



MERLEAU-PONTY: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN INTERROGATIVE ONTOLOGY AND BIOLOGICAL SCIENCES

Merleau-Ponty: relación entre la ontología interrogativa y las ciencias biológicas

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Abstract: In this paper we will ask ourselves about the meaning of the Merleau-Pontyan cogitation on the biological sciences developed in the courses taught at the Collège de France in the years 1956-1957; 1957-1958; 1959-1960 and its connection with the project of a new ontology and the questioning about the current status philosophy, which accompany the reflections of the French philosopher collected in the course proposed at Collège de France entitled “Possibilité de la philosophie” (1958-1959) and in *Parcours deux* 1951-1961. We will therefore try to understand why and how these investigations open up the ontology project of wild Being discerned in *The visible and the invisible* (1964).

Keywords: Merleau-Ponty, Ontology, Biological Sciences

Resumen: En este artículo nos preguntaremos sobre el significado de la reflexión de Merleau-Ponty sobre las ciencias biológicas desarrolladas en los cursos impartidos en el Collège de France en los años 1956-1957; 1957-1958; 1959-1960 y su conexión con el proyecto de una nueva ontología y el cuestionamiento sobre la condición actual de la filosofía, que acompañan las reflexiones del filósofo francés recogidas en el curso del Collège de France “Possibilité de la philosophie” (1958-1959) y en *Parcours deux* (1951-1961). Intentaremos, por lo tanto, comprender cómo estos estudios e investigaciones en efecto se abren al proyecto ontológico del Ser bruto vislumbrado en *Lo Visible y lo Invisible* (1964).

Palabras-Clave: Merleau-Ponty, Ontología, Ciencias Biológicas

Resumo: Neste artigo nos perguntaremos sobre o significado da reflexão de Merleau-Ponty sobre as ciências biológicas desenvolvida nos cursos ministrados no Collège de France nos anos 1956-1957; 1957-1958; 1959-1960 e sua conexão com o projeto de uma nova ontologia e o questionamento sobre a condição atual da filosofia, que acompanham as reflexões do filósofo francês coletadas no curso do Collège de France “Possibilité de la philosophie” (1958-1959) e em *Parcours deux* (1951-1961). Tentaremos, portanto, entender como esses estudos e investigações com efeito abrem-se para o projeto ontológico do Ser bruto vislumbrado em *O visível e o invisível* (1964).

Palavras-Chave: Merleau-Ponty, Ontologia, Ciências Biológicas

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It is interesting to note that Merleau-Ponty's question on the condition and historical situation of philosophy - i.e. the possibility of the philosophical reason to continue existing and subsisting as an essential moment of human self-awareness (*Parcours deux* 1951-1961; *Résumés des cours* 1952-1960) - took place, in those same years, simultaneously with another examination, equally fundamental concerning the concept of nature from the point of view of the history and the metaphysical and scientific philosophical reflection on the subject.

A first attempt to answer the question mentioned above (what is the relationship between the debate concerning the concept of nature and the question on the possibility of philosophy as a new ontology?¹), can already be found within the course of the Collège de France of 1958-1959, posthumously referred to as "*Possibilité de la philosophie*".² In this text, Merleau-Ponty introduces the reasons that led him to take note of the current state of non-philosophy (decline of philosophy) and the need to move away from a certain exceeded attitude of establishing the reflection on the Being and emancipating the "Nature from the categories of substance, accident, cause, telos, potentiality, actuality, object, subject, by itself, in itself, traditionally implicated in ontology" (Merleau-Ponty, 1995, p. 107).

Merleau-Ponty's judgment on the historical development of philosophy is clear. After Hegel, philosophy would have fallen into a state of such a profound crisis that all attempts to deny or overcome traditional metaphysics (carried out by Marx and Nietzsche, for example), did not lead to the postulation of new theoretical foundations, and indeed left to us, modern, an infinite sense of emptiness and a pure interrogation. Briefly, a large black cloud destined to cover the skies of modernity for an indefinite time. According to Merleau-Ponty, the lack of some perspective and the loss of the solidity of a ground, would cause the birth of a new form of Prometheanism, supported now by the experience of a science less and less at the service of man and the world and of a technical spirit set free from any restrictions in the particular means of exploration.

Among the most disadvantageous results of this very disappointing balance of modernity, Merleau-Ponty recognizes a mixture of naturalism and extreme artificialism, especially represented by the logic of neo-Darwinism, which has produced a flattening of the concept of evolution over that one of group elimination or adaptation. Moreover due to the influence of information theory and its applications, neo-Darwinism has reduced the concept of function (or part) to that of artifact or device (i.e. feeding devices, sexual devices) – that is, to what is built out of blind necessity, destined for success or elimination, absolutely denying the language of finality without however justifying it (Merleau-Ponty, 2003).

The crisis of rationality manifests itself not only in humans' relationship with nature - see the example given by technical evolution with the production of the bomb and atomic energy that could destroy them - and therefore, ultimately, in a technique conceived no longer as an application of science, but its condition ("*The universe is the universe of constructa. This is all-human and all-inhuman universe*"³), but the crisis also manifests itself in the relationships among humans and in the difficulties encountered in the possibility of an organic society and a world civilization (Merleau-Ponty, 1995).

The notion of reduction at the basis of Husserl's phenomenological idealism, according to Merleau-Ponty, remains as the "return to the immanent sense of our experiences" (Merleau-Ponty, 1995, p. 111) and to a world and nature as they are experienced by us, as results of our intentional life, with the attempt to reconfigure the scientific and technical praxis within a rediscovered and transcendent feeling of human spirituality. I quote Merleau-Ponty (1995):

It is for having forgotten the flow of the natural and historical world, for having reduced it to some of its productions such as the objectivity of the sciences of nature, that philosophy and reason have become unable to control and, above all, to understand the historical destiny of humans (p. 112).

It is interesting to notice that the attempt made by Husserl's phenomenological philosophy to come back from the objective world to the *Lebenswelt*, runs parallel to the flourishing, in the forties of the twentieth century, in France, of a scientific literature with a teleological orientation about the theory of evolution, as a reaction to the extreme drifts outlined by the monistic mechanicism of the late nineteenth and the neo-Darwinism of the twentieth century. I am particularly referring to Pierre Lecomte du Noüy and his book *L'Avenir de l'Esprit*, published in 1941, where the French physicist raises the problem of biological evolution, seeking an answer to the problem of the future of human beings and assumes that "human

1 An ontology that intends to take distance from traditional metaphysics as much as from its negation.

2 Collected in *Résumés des cours*, Gallimard, Paris, 1968, pp. 141-156.

3 *Ibid.*, p.10. The crisis of rationality, for Merleau-Ponty, is also noticeable in the ultra-humanistic and hyper-rationalist tendencies to build missiles or space shuttles to inhabit other planets, *ibid.*, p.12.



inquietude stems, above all, from the fact that intelligence has deprived human of any reason for being” (Lecomte du Nouy, 1948, p. 25).

Parcours deux collects some unpublished works by Merleau-Ponty, which span the decade 1951-1961. This is a very important text because, among many other things, it contains the dossier concerning his candidacy for the Collège de France (he was elected in 1952) with the teaching and overcoming projects, as well as a general summary of the most important works published so far (1942, *The structure of Behavior*; 1945, *Phenomenology of perception*).

In one of these summaries (Merleau-Ponty, 2000, p. 11-12) attention is given to a problem that Merleau-Ponty considers constant (i.e. always present) within the history of philosophy and further sharpened with the onset of positive knowledge of natural sciences and experimental researches. This problem deals with the disagreement between the image that human has of himself through reflection (where rationality is thought of as unconditional, disembodied and timeless) and the image that he gets instead by placing himself as an object of analysis/evaluation of an external spectator who observes his conduct conditioned by either the laws of nature (psychology, biology), or the social organization law (sociology, economics) or simply by the contingency of history. In this second perspective, the human being and his actions would be compared to pure facts, whose dynamics would be therefore experimentable and factually ascertainable.

Giving up either of the two perspectives does not avoid important consequences on the epistemological level.

1) In order to be able to build knowledge, even positive, I must be sure that I can access my / others’ thoughts in order to appreciate their intrinsic validity. However, considering me just a product of history (Merleau-Ponty, 2000)⁴, would prevent me from being able to grasp its meaning; limiting myself to its factual observation, I would therefore deny the philosophical question and the possibility of the question about Being.

2) On the other hand, if I gave up the external point of view, keeping only the testimony of conscience and its direct access to our own or others’ lives, I would not take many steps forward in knowledge, which also pursues the search for objectivity as a historical formation and model destined to “regulate and shape our relationships with others and with the truth” (Merleau-Ponty, 1995, p. 112).

Thus, according to Merleau-Ponty, we must try to build a path that helps us to understand how the human being may simultaneously manifest himself as subject and object of the history, so that his autonomy and the (external) conditioning are no longer seen as contradictory and irreconcilable aspects from the point of view of a theory of knowledge and a conceptual synthesis (Merleau-Ponty, 2000, p. 12).

Already in the text of 1951 mentioned above, Merleau-Ponty is aware that the path towards a reconsideration of ontology/metaphysics and epistemology passes through two fundamental steps: the examination of positive knowledge and philosophical attitude (Merleau-Ponty, 2000, p. 13).

The calling into question of the logical/conceptual order that underlies the reflection on being and its articulation has to do with the Being understood according to the order of the substance and its categories (quantity, relationship, modality), to the notions of object, subject, and its attributes, properties and functions, to the idea of *per se* or *by itself*, to the distinction between form and matter (the first with a connotation of activity and the second of passivity).

But the questioning also has to do with the necessity to test the positive knowledge and its attempt to found the unity of the thing as a unity of logical order⁵, to seek a unique way that defines the thing clearly and distinctly and to make use of a language founded in the nature of things, because precisely it is considered to be capable of reproducing the exact relationships among the various corresponding concrete elements.

As an example, in this perspective, the spatial distance is perceived as a relationship between different points of the objective space to which Merleau-Ponty rather opposes, as inspired by the novel *L’Herbe* (1958) by Claude Simon, the idea of space as a connection between our flesh and the flesh of the world (Merleau-Ponty, 2003, p. 199); again, still according to the above ‘positive’ perspective, the object is perceived as a geometric object, from which our intelligence has the *a priori* law of construction and modeling. Such kind of expressing knowledge corresponds to the institution (here intended as historical and cultural construction) of the experience of the truth.

Then, on one side, the revision of the ‘positive’ thought includes the question “does it really correspond to a kind of knowledge that reduces the human being to the wave of an object (*partes extra partes*)”; on the other side, the revision of the philosophical attitude leads to ask ourselves if it does truly authorize us “à nous définir comme sujet inconditionné et intemporel” (Merleau-Ponty, 2000, p. 13).

⁴ Both the history of nature and the history of culture and, therefore, the history of thought and its artifacts, understood as “*succession des ouvrages de l’esprit*”, p.46.

⁵ When instead the unity of the thing seems more founded “*sur notre familiarité avec les horizons d’un monde que nous n’avons pas eu à construire pièce à pièce*” (Merleau-Ponty, 2000, p. 20).



Now, according to Merleau-Ponty, one of the 'positive' results carried out by modern biology has been to call into question such a kind of substantive way of conceiving nature and the human being - exactly that of an unconditional and timeless view of the mind and rationality.

A philosophy (Husserl's) set as "*recapture of Lebenswelt*" (Merleau-Ponty, 2003, p. 50) taught us that truth and meaning never (will) coincide; the phenomenological reduction brings us back to "to a concatenation of horizons, to an open Being (Merleau-Ponty, 1995, p. 112). The research on the ontology of nature (*i.e.* of an interrogative ontology) has, therefore, the aim of taking up the question of Being still approaching it through time, to be understood, however, on this occasion, as an operator of Being that, historically, transforms individual existence into something whose meaning is codified and mediated through indivisibility with other Beings.⁶ "*The study of the human body as the root of symbolism*" - says Merleau-Ponty - "*focuses on [the] conjunction physis-logos*" (Merleau-Ponty, 2003, p. 5). The search for this deep conjunction between the vegetative/organic and the ontological levels is the objective *princeps* of the courses on the concept of Nature, with a view of a new ontology as expressly anti-metaphysical.

Already in *The Structure of Behavior*, Merleau-Ponty had shown how Gestalttheorie and Behaviorism were both the expression of a scientific experience that presupposed some ontology without however making it explicit and thus losing sight of its (biological) object. By contrast, according to Merleau-Ponty:

The object of biology is to grasp that which makes a living being a living being, that is, not according to the realist postulate common to both mechanism and vitalism—the superposition of elementary reflexes or the intervention of a "vital force," but an indecomposable structure of behavior (Merleau-Ponty, 2010, p. 54).

That is a structure which, among all the possible connection or assembly systems, is the only one that can guarantee and perpetuate the transmission of the biological value of an organism and its components, making it sentient and sensitive, meaning and signifier.

In *Parcours deux*, the relationship between perception and expression is brought back through the comparison between painting and language ("*langue*"). Despite the arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign (meaning), once established (that is, codified through rules and norms), language gives us the sweet illusion of possessing a truly and absolutely sense of what I say or write - the likely power of absolute recapitulation of the meaning expressed by the word - when instead we should learn with painting, literature and poetry that the movement of expression is, in itself, an unfinished work, always open, never enunciative or recapitulative of other expressive forms ("*language comme un travail analogue de reprise qui ne nous donne nulle part les choses mêmes*") (Merleau-Ponty, 2000, p. 31).

Conversely, science pursues the need to make univocal what is not univocal. Opposing this type of expressiveness that characterizes scientific naturalism (for Laplace, Merleau-Ponty reminds us, physical nature is a single fact, a great truth⁷), the rehabilitation of the *perception* conduct and attitude leads to the recovery of expression as an ability owned by the phenomenon to reveal itself through its disposition as an incarnate subject (Merleau-Ponty, 2011, p. 57), that is, to offer oneself as "*registre ouvert dont on ne sait ce qui s'y inscrira*" (Merleau-Ponty, 2000, p. 41). Hence, the idea that the thing is equivalent to the infinite enumeration and totality of the gestures that, each time, lead us in a different way, towards the thing itself.⁸

Perception is not a science of the world, or a form of additional knowledge (*Parcours deux*, p. 22); it is neither an act nor a deliberate stance; it is the basis on which all acts stand out - also the acts of science, and it is presupposed by them. The world is not an object whose constitution law I own it is the natural environment and the field of all my explicit thoughts and perceptions. "*Le monde auquel je suis lié par le rapports prélogiques du schéma postural de la motricité et même de la sexualité ne peut être une somme d'objets disposés devant un sujet contemplatif*" (Merleau-Ponty, 2000, p. 19).

As announced in *Le monde sensible et le monde de l'expression*, the body is indeed a power of invention, a subject of knowledge; however, it is subordinated to the conditions and restrictions of nature (Merleau-Ponty, 2011, p. 82). The postural scheme of motricity and sexuality itself shows these links. In this sense, we would be wrong to think that sexuality is closely linked to a certain organic function, when, instead, it is placed within a broader historical view, which concerns not only the history of human being's relationship with nature (phylogeny and ontogenesis), but also to the history of one's relationship with other human beings: the development of sexuality has to do with a personal history, it is a product of the carnal relationship with things and with others, which accompanies us throughout our ontogenetic development, starting from the psychological circumstances that characterize child development.⁹ In this sense, regarding a function like sexuality, Merleau-Ponty says:

6 « Time must constitute itself—be always seen from the point of view of someone who is of it» (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p.184).

7 Merleau-Ponty, 1996, p. 199.

8 *Le monde sensible et le monde de l'expression*, cit., p. 58; *Parcours deux*, cit., p. 27: "*le geste nous porte vers l'objet perçu sans que nous ayons à calculer la distance*".

9 On the topic of the relationship between sexuality and child development, I refer to *Merleau-Ponty à la Sorbonne: Résumé de Cours 1949-1952*.



[la sexualité] paraît être et est étroitement liée à un certain appareil organique, se dégage pourtant peu à peu chez l'enfant d'un rapport plus vague à autrui et au monde, que toutes les circonstances psychologique de l'enfance contribuent à définir, et inversement apporte à notre histoire personnelle comme un thème qu'elle devra déchiffrer, un certain mode du rapport charnel aux choses et aux autres. Comme par une sorte d'osmose, le corps et le sujet diffusent l'un dans l'autre. Mon corps redevient mien pendant que je m'incarne en lui (Merleau-Ponty, 2000, p. 19).

The individual subject is indeed a situated and embodied body, but not in the same way as the animal is. The human being does not feel fully satisfied, like other animals are, by simply attending a milieu, but he always seeks to appropriate it conceptually. And this is what designates the boundary between animal prehistory and human history.

Still in the preface to *Phenomenology of perception*, Merleau-Ponty affirms the need to understand existence (and its relationship with other existences) as incarnation in a nature and a possibility of a historical situation.

For the 'other' to be more than an empty word, it is necessary that my existence should never be reduced to my bare awareness of existing, but that it should take in also the awareness that one may have of it, and thus include my incarnation in some nature and the possibility, at least, of a historical situation. The Cogito must reveal me in a situation, and it is on this condition alone that transcendental subjectivity can, as Husserl puts it, be an intersubjectivity (Merleau-Ponty, 1994, p. 9).

In the courses on the concept of nature taught at the Collège de France (1956-1960), the proposal for a new ontology has as main objective to understand the connection between human being and nature, rethinking the history of humans within the history of nature. That means, however, rethink this interweaving, neither in the manner of a corollary - the history of man is a truth that derives from another truth - nor that of a recapitulation - the history of man is situated within another history (that of nature), from which he represents the culmination of continuous progress - or, finally, in the manner of an appendix - in which the history of man is situated as a merely accessory and, therefore, contingent event. "We must not consider the situation [*read incarnation*]¹⁰ as an unjustifiable contingency, a pure fact without truth, and we must not consider the spirit as a non-localized spirit, pure theory with no place" (Merleau-Ponty, 2003, p. 14).

As I have already pointed elsewhere, according to Merleau-Ponty, the act of understanding the human condition as incarnation in a nature and possibility of a historical situation cannot be reduced to a self-understanding of what one really wants to be and is as historical subject. This is because, along the timeline, the history of human being is not intertwined with that of nature only once. A body's past, the biological condition of existence, highlights Merleau-Ponty, never leaves the body and feeds it secretly and implicitly. Ultimately, the historical phases of any organism's ontogenetic infrastructures are announced through their connection with nature, which presupposes a continuous transformation of being through evolution.

Being even more radical, one might ask whether, in order to keep culture in contact with the raw being (Merleau-Ponty, 2003), it is legitimate to maintain a unique (and therefore ideal) notion of nature, as well as of human nature or humanity. Opening up to the perceptual experience, establishing the priority of the perceived world means, first, to believe that the meaning of the world is never placed by and through acts; which entails questioning that contact with being is, first of all, *theoria*, and that therefore it is possible to abstract an essence of subjectivity or animality. The act of believing in a world of ideal or abstract essences would mean, according to Merleau-Ponty, to perpetuate our philosophical reflection within an unfounded dialectic, based on pre-modern and, above all, pre-evolutionary ontological assumptions.

In the introduction to the courses on the concept of Nature (1956-1957) Merleau-Ponty writes:

Can we validly study the notion of nature? [...] Isn't it quite vain to seek the secret of the word in single meaning, by looking in a single direction? Are we not then subject to Valéry's critique when he says that philosophy is only the habit of reflecting on words while supposing that each word has one meaning, which is illusory since every word has known shifts in meaning? [...]. There is a nature wherever there is a life that has a meaning, but where, however, there is no thought; hence the kinship with the vegetative. Nature is what has a meaning, without this meaning being posited by thought: it is the autoproduction of a meaning (Merleau-Ponty, 2003, p. 3-4).

The project of a total history (discussed in text XXI "*Un inédit de Maurice Merleau-Ponty*" published in 1962) would therefore go in the opposite direction both to the project of a philosophy of the object and to the institution of a positive knowledge (as an attempt to reveal the true nature of the object itself) and also, to the institution of the *cosmotheoros* subject philosophy, revealing a single sense of the world and at

¹⁰ My addition.



a distance.¹¹ The project of a total history should try, in this case, to reveal the subsoil, the subfloor, the underlying matrix, that is nature, which supports (makes possible, feeds) that idea of a unique history intended, in *Parcours deux*, as the embodiment of consciences (Merleau-Ponty, 2000, p.33) and “*pluralité d’êtres qui se reconnaissent comme des semblables*” (p. 47).

In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty (1971) states: “But in reality all the particular analyses concerning Nature, life, the human body, language will make us progressively enter into the *Lebenswelt* and the “wild” being (p. 165)”.

The teaching projects for the Collège de France collected in *Parcours deux* will be carried out, concretely, in the subsequent courses from 1956 to 1960. Returning to our initial question, ‘why would Merleau-Ponty face the fundamental philosophical problem - the ontological relationship between subject and object - opening up to the scientific debate about modern biology?’, we can assume that the answer lies in the fact that he thinks that this path can help us to overcome the traditional philosophical categories that give shape and content to our thought: nature and reason. Especially: “Disclosure of a type of being different from that in which what is called matter, spirit and reason, resides” (Merleau-Ponty, 2003, p. 5).

Merleau-Ponty observes: modern biology has ceased to be substantive in order to become dialectic, thus opening a way to avoid one of the fundamental errors of metaphysics: placing a positive principle behind the phenomena, that is of idea, essence, and entelechy (Merleau-Ponty, 1996). Especially, developments in modern biology have made it possible to understand that the anatomy and physiology of the organism- the functional aspect on the one hand and the cognitive aspect on the other (behavior, learning manifested by the organism both in the intraspecific and interspecific relationship) - cannot be seen as no communicating areas, as distinct processes.

A theory of the organism as *partes extra partes* that is mechanistic or reductionist, whereby the function is reducible to the only present elements, or, conversely, to a vitalistic vision of organism, for which the animating principle of the body would be irreducible to its material components, is unfounded and no longer sustainable by now. The theory of natural evolution reveals that, in life, there is an irreducible reference to *Umwelt* (Merleau-Ponty, 2003): each animal holds the social horizon of its species. By virtue of this simple attestation, modern biology clearly shows that the being of the organism can no longer be defined from its condition of *bloßhe sachen* (Merleau-Ponty, 2003, p. 60). Hence, the reference to the idea that positive knowledge (biology) can reveal another way of being other than that of objectivity only.

As already anticipated by Husserl (Appendix XXIII of the *Crisis*), biology would reflect the intentional inference that lies behind an essentialistic and typological way of conducting the study of individual animal through classes and species (Merleau-Ponty, 2003, p. 138).

The distinction between species with radial or bilateral symmetry determines their different manifestation on the anatomical and functional, reproductive, but also motor and communicative levels (relationship between motility/activity/postures).¹²

Coghill’s studies on the axolotl (*Anatomy and the Problem of Behavior* 1929) show the embryonic development of this lizard and the evolution of its motor behavior from the swimming to the walking state, and underline how the various phases of the biological organization (preneural, eg embryogenesis) anticipate the tasks that the organism must perform.

On the one hand, the body is a sketch of behavior; embryonic development anticipates future behavior, the organs or outlines of organs of the embryo have no meaning if we consider them independently of all logic of behavior (Merleau-Ponty, 2003, p. 147).

Coghill observes that, in the higher vertebrates, the nervous system and the complete development of the organism on the motor and cognitive level do not depend on the presence / excitation of the single neuron, but on the total growth of the organism. The nervous system develops by vascularization and this involves an organism that reacts to its environment (first in the fetus and then externally), and therefore, it grows. An embryo already has a reference to the future: the organism, including man, is a mechanism, but within the limits of its constitution and its environment.

It is not a positive being, but an interrogative being which defines life. [...] From the moment when the animal swims, there will be a life, a theater, on the condition that nothing interrupts this adhesion of the multiple. It is a dimension that will give meaning to its surroundings (Merleau-Ponty, 1996, p. 156).

¹¹ Merleau-Ponty, 2000, p. 47 : « S’il faut dire qu’il y a une histoire totale – un seul tissu qui réunit toutes les entreprises de civilisations simultanées et successives, tous les faits de pensée et tous les faits économiques –, ce n’est pas au nom d’un idéalisme historique ou d’un matérialisme historique qui remettent, l’un à la pensée, l’autre à la matière, le gouvernement de l’histoire ».

¹² Merleau-Ponty (1996) refers to Gesell and Amatruda’s book « *L’embryologie du comportement* ». « Now, in the organism, the postural function is subtended by muscle tone, by the fundamental activity of the organism in narrow relation with the basal metabolism. Insofar as there is no posture, there is no living body.» *Nature. Course Notes from the Collège de France*, p.146.



The organism, Merleau-Ponty says: must be considered as a field; that is, it is both physical being and a meaning (Merleau-Ponty, 1996, p. 150). The birth and the origin of meaning, that is, the ability to feel part of life and the world, to produce meaning and express it as a shared symbolic horizon - which is not only characteristic of man, but also of other animal species - is rooted within the biological history and does not represent a deviation or a second history. Understanding the animal means to understand the natural institution or the original foundation (*Urstiftung*) of the spirit.

The courses at the Collège de France on the concept of Nature, then, represent the idea that the conditions to understand how historically this incarnation became possible would have to be found in biological evolution. Thus, the path of biology and ontology seems to be fixed.

The fact of our kinship with animals, and the fact that different species present, among them, homologous and analogous characters cannot and must not leave us without a question. The animal, including human being, is never a mere mechanism of adaptation: it is bodily open to its congeners and other species, it is articulated (structured) to coexistence, to showing itself, to making itself seen. There is a symbolism inherent in corporeality: the animal is a *logos* of the perceptual world. Ultimately, what binds every living thing to the other is the fact that it can reach it only through its own existence (Merleau-Ponty, 2003).

So, as Merleau-Ponty points out, trying to understand the path of history through biology and evolution, is not just drawing an individual story, but sketching the future of a type, a being and a collective history (Merleau-Ponty, 2003, p. 157). In Appendix XXIII of the *Crisis*, Husserl had already revealed the fact that biology holds an ontological scope and relevance, precisely because it is not limited to a sector of being but deals with life as a peculiar and coextensive characteristic of Being (*"It is, therefore, the path to the true a priori to which the world of living beings refers to"*).¹³

It is just to this difficult "*completely interconnected philosophy*" (Merleau-Ponty, 2003, p. 57) that Merleau-Ponty becomes heir, and along with it, the need to deal with general biology precisely because it is capable to embrace the whole concrete world and, therefore, to offer passage to the interrogative ontology underlying the project of *The visible and the invisible*.

The body unites us directly with the things through its own ontogenesis, by welding to one another the two outlines of which it is made, its two laps: the sensible mass it is and the mass of the sensible wherein it is born by segregation and upon which, as seer, it remains open (Merleau-Ponty, 1971, p. 132).

Merleau-Ponty's statement "*the flesh is in this sense an 'element' of Being*" (Merleau-Ponty, 1971, p. 139) by now takes on a precise meaning, that the passage through biology can help us to reveal that: the flesh is an element of the universal Being, it is the cradle of divisibility and indivisibility, of differentiation and undifferentiation; it is through it that the passage from the mute world to the speaking world, from the invisible and the visible (and *viceversa*) takes place; all the possibilities of language are already immanent in the architecture of the (biological) body and in its ontological structure. It is within the biological body that the power to signifying, the birth of meaning, and the ability to express an experience are hidden.

Merleau-Ponty excludes any reference of the term flesh to that one of matter, substance, and spirit: concepts that all presuppose a pre-evolutionary, essentialist and non-interrogative ontology about the texture and the relations underlying the universal Being.

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¹³ Husserl, 1961, Appendice XXIII, p. 508. My translation.



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