to three phenomena: the overall amount of surrounding light, the smell of the butyric acid from a mammal's sweat, and the specific temperature of a mammal's blood (Uexküll, 1958).

On the other hand, the '*a priori*' prospective activity structuring the environment of an organism is limited in its scope by the range of possible actions a particular organism is able to realize. Thus, although it is impossible to understand an organism without taking into account its meaning-giving 'prospective' attitude and activity, its capacity of 'grasping' its environment in a meaningful way is not universal. It is limited by the organism's structure; it always depends on concrete local conditions; it is linked to the practical context faced by the organism; it is affected by every bodily malfunction, etc. The organism's 'understanding', or grasping of its situation, and ultimately of its environment as a whole, is not unconditioned as in the case of a 'transcendental consciousness', which can be defined as a *universal* capacity to grasp *anything* as a meaningful entity.

In his second doctoral thesis from 1945, *Phenomenology of Perception* (2012), Merleau-Ponty further elaborated the interpretation of the unity of the body and its relationships of subjective and objective dimensions from the 'internal' perspective, i.e. as they appear in a subject's perception. *Phenomenology of Perception* shows that it is no more possible to define the body as an object to which a set of sensations would be coordinated. Again, Merleau-Ponty draws from experiments in physiology, neurology, Gestalt psychology and psychopathology. We cannot understand even *physiological* functioning without taking into account our existence as a totality (cf. Merleau-Ponty, 2012, pp. 89f.), i.e. the 'subjective' dimensions such as intentions to perceive or a choice of orientation. In some pathological cases, for example, the subject cannot perform a movement given a conceptual-verbal command, while he can do the same movement in a practical context. This confirms once again that the same physical activity is performed *or not* depending on its *meaning* for the subject.

All Merleau-Ponty's descriptions lead to the idea that we cannot understand the living body as an object *plus* some other, 'functional' characteristics, that would be superposed to an objective layer – a presupposition widely accepted not only in the physiology and psychology of Merleau-Ponty's time, but in some respect also, as we have seen, in Husserl's account of the unity of the body. If we start describing the living body as an object, and then want to 'add' some other characteristics, we have gone too far, so to speak, and will not be able to understand its connection with the psychological life or the 'subjective' dimension of the being in question. So, according to Merleau-Ponty, the objective and subjective dimensions of the body are not only juxtaposed or systematically correlated (Husserl's 'parallel' of consequences). Their relationship is rather that of mutual implication and circular dependence or conditioning, for we would be unable to understand the orders as separate if we did not understand the embodied subjectivity as one totality. The objective, physiological processes in the body are conditioned by the organism as a totality, transcending the sum of its physical elements, i.e. as endowed with its specific 'prospective *a priori*'; whereas the subjective, psychological processes are based on the corporeal infrastructure, and never cease to rely on it.

Merleau-Ponty's 1953 lectures: circularity between the perceiving and the perceived

In 1953, Merleau-Ponty was appointed to the Collège de France, which ensured him greater academic freedom. For his first lectures at the Collège, he took over the topics from his two doctoral theses with the aim to show their broader philosophical relevance, not limited only to what could be understood as the psychological peculiarities of perception. It is noteworthy in the context of our topic that the central idea he wanted to elaborate further was the concept of circularity between the subjective and objective characteristics of the body, as well as between subject of perception and external object of perception. Instead of only negatively observing that body is neither an object nor an idea for the consciousness, Merleau-Ponty now attempted to draw stronger philosophical conclusions from his earlier phenomenological analyses, and to attain a positive grasp of the problem of circularity.

First, it has to be thoroughly described how the circularity defines relationships between the body and its surrounding world. Such exemplary phenomena as visual depth, spatial orientation, or movement, attest that between a living body and its environment, there is an intrinsic mutual reference, which determines which form the world acquires for us. These phenomena are never exclusively 'subjective' representations or 'objective' givens. Based on examples taken over from Max Wertheimer's experiments (Wertheimer, 1912), Merleau-Ponty shows, for example, that an 'objectively' or 'subjectively' identical situation can be perceived both as 'oblique' or 'vertical', depending on how the subject concretely 'appropriates' the surrounding space (cf. Merleau-Ponty, 2011, pp. 41–54; cf. Merleau-Ponty, 2012, pp. 253–265). Our sense of 'verticality' is closely linked to, and dependent on, what we can accomplish in such a 'vertical' space and how it phenomenally reacts to our actions (e.g. when we walk upright, the ground moves horizontally). The perception of orientation such as 'verticality' is thus a norm for some activity, a temporary 'standard' open to transformations depending on how this activity can be concretely realized. Based on other experiments from Gestalt psychology and neurology (e.g. Michotte, 1954), Merleau-Ponty similarly demonstrates that movement can only be perceived by a subject able to move, i.e. that a perceived movement calls for some of the subject's motor capacities and is itself a modality for these capacities to activate themselves (cf. Merleau-Ponty, 2011, pp. 58–73; Merleau-Ponty, 2012, pp. 279–293).

Merleau-Ponty's aim is to generalize these findings. In these and other similar cases, a subject experiences *in the world* something that is fundamentally linked to his/her attitudes, possibilities, capacities, and abilities; and vice versa, the subject only has these powers at his/her disposal inasmuch as the appropriate surroundings call out for them. When I walk, for example, and I perceive the space between trees as a void, the perceptual meaning I experience is linked to my ability to move and thereby to control the way in which my spatial environment phenomenally transforms. A subject conceived as a contemplating conscience, a pure synthesizing activity or the 'faculty of judging' (Descartes, 2008, p. 23) would lack any reasonable resource permitting it to differentiate between an 'obstacle' and 'walkable space', for both phenomena would be 'objects' synthesized from aleatory bits of 'sensory givens' according to a neutral *a priori* logic. (A similar problem is encountered by those who strive to produce an artificial intelligence: it cannot be designed as a system of facts and rules of how to relate them, but rather as a system of problem-solving functions; cf. Dreyfus, 1992.) Likewise, an intellectually conceived conscience cannot

account for the phenomenon of orientation: a landscape or a familiar face turned upside down do not have the same perceptual meaning for us, for we do not recognize them; for a transcendental consciousness, though, the two phenomena represent simply *one and the same* object from a different perspective (cf. Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 20). A landscape is a passable space that invites me to invest my capacities to change my position; a face is the site of gestures of which I am myself capable and the meaning of which I can situate into my own emotional and cognitive world. When they are turned upside down, they are no longer the sites for my powers to be employed, which is exactly why they become foreign and unrecognizable for me, why they are now different realities.

The perceptive experience in general thus contradicts our natural belief that the objects we perceive exist, for us, independently of whether, and how, we perceive them. Merleau-Ponty's studies of perceptual experience show that the meaning of the perceptual world, and possibly of the world in general, results from an *interaction* or *mutual reference* of a subject-related perspective or attitude and object-related response to this attitude.

Merleau-Ponty's 1953 lectures: the living body as body schema

The circularity between our perceiving body and the perceived world has the potential to change our idea of what an object is and what, in general, the world is. The questions now are: who is the 'subject' of this relationship with the world, and how are we to understand its nature? Merleau-Ponty's goal is to help us to understand how the subject can enter into interactions with the world, as described above, and how it can be open to the transformations that such interactions imply and require (cf., e.g., Merleau-Ponty, 1968a, p. 55). It is clear after previous explanations that such a subject cannot be conceived as a mere product of causal interactions between objects (as a sort of physiological machine), nor as a universal capacity to relate to meaningful objects (such as the Cartesian *ego cogito*, the Kantian transcendental subject, or even the Husserlian transcendental consciousness). But how are we to conceive it positively?

When Merleau-Ponty approached this question afresh in 1953, he took as a point of departure a notion originally developed by neurologists: 'body schema' (Merleau-Ponty's primary sources are Head, 1920; Head and Holmes, 1911–1912; Lhermitte, 1939; Schilder, 1923; Schilder, 1950). According to Head's seminal definition (1920), the body schema is a preconscious "standard against which subsequent motor changes are measured" (Gallagher, 2005a, p. 19). Based mainly on the definitions of Head and Schilder, Merleau-Ponty understands the body schema as a practical intuitive diagram of my relationships with the world, a 'register' where all of my attitudes and actions are 'noted', and which therefore provides the reference norm in contrast to which I perceive something as specifically spatially and temporally related to my body (Merleau-Ponty, 1968a, p. 16; for Merleau-Ponty's discussion of the notion of 'body schema', cf. Merleau-Ponty, 1968a, pp. 16–21; Merleau-Ponty, 1995, pp. 270ff.; Merleau-Ponty, 2011, pp. 126ff.; Merleau-Ponty, 2012, pp. 100ff.).

Already in *Phenomenology of Perception* (2012), Merleau-Ponty studied the concept of body schema and rejected its early 'associationistic' and later 'formalist' interpretations, which attempted to conceive it as the result of an empirical accumulation or as an *a priori* form (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, pp. 100–105). In the 1953 lectures, his basic position remained the same: the body schema is a phenomenon that transcends the double

polarity of subject and object, and thus supports the idea of circularity between empirical and transcendental dimensions in the body. On the one hand, such disturbances of one's relationship with the body as autopagnosia (in which a subject has lost the capacity to grasp conceptually some parts of his/her own body, but has maintained practical access to it) show that the body schema is not a set of ideas or representations of consciousness (Merleau-Ponty, 2011, p. 139; in contemporary literature, cf., e.g., Paillard, 1999). On the other hand, the body schema is not a body-object either, as we can see in the example of certain pathological illusions, such as the amputee's 'phantom limb'. In these cases, the 'overall practical activity' continues following the original body schema, in spite of the fact that the subject has lost the objective physical part on which the activity needs to be based (Merleau-Ponty, 2011, pp. 137–140; cf. Merleau-Ponty, 2012, pp. 78–91; in contemporary literature, cf. in particular Gallagher, 2005a, pp. 86–107).

But, again, these demonstrations are mostly negative, for they only show that it is impossible to account for the body exclusively from a third- or first-person perspective, and that their potential combination results in paradoxes. In the 1953 Collège de France lectures, however, Merleau-Ponty studied new sources relevant to his topic (in particular Schilder, 1950) and significantly developed his interpretation of the philosophical implications of the neurological notion of body schema.

We can speak of the body schema positively as of something possessing a 'pre-logical' unity of 'lateral coexistence' or 'mutual implication' (Merleau-Ponty, 2011, pp. 126 and 133). These characteristics must be understood in contrast to those which would be derived from a superordinate idea or meaning (mental entity), or from a merely material extension with no inherent connection of its parts and only external mechanical relationships between its distinct elements (physical entity). On several levels, the specific unity of the body defies the attempt to reduce it to either objective or subjective explanation, and thus supports the idea that it requires a new ontological category which would correspond to its singular character. Our revised idea of subjectivity, asserts Merleau-Ponty, must correspond with this new ontological category.

The special character of the body can be demonstrated on the level of its relation to space and perceived objects. The body schema is not an object that we would act upon, or a mental representation of such an object, but a preliminary 'attitude', 'privileged position', or 'point of departure' that we need to have at our disposal while confronting a particular situation in the world, and the objects in it (Merleau-Ponty, 2011, pp. 133 and 138f.). For this reason, the body schema is *not in space*, but rather serves as the reference point or norm, based on which we can differentiate 'here' from 'there', and thus understand spatial relationships. As such a spatial norm for any practical activity, the body schema is *not perceived*, as we perceive objects, for it always stays in the background of the perceived. The relationship of the perceived object to my perceiving body is therefore that of a figure on the ground, as understood in Gestalt psychology. All thematic phenomena refer to my body and only show themselves in contrast to it, as a deviation from the norm my body continually re-establishes by its specific arrangement and position.

Due to the necessary mutual implication between the perceived phenomenon and the body as the point of departure for an action and the background for a perception, our position and attitude must be continually readjusted according to what we intend to perceive. The schema therefore does not correspond either to the objective emplacement of our body

and its objective form, or to an *a priori* form. Merleau-Ponty refers to experiments showing that the emplacement of the body schema is shifted in the direction of corporeal tonus, i.e. in the direction of our perceptive intention, compared with the objective position of the body (Merleau-Ponty, 2011, p. 143).

Because all of these functions require constant readjusting, the body schema as a structure is continually transformed and ‘reanimated’ via movement. Correspondingly, the world in front of us acquires a different level of structuration depending on our relative (in)ability to adopt an appropriate position, posture, or movement. In sleep or at rest, for example, when we are not facing any practical situation to deal with, the body schema loses its differentiation, and becomes less structured. In such situations, correlatively to the lowered level of articulation of our body schema, the differences between, for example, left and right or above and below become more vague (Merleau-Ponty, 2011, pp. 160–165). Similarly, the ‘compensatory’ movements in patients with apraxia can be interpreted as attempts to bring back the pathologically weakened articulation of their body schema (Merleau-Ponty, 2011, pp. 139–141). In contrast to that, situations requiring our active participation ask for a particular position, posture, or movement of the body, which in turn contribute to a finer perception of the situation. The body can also ‘get in the way’ of my activity when it is lacking the necessary capacities or is exhausted, and this situation is similarly perceived by me as a particularly ‘adversary’ characteristic of the perceived object (cf. Gallagher, 2005a, p. 34).

We have seen that Husserl already described, for example, how the body serves as a spatial reference but, for him, the very unity of our body was co-founded on Cartesian extension, objective space. Merleau-Ponty’s interpretations of body schema show how the body itself is the criterion for any possible spatial differentiation, and thus the fundament for our idea of objective space, rather than being itself founded on it. This, in turn, changes our understanding of the relationships between our ‘practical’ body (the body as a departure point and referential norm for our actions and perceptions in the world) and the body-object (the body as the target of our actions and perceptions).

The body as a norm and agent of perception (‘schema’) has itself the capacity to ‘sediment’, i.e. to acquire the function or the value of a body-object (Merleau-Ponty uses the expression ‘to sediment’ repeatedly in this context, cf., e.g., 2011, p. 148). Based on his interpretation of Schilder (1950), Merleau-Ponty asserts that the visual layer of the body schema, i.e. the image we have of our own body from the exterior, results from a fixation or objectification of our practical-motor body schema (Merleau-Ponty, 2011, p. 148; in the more recent literature, this relationship is described between ‘body-image’ and ‘body-schema’, cf. Gallagher and Zahavi, 2008, p. 146: explicit awareness of one’s body, the body-image, “presupposes the tacit contribution of the body schema”; cf. Gallagher and Cole, 1995, p. 377). The same idea is shown negatively by the fact that a subject dealing with apraxia still has access to his body as object of perception, speech, and gestural pointing, but no longer as a point of departure for an action (cf. the well-known case of patient Schneider, Gelb and Goldstein, 1920; Merleau-Ponty, 2012, pp. 139ff.; Merleau-Ponty, 2011, pp. 139ff.; for a contemporary description, cf., e.g., Paillard, 1999); this means that, in apraxia, the sedimented, objectified structure remains, while the set of practical functions which helped to build it is damaged and inaccessible. If the body-object were one of the fundaments of our practical body, such relative

dependencies and disconnections, as seen for example in apraxia and autotopoagnosia, would be incomprehensible and factually impossible. Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of the body schema thus exclude the (widely spread) Husserlian idea that the body-schema presupposes the body-object as one of its preliminary components or layers. This thesis is valid on the phenomenological level, as we have seen on the examples of our perception of the body, but also on the ontological level, for the very idea of the ontological dimension of objects must be traced back to the context of the constitution of the object in our (bodily) experience (cf. Merleau-Ponty, 2000, pp. 215–234; Merleau-Ponty, 1995, pp. 104–113). Despite this partial clarification in the 1953 lectures, the difference and exact relationship between the practical 'infrastructure' and the objectified 'superstructure' of the body remains an open question for Merleau-Ponty. So it does, as far as we can say, in the contemporary discussions of this topic in neurology, cognitive science and their philosophical interpretation (cf. Paillard, 1999, p. 206; Gallagher, 2005a). Merleau-Ponty finds that the objectified body must be 'connected' to the practical, but also that it acquires a 'relative independence' (cf. Merleau-Ponty, 2011, p. 157). Inversely, we must be able to maintain the objectified superstructure in contact with the practical infrastructure, or it becomes, as in some pathologies, a mere 'mask' of the original bodily functions, their simplified and reduced imitation (cf. Merleau-Ponty, 2011, pp. 148 and 157f.). Between the two dimensions of the body, there is therefore circular influence and mutual structuration, while the superstructure is, so to say, more resistant to change, and the infrastructure more respondent to it. Merleau-Ponty's 1953 interpretation of the body schema brings a more exact idea of what we have called, with him, the circularity in the body, and thus sheds light on the subject-object paradox we have seen with Husserl.

CONCLUSION: THE ORIGINALITY OF MERLEAU-PONTY FROM A CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVE

Contemporary scholars dealing with embodiment underline that it is necessary to clearly distinguish 'body image' and 'body schema' (Gallagher, 1986; Gallagher, 1995; Gallagher, 2005a, pp. 17–40; 2005b; Gallagher and Cole, 1995, pp. 369ff.; Gallagher and Zahavi, 2008, pp. 145f.; Paillard, 1999, p. 197). Gallagher points out "a long tradition of ambiguous terminological usage" of the body image and body schema in many disciplines, in particular in neurology and its philosophical interpretations (Gallagher and Cole, 1995, p. 370; cf. Gallagher, 1986). With respect to this difference, the *body image* has been recently defined as "a conscious idea or mental representation that one has of one's own body"; an experience of one's body as one's 'intentional object', which can acquire several forms, such as percept, concept, or affect (Gallagher, 2005a, p. 25). In contrast to that, the *body schema* has been defined a set of "various neural motor programs command[ing] muscle groups" and remaining "below the threshold of my awareness and outside of my personal control" (Gallagher and Cole, 1995, pp. 369 and 373); or as "a system of sensory-motor capacities that function without awareness or the necessity of perceptual monitoring" (Gallagher, 2005a, p. 24; with an almost identical definition in Gallagher, 2009, p. 118).

The difference between body image and body schema has been tacitly addressed also by Merleau-Ponty, who was never prone to the terminological and conceptual confusion

criticized by Gallagher and other contemporary authors. Although several of Merleau-Ponty's neurological sources *did not* clearly maintain this difference (Lhermitte, 1939; Schilder, 1950), Merleau-Ponty does not confuse the two ideas and respects Head's original distinction between image and schema (Head and Holmes, 1911–1912). Throughout both *Phenomenology of Perception* (2012) and his 1953 lectures (2011), Merleau-Ponty translates Head's and Schilder's idea as *schéma corporel*, precisely in order to distinguish it clearly from an 'object of knowledge', image or representation contemplated by the intentional consciousness (Merleau-Ponty, 2011, p. 140; cf. Merleau-Ponty, 2012, pp. 100ff.; translator's introduction, Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. XLIX; Carman, 1999, p. 218; Saint-Aubert, 2011, p. 29). Although the body schema "indicates an order" or "indicates the essential", it "does not need interpretation", asserts Merleau-Ponty, because it is "concrete, visible as a drawing" and provides "knowledge without concept, totality without idea" (2011, p. 133f.).

The importance of these facts becomes clear when we open the discussion of the relative phenomenal presence of the body schema and, correlatively, the question of how to situate it in relation to the ontological dimensions of subject and object.

Paillard, for example, recently stated that the schema is "registered", but "not perceived", that it provides a "clear localisation without sensory detection" (Paillard, 1999, pp. 198 and 201). Gallagher and Cole (1995) rely on the notion of 'proprioception', 'proprioceptive awareness' or 'proprioceptive information', which they define as "a felt experience of bodily position" consisting in "subpersonal, physiological information – the result of physical stimuli at certain proprioceptors" (pp. 376f.). The authors also claim that, to a great degree, "the body schema functions to control body posture and movement nonconsciously" (p. 385).

Gallagher essentially concentrates on showing that the body schema is not a body image, i.e. an intentional object of explicit consciousness. In a more recent publication (2005a), he explains that the body schema functions in a 'pre-reflective' or 'non-conscious way', although "there are reciprocal interactions between pre-reflective body schemas and cognitive experiences" (p. 35). In other words, I can become aware of some of aspects of the body schema, although it "is always something in excess of that of which I can be conscious" (p. 38). Gallagher claims even more strongly that "posture and majority of bodily movements operate in most cases *without the help of bodily awareness*" (p. 28, italics added), the 'awareness' being itself defined *in opposition* to intentional conscious perception, i.e. as a 'marginal awareness' (p. 27), 'non-observational self-awareness' (p. 29). This position ultimately leads to a relativization of the phenomenal presence of the body schema, clearly visible in Gallagher's claim that "whether and to what degree body awareness is a constant feature of consciousness is [...] a matter of individual differences, and differences in situation" (p. 28).

In contrast to Merleau-Ponty's systematic explanation based on the conceptual pair ground-figure, norm-deviation, these above characteristics seem to have weaker explanatory potential, for they assert that the schema is simultaneously 'felt', 'registered', given as 'information', but is 'nonconscious', 'not sensorily detected', not (entirely) present to our 'awareness'. The body schema must be clearly situated in relationship to consciousness, if we are to understand how it can 'interact' with the body image, as Gallagher and others claim. In this respect, a relativizing or simply negative explanation of the phenomenal status of the body schema is not satisfactory.

Functionally, Paillard and Gallagher (with his collaborators) attempt to articulate the difference between the body image and body schema with the help of the opposition between ‘knowing what’ and ‘knowing how’, interpreted more precisely as the difference between ‘what’ (body image) and ‘how to use it’ (body schema), and ‘where’ (objective space) and ‘how to get there’ (practical space) (Paillard, 1999, pp. 207f.; Paillard, 1991; cf. Ryle, 2009); or between ‘noetic contents’ and ‘pronoetic performance of the body’, or ‘implicit processes or operations’ (Gallagher 2005a, pp. 32 and 17; cf. also Strawson, 1997). Ontologically, however, these distinctions seem to be interpreted following the opposition between subjective and objective dimensions, and thus without the ontological novelty of Merleau-Ponty. With the distinction of body image and body schema, Paillard believes he has met the distinction between the ‘cognitive’ brain and sensorimotor ‘machinery’ (1999, p. 212). Gallagher claims, in addition to the previously explained relativization of the phenomenal presence of the body schema, that the pronoetic body-schematic function is ‘happening’ as a ‘performance’ or ‘process’ (2005a, pp. 29, 32, 17).

On the one hand, Gallagher’s efforts to distinguish between body image and body schema thus obviously converge with Merleau-Ponty’s, who explicitly claims that the body schema “is not perceived”, that it “precedes explicit perception” (Merleau-Ponty, 2011, p. 143). On the other hand, the positive characteristics of the body schema on the phenomenal and ontological level seem to be different in the two authors. In contrast to Gallagher, Merleau-Ponty (2011) explains that, precisely because the variations of the articulation of the schema arouse variations of the perceived world, the body schema “is also a specific structure of the perceived world” and that the perceived world “is rooted” in it (2011, p. 144). In other words, for Merleau-Ponty, the body schema as ‘background’ or the ‘ground of the figure’ of the world, i.e. its ‘specific structure’, is *in principle* constantly present in our perceptual experience. My body, claims Merleau-Ponty, is “the unperceived term at the center of the world toward which every object turns its face”, which is why its presence in our experience is a “metaphysical necessity”, not only a factual result of experience (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, pp. 84 and 93). The body schema is a *systematic* part of our experience of the world and its presence cannot be relativized, as it seems to be by Gallagher (cf. the citations above, in particular 2005a, pp. 27f.).¹

A comprehensive interpretation of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of the embodied subject in relationship to contemporary knowledge would require a separate, dedicated publication. The originality of Merleau-Ponty’s approach, however, can be already seen in the fact that he understands the ‘image’ or ‘perception’ (be it of one’s own body) and its ‘background’, provided by our body ‘schema’, *as an indivisible dynamic system of the establishment and shifting of norms and deviations from them*, and not primarily as an opposition between subjective ‘mind’ and objective ‘machinery’ or ‘process’. Merleau-Ponty’s different understanding of the phenomenality of the body schema thus entails also a different ontological conception of the subject.

According to Merleau-Ponty, the body-agent carries us to (or maintains us at, or prevents us from getting to) a point in space and time, where we experience something as

¹ At the time of writing, I was not aware of Emmanuel de Saint-Aubert’s critical comparison of Merleau-Ponty’s and Gallagher’s interpretation of body schema. Cf. Saint-Aubert, E. de (2013). *Être et chair. Du corps au désir: L’habilitation ontologique de la chair*. Paris: Vrin, pp. 43–59.

given with such and such characteristics. More importantly, the body-agent does it *principally from within* the world and could not do it from outside or without being part of it: only as situated *inside* the world and being *part of it*, i.e. as being perceptible as an object, can body-subject take a stand, adopt an attitude from which it can experience something under a particular perspective. *The fact that we are, as subjects-bodies, part of the world of objects, thus has, for Merleau-Ponty, a transcendental value, i.e. it is not merely accidental, or limiting and negative characteristics, but it is constitutive of subjectivity* (cf., e.g., Merleau-Ponty, 1968b, 153f.: “My body sees only because it is a part of the visible in which it opens forth.”). What a subject experiences mirrors the subject’s standing among other beings, which is not possible without the subject being simultaneously perceptible, as an ‘object’, for then he would not have any standing.

We can interminably scrutinize our body as an object, but this effort will never clarify why and how we can only experience something ‘thanks to’ our body, in the sense we just described.

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