

Corporeity and Affectivity

Dedicated to Maurice Merleau-Ponty

Edited by

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FROM THE PURE PHENOMENON TO THE DIVERGENCE IN THE
FLESH. ON THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE HUSSERLIAN CONCEPT
OF THE PHENOMENALITY IN MERLEAU-PONTY

Karel Novotný

The question that I wish to pose in this paper concerns the nature of appearance in Merleau-Ponty. If in Husserl appearing can be apprehended only on the basis of an act of meaning-endowment in intentional experience, or thus as an act of bestowing meaning through consciousness, which transcendental reflection should secure in the medium of the pure phenomenon, then both the nature of appearance and the method of gaining access to appearance are modified from the outset in Merleau-Ponty. Although appearance on its most fundamental stratum, namely, that of sensing, is first and foremost characterized as an intentional event of sense, the concept of meaning undergoes a transformation in the works of Merleau-Ponty, generating a framework for a new apprehension of the nature of appearance and thus for a new apprehension of phenomenality: the phenomenon is not merely a correlate of meaning-bestowal through intentional consciousness. This act of bestowing meaning is no longer apprehended in the sense of the ineluctable spontaneity of the intentional act of an “I experience,” of an act of noesis which would be absolutely transparent to itself via the noema (even though even for Husserl the reduction to this transparency cannot be reached at a stroke, but must rather be iterated). For Merleau-Ponty, this transparency in the “pure phenomenon” is, in principle, unattainable, and hence the corresponding transcendental reduction is impossible. This view is closely connected to the following conviction of Merleau-Ponty: The origin of phenomena is to be sought at a level deeper than that of intentional consciousness; meaning-endowment in the sense of Husserl’s static phenomenology is not the ultimate origin of appearance, as his genetic phenomenology already shows in various contexts. Building on the project of the transcendental genesis of intentionality, in its own way and above all with its emphasis on corporeality, Merleau-Ponty pushes forward into heretofore unconsidered aspects of this project. In the following essay I would like to adumbrate Merleau-Ponty’s approach, focusing again on the question of the nature of appearing, it is on the question of the phenomenality.

My point of departure is the observation that, in his philosophy, Edmund Husserl posits an elementary phenomenological difference between lived-experience and its object, which can be regarded as the decisive approach to the question concerning the nature of appearance. When something appears, we can and must be attentive to this difference and distinguish the accomplishment of appearance from what appears. This accomplishment is to be grasped as lived-experience, which is made up of immanently “*reel*” components (acts of perception, memory, image-consciousness, and the sensuous contents that correspond to them), while what appears cannot be any component of this accomplishment of appearance; as an object, it is “*irreel*,” it is not a lived-experience, such as this can be illuminated, for Husserl, with reference to the model of external perception.

What Merleau-Ponty puts into question first and foremost in *Phenomenology of Perception* is not so much phenomenological difference itself, such as I understand it, namely, as the difference between the *lived-experience* of appearance and the phenomenon *qua* a givenness of content that is experienced. Even in the act of sensing, such as Merleau-Ponty analyzes it in *Phenomenology of Perception*, this distinction is reconstructed. And Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of divergence [*écart*], found in his later work, can be read, as I will try to do in the second part of this essay, in terms of a *form of* phenomenological difference, which, however, does not correspond to the Husserlian primordial phenomenological difference insofar as Merleau-Ponty, in his later work, wishes to overcome the dualism between experiential consciousness and its worldly content, as both are embedded in a universal (ontological) medium of the sensible, of the flesh. Yet in the late Merleau-Ponty, what we see is an approach to a new form of phenomenological difference by means of which he sheds light on the nature of appearance.

What Merleau-Ponty confronts from the outset is Husserl’s “pure phenomenon,” that non-empirical, non-worldly medium which is self-given in the attitude of the *epoché* as a correlate to the pure regard of the disinterested observer, who looks upon lived-experience without positing it as something worldly being and without himself being posited as a worldly entity either. For Husserl’s method, this is an essential moment: even genetic phenomenology must be able to thematize the concealed implications of the actual act of meaning-bestowal in the pure phenomenon; the context of meaning, and not any fact, is the milieu of evidence. In this respect, Merleau-Ponty expresses his explicit opposition to the classical image of transcendental phenomenology: the transcendental reduction

is, according to him, impossible – because facticity cannot be reduced to essences in the medium of the pure phenomenality, this project cannot be accomplished, finished.¹ Insofar as there is no pure phenomenon, and the method must take account of this circumstance, this will be authoritative for the status of phenomenality in Merleau-Ponty's newly fashioned phenomenology.

1. *The Phenomenal Field*

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, the question of the phenomenon is explicitly treated in the chapter on the “Phenomenal Field”. In addition, we also find important passages having to do with the phenomenon elsewhere, in particular in the chapter on “Sense Experience.” We will limit ourselves to these two contexts in what follows.

First, what is noteworthy in *Phenomenology of Perception* is the following characteristic, which justifies our taking as our point of the departure the problems of appearance and the phenomenon in sense experience (with sense experience, however, already being identified as an intentional tissue).

“Sense experience is that vital communication with the world which makes it present as a familiar setting of our life. It is to it that the perceived object and the perceiving subject owe their thickness. It is the intentional tissue which the effort to know will try to take apart.”²

In comparison with Husserl's conception of experience, something original seems to be announced here in the concept of thickness. This thickness is articulated more and more precisely throughout *Phenomenology of Perception*, in Merleau-Ponty's later texts, and particularly in the chapter on “Sense-Experience”, as we see in the following passage:

To ‘live’ a thing is not to coincide with it, nor fully to embrace it in thought. Our problem, therefore, becomes clear. The perceiving subject must, without relinquishing his place and his point of view, and in the opacity of sensation, reach out towards things to which he has, in advance, no key, and, for which he nevertheless carries within himself the project, and open himself to an absolute Other which he is making ready in the depths of his being. [...] the pebble appeared to me in the full light of day in opposition to the concentrated darkness of my bodily organs.³

¹ “Preface” to the *Phenomenology of Perception*. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith. New York: Routledge, 2010, p. 4.

² *Ibid.*, p. 61.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 380.

Thickness as a universal characteristic of phenomenality is closely related to the animate organism, and indeed to the body, if we are to maintain this Husserlian distinction. If every act of appearance happens within the realm of sensibility, then the light of appearance is always bound up with the dense shadows of bodily organs, and indeed not explicitly so that we might, in order to grasp the essence of appearance as a radiation of light, refrain from regarding these shadows as mere facticity that would have nothing to do with essence. The act of living through an appearance should not be traced back to what consciousness is capable of identifying therein, through reflexive retrospection and in the transparency of light and of the mind, as the meaningful content. Hence appearance cannot be reduced to an essentiality, to an ideality of essence, as we see in Husserl: the living through of appearance and the apparent contents are to be distinguished, and only the latter can be dissolved by means of eidetic analysis into an ideal essentiality. On the contrary, Merleau-Ponty reminds us that neither the lived experience of appearance nor the apparent content, be it given objectively or pre-objectively, can be reduced to the medium of the pure phenomenon, for every phenomenon is, in its facticity and factual experience, apprehended with the organic body. Its nature is constituted by the dense shadow of the body and the temporality proper to the factual bodily condition of experience.⁴

Hence we are in a position to understand the following passage that left us with an indication of Merleau-Ponty's conception of difference in variance from Husserl's: "[...] [T]he thing is an outcome of a flow of subjective appearances. And yet I did not actually constitute it, in the sense that I did not actively and through a process of mental inspection posit the interrelations of the many aspects presented to the sense, and the relations of all of them to my different kinds of sensory apparatus. We have expressed this by saying that I perceive with my body."⁵

To the event of appearance belongs not only the latency of potential, heretofore unthematized meaning-relations–horizontality *qua* a

⁴ Merleau-Ponty's remarks on the incompleteness of the reductive access to the phenomenality are consistently coupled with the theme of temporality. Putting this incompleteness in connection with the facticity of the body as I propose in this first part of my paper can only be a first step in attempting to see the different status that phenomenality has for Merleau-Ponty with respect to Husserl's classical phenomenology. Critical remarks concerning the limited role of the "organs of the body" in the early concept of the phenomenality in Merleau-Ponty made by Annabelle Dufourcq, Jenny Slatman and Keith Withmoyer helped me to see and review this point. I thank all of them very cordially for their reading of this paper.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 380.

concealed yet, in principle, determinable nexus of meaning—but also in some way the dense shadows of the organs of my body: what seems to make the relation to the outside possible is not any kind of constitutive ego in the sense of a *pure* ego of the mental acts of lived experience, but rather precisely an embodied subjectivity, the perceiving body as Merleau-Ponty puts it in the quoted passages. As embodied, subjectivity dwells alongside other things in the very same world; this is one aspect of the problem of phenomenal givenness, yet we are, even so, essentially placed at a certain distance from things and not only spatially. The phenomenological difference between the lived experience of givenness as such and the given remains in effect; even when no member of this relation is “pure,” both are to be located in the milieu of world-facticity. Therefore traditional oppositions, such as “the inner” and the “absolutely other,” are sublated in the new conception of the perceived world.

In the chapter on the “Phenomenal Field” Merleau-Ponty proceeds in an antithetical manner to two opposite conceptions. He begins with a critique of introspective psychology, which regards appearance as an independent mental reality. On the basis of his own interpretation of factual perception, he points out that every content found in so-called introspection is worldly rather than immanent, so that what is found in this introspective path in the ‘inner,’ what is present in lived experience as a purportedly immanent or real [*reell*] content, is the phenomenon which is to be distinguished sharply from the “lonely, blind and mute life.” The phenomenal field is no “inner world.” Phenomena are thus not “states of consciousness” or “mental facts.”⁶

As is well-known, Merleau-Ponty refuses to accept the following interpretation of the transcendental-phenomenological epoché and reduction, “...which would leave nothing implicit or tacitly accepted in my knowledge” so that I, as the phenomenological observer, who carries out the inner experience of my own lived-experience, might be able to “take complete possession of my experience, thus equating thinking and thought.” In order to delineate the approach coming out of his own position, Merleau-Ponty appeals to the fact that present-day philosophy takes “the fact as its main theme” and this emphasis, furthermore, requires a transformation of philosophy, a task which Merleau-Ponty takes up. Despite being unities of sense, phenomena put up resistance due to their facticity. Merleau-Ponty warns against the dissolution of the phenomenal field into

⁶ Ibid., p. 67.

the transcendental field to which self-transparent and self-constituting subjectivity pertains: “Now the phenomenal field as we have revealed it in this chapter, places a fundamental difficulty in the way of any attempt to make experience directly and totally explicit.”⁷

Nevertheless, when he speaks of the fundamental difficulty that confronts any attempt to make the phenomenal field directly and totally explicit, he must cling to sense, just as Merleau-Ponty introduces it as the identity of inner and outer, which offers resistance to the possibility of the sense given in the “pure” phenomenon being dissolved in consciousness *qua* noema corresponding to an act of noesis, of it being self-given through the reflection of the phenomenological observer. What offers resistance is facticity: “If a universal constituting consciousness were possible, the opacity of the fact would disappear.”⁸ Therein lies, for instance, the reason for Merleau-Ponty’s distance from the image of classical transcendental phenomenology, which he appropriates in staking out his own position: “If we were consciousness, we would have to have before us the world, our history and perceived objects in their uniqueness as systems of transparent relationships.”⁹

Merleau-Ponty demands of reflection that it partakes in facticity, in the density of what is reflected: “If then we want reflection to maintain, in the object on which it bears, its descriptive characteristics, and thoroughly to understand that object we must not consider it as a mere return to a universal reason and see it as anticipated in unreflective experience, we must regard it as a creative operation which itself participates in the facticity of that experience.”¹⁰

This participation is decisive—in it, access to appearance as such is given—if in general we assume such access is possible for a philosophy that does not assume for itself a coincidence with appearance itself, but in fact vehemently disapproves of such a coincidence. The reflexive grasping of the phenomenon occurs on its own as perception or experience in the phenomenal field; it thus gives the “phenomenon of the phenomenon.”¹¹ Hence reflection on the phenomenal field must not forget that it is itself also a form of experience that is carried out in this field. Reflection remains perception, contact from a distance, thus it cannot assume for itself a coincidence with the singular facticity of the object of reflection: “Bergson’s

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

mistake consists in believing that the thinking subject can become fused with the object thought about, and that knowledge can swell and be incorporated into being."¹²

The insight and maxims of this method, of reflective correspondence to factual perception, seem to imply the following: not only is so-called external perception essentially tied to the body, which perceives 'now' and 'here,' but so is reflection, which, as it were, looks upon this mode of access. Reflection's participation in the unreflected – that is, the participation of so-called internal perception in what happens in external perception – is participation in the very same body, which exists in a living communication with the world. Now what is at stake is explaining and making explicit not only external perception but also the internal perception of philosophical reflection in accordance with the insight that the subject of perception is the body. Bodily experience has corporeality to thank for its facticity (perceiving as it does 'here' and 'there') and what is experienced has corporeality to thank for its individuality. Corporeality in the sense of a *Leiblichkeit* irreducible to an "inner" self-experience - or with a later term found for this issue – corporeality in the sense of the flesh is inseparable from the phenomenon. It constitutes the status of the phenomenon and, despite the shadowy remainder of indeterminacy, it is also the ground of the phenomenon's accessibility. But the phenomenon in question is precisely no longer a "pure" one.

The question, however, is how to articulate a new concept of phenomenality from the insight into the irreducible bodily nature of appearance, and to overcome a dualistic concept in which the light of a determinate sense shines only thanks to the dense shadows of the indeterminate, similar to the way in which a figure comes into relief only thanks to its background, where still the visible and the invisible seem to be construed in their connection along dualistic lines; one of these poles risks remaining indeterminate. A new concept of phenomenality is therefore demanded by Merleau-Ponty's account of phenomenality.

2. *Phenomenon and Flesh – Divergence in the Lived Experience of Appearance and in the Phenomenon of the Sensible World*

In order to place the medium of communication between the living through [*Erleben*] of one's own lived-experiences and the "outer" of the

¹² Ibid., p. 72.

world in a new constellation, that is, to phenomenologically elucidate the process of appearing in the medium of the sensible, in the flesh, Merleau-Ponty unfolds, in his later work, a series of reflections in which he substitutes new expressions for traditional philosophical concepts such as that of lived-experience, appearing *qua cogito*, which serve to correspond more adequately to his newly attained standpoint. Among these concepts, we find those of *la chair* and *l'écart*, which are translated respectively as flesh and divergence. I will attempt to show that the primordial phenomenological difference between lived-experience, which does not itself come to appearance, and the appearing phenomenon, is transformed in Merleau-Ponty's later work in a thinking of differentiation, where phenomenalization, and thus the very dynamic of appearing, is elucidated through the events of divergence and divergences.

To begin, I will adduce and comment on a passage from the third chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible*, "Interrogation and Intuition," which is above all devoted to a reflection on method. The context of this passage involves a confrontation with the return to the immediate, and to coincidence, as the supposed place of origin and truth, in which philosophical knowledge can be secured and self-grounded. The classical path of knowledge from essence to facts is revealed in this confrontation as a dead-end, a tautology of spirit, or, in other words, reason, or, *intellectus*, as it grasps only its own images and projections instead of genuinely approximating being, which, connected with the irreducible fact, drops away along this path. Therefore the countervailing strategy of philosophical method, namely, of coinciding with being in the factual contact that takes place in lived experience, without converting it into essence or dissolving it in a universal. But if I express this experience, Merleau-Ponty argues,

"by saying that the things are in their place and that we fuse with them, I immediately make the experience itself impossible: for in the measure that the thing is approached, I cease to be, in the measure that I am, there is no thing but only a double of it in my 'camera obscura.' The moment my perception is to become [...] thing, Being, it is extinguished; the moment it lights up, already I am no longer the thing. And likewise there is no real coinciding with the being of the past: if the pure memory is the former present preserved, and if, in the act of recalling, I really become again what I was, it becomes impossible to see how it could open to me the dimension of the past. And if in being inscribed within me each present loses its flesh, if the pure memory into which it is changed is an invisible, then there is indeed a past, but no coinciding with it – I am separated from it by the whole thickness of my present; it is mine only by finding in some way a place in my

present, in making itself present anew. As we never have at the same time the thing and the consciousness of the thing, we never have at the same time the past and the consciousness of the past, and for the same reason: in an intuition by coincidence and fusion, everything one gives to Being is taken from experience, everything one gives to experience is taken from Being.”¹³

Here Merleau-Ponty brings into play Husserl’s primordial phenomenological difference, and he applies it as a means to refute phenomenological method and the position of intuitive coincidence (Bergson). Either I am my lived experience or a phenomenon appears over against me, that is, it is something distinct from me, in which I nevertheless become absorbed, as I am completely absorbed in apparent being without explicitly regarding appearance as my lived experience. On the contrary: if I am aware of myself in a thematic way, and I pay attention to my ongoing lived experience, the being that was present in appearance becomes extinct. Still, Merleau-Ponty aims at elucidating factual experience; in the phenomenon I am with myself just as much as I am with the thing, which comes to appearance in the phenomenon and my experience of it. Hence, in the phenomenon encountered in factual experience itself, Merleau-Ponty must seek that which holds together both of these mutually exclusive standpoints. Here the concept of divergence comes into play, through which the primordial phenomenological difference is also sublated; that is, it becomes effectively valid as it opposes coincidence; however, it is integrated into a structure and is embedded into a description that emerges out of the analysis of factual experience, such as in the following example: “overlapping of cavity and relief, which remain distinguishable.”¹⁴ This is Merleau-Ponty’s way of sublating the phenomenological difference between lived experience and the phenomenon. The concept of divergence serves as a vehicle, as a means for this sublation *qua* phenomenological description.

“If the coincidence is never but partial, we must not define the truth by total or effective coincidence. And if we have the idea of the thing itself and of the past itself, there must be something in the factual order that answers to it. It is therefore necessary that the deflection [*écart*], without which the experience of the thing or of the past would fall to zero, be also an openness upon the

¹³ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *The Visible and the Invisible*; Followed by Working Notes. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Evanston [Ill.: Northwestern UP], 1968, p. 122. Abbreviated as *Val*.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

thing itself, to the past itself, that it enter into their definition. [...] What there is not a coinciding by principle or a presumptive coinciding and a factual non-coinciding, a bad or abortive truth, but a privative non-coinciding, a coinciding from afar, a divergence, and something like a 'good error'. [...]"¹⁵

This is a phenomenological description of how appearance as lived experienced partially coincides with apparent being, and thus is a kind of contact with being, even as they remain distinct from one another, and it can be delved into further. This passage points to contexts which touch upon the divergence in the phenomenon and which receive an ontological interpretation in Merleau-Ponty. The coincidence of lived experience and the phenomenon of a being lies in the fact that "a sort of dehiscence opens my body in two, and because between my body looked at and my body looking, my body touched and my body touching, there is overlapping or encroachment, so that we must say that the things pass into us as well as we into the things."¹⁶

The phenomenological description of the divergence of lived experience and the phenomenon is founded on the fact that "what is lived is not flat, not without depth or dimension," and it does not take place in an immanence of consciousness – it is by essence and by its facticity always incarnated, and Merleau-Ponty will account for this condition of factual experience, namely, that it is related to itself not only in inner life but also always realized in the 'outer' and thereby it is also experienced or experienceable:

There is an experience of the visible thing as pre-existing my vision, but this experience is not a fusion, a coincidence: because my eyes which see, my hands which touch, can also be seen and touched, because, therefore, in this sense they see and touch the visible, the tangible, from within, because our flesh lines and even envelops all the visible and tangible things with which nevertheless it is surrounded, the world and I are within one another, and there is no anteriority of the *percipere* to the *percipi*, there is simultaneity or even retardation.¹⁷

Merleau-Ponty expresses this succinctly in a passage: sensing (*le sentir*) divergence into what is lived experienced (*le senti*), the sensing (*le sentir*)

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 124–5. See a commentary of this passage in Marc Richir, « Sens de la phénoménologie dans *Visible et invisible* », in : *Esprit* 1982. This text first and then other works of Marc Richir inspired me to look for the nature of phenomenality in the late Merleau-Ponty in terms of divergence – precisely the various concepts of divergence – *écart*, *distorsion* – play essential role in Richir's own account of the phenomenalization.

¹⁶ Val, p. 123.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 123.

is in a way contained in what is undergone, lived experienced and sensed (*le senti*). What is sensed, *percipi*, contains in a certain way the *percipere*, the lived-experience as the transition from inner to outer, a transition that is belated vis-à-vis the outer, insofar as this transition always already takes place as incarnated, as the divergence *qua* act of transcending (classically regarded as from inner towards the outer) is embedded in an ontological milieu, in the sensible (*le sensible*), in a sensible world, the mode of being of which is precisely distance, i.e., divergence. In factual experience, everything as experienced phenomenon is thus Being at a distance, and this Being at a distance is reached by means of the divergence of lived experience, however, in such a way that the distance of what is experienced is never liquidated. We come into contact with it as a partial coinciding, “coinciding from afar,” as we have read in Merleau-Ponty. This “from afar” is originally inscribed as an ontological character in the being of the world, and the mode of bodily “being in the world” can hence be described as divergence, which, at the same time, transpires alongside the givenness of the world or is belated vis-à-vis the givenness of the world. Belated lived experience is, however, (e.g. as incarnated tangibility) thereby itself a component of this givenness of the world, this Being at a distance, which is therefore placed in the way of the self-relation of lived experience. This becomes paradigmatic in the experience of self-touching *qua* manner of self-reflection, which is already found at the level of the body, which in the process becomes flesh, becomes the universal “ontological milieu.”

A nice passage from the fourth and final chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible*, “The Intertwining – The Chiasm”, brings together Merleau-Ponty’s reflections on the incarnation of lived experience and phenomena, which we have already addressed:

We understand then why we see the things themselves, in their places, where they are, according to their being which is indeed more than their being perceived – and why at the same time we are separated from them by all the thickness of the look and of the body; it is that this distance is not the contrary of this proximity, it is deeply consonant with it, it is synonymous with it. It is that the thickness of flesh between the seer and the thing is constitutive for the thing of its visibility as for the seer of his corporeity. It is not an obstacle between them, it is their means of communication. It is for the same reason that I am at the heart of the visible and that I am far from it: because it has thickness and is thereby naturally destined to be seen by a body...The thickness of the body, far from rivaling that of the world, is on the contrary the sole means I have to go unto the heart of the things, by making myself a world and by making them flesh. The body interposed is not itself a

thing, an interstitial matter, a connective tissue, but a *sensible for itself*... hence an *exemplar sensible*, which offers to him who inhabits it and senses it the wherewithal to sense everything that resembles himself on the outside such that caught up in the tissue of the things, it draws it entirely to itself, incorporates it, and, with the same movement, communicates to the things upon which it closes over that identity without superposition, that difference without contradiction, that divergence between the within and the without that constitutes its natal secret.¹⁸

The term, “natal secret” is not chosen by Merleau-Ponty arbitrarily. We also find traces of this way of thinking in the manuscripts, known as they are under the title of “Working Notes” appended to *The Visible and the Invisible*. They give much to be thought. I will try to touch on a few of ideas concerning divergence as expressed in a fragmentary way in different contexts of these “Working Notes.”

3. *Dehiscence in the Working Notes*

Delayed lived experience, which we spoke of as an incarnated “feeling one’s way around,” if we descend to another register of experience, surely also constitutes a kind of retention. For Husserl, time-consciousness, which is constituted by means of retentions, is most fundamental the register in which the true origin of appearing can be situated. Roughly speaking and leaving protention aside, retention is the first appearance of the sensed content of a proto-impression, the appearance which also appears to itself. Merleau-Ponty pays due attention to Husserl’s analyses of time-conscious and notes already in *The Phenomenology of Perception*: “Here a light bursts forth, for here we are no longer concerned with a being which reposes within itself, but with a being the whole essence of which, like that of light, is to *make visible*.”¹⁹ In the springing up of time that we are, it is certainly not an ego that takes the initiative in which temporalization consists, says Merleau-Ponty, and yet the “bursting forth” of time is not a simple fact to which I am passively subjected: “It withholds me from what I was about to become, and at the same time provides me with the means of *grasping myself at a distance* and establishing my own reality as myself” (emphasis by K.N.).²⁰

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 252–3.

¹⁹ *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 495.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 498.

Although the term *écart* does not show up here, the thought of dehiscence can be traced in these reflections. This term is expressly employed, for example, ten years later in his lecture on passivity. In general it is a question of grasping meaning as the passive dehiscence of active meaning-bestowal. The “Résumé du cours” gives voice to his basic thought.

“The aim of this course is to extend the ontology of the perceived world beyond sensible nature. That it is a question of understanding how consciousness can sleep, how it can be inspired by a past that apparently escapes it, or finally how it can regain access to the past; passivity is possible on condition that “being aware [*avoir conscience*]” is not “bestowing a meaning [*donner un sens*],” which one withholds from the unintelligible matter of consciousness, but producing a certain gap [*écart*], a certain variant in the already instituted field of existence that is always behind us, and the weight of which, like that of a steering wheel, comes into play even in the actions by which we transform them. For man, to live is not only to perpetually impose signification, but also to continue a whirlwind of experience that is constituted with our birth, at the point of contact between the ‘outside’ and he who is called upon to live it.”²¹

What is at stake in this concept is by no means a momentary inspiration that merely accompanied the redaction of Merleau-Ponty’s last unfinished book. The lectures from the working notes from this period, as they are presented in the edition of *The Visible and the Invisible*, shows, on the contrary, that the concept he aims at and accentuates is employed in various contexts. The first context concerns in general the contact between lived experience and the phenomenon, the originary phenomenological difference, as Merleau-Ponty resituates it in the field of the existence of the always already present world. Now, the specific applications of the concept of dehiscence in the working notes allows it to attain a closer presentiment, yet one that can still only “feel its way around,” as the status the of originary phenomenological difference in the late Merleau-Ponty is cancelled, or, in a different way of conceiving phenomenality, modified.

From the outset and throughout, the tendency toward overcoming every classical subject-object duality in favor of the perspective of a world is made clear as soon as this perspective is given in the sensible, in the flesh, and hence also sought through philosophical reflection. One of the working notes reads:

²¹ M. Merleau-Ponty, *L’Institution. La Passivité. Notes de cours au Collège de France (1954–1955)*, textes établis par D. Darmaillacq, C. Lefort et St. Ménasé, Editions Belin 2003, p. 267.

It is a matter of grasping the fact that 'subjectivity' and the 'object' form a singular whole, that subjective 'lived experiences' count among the world and participate in the worldliness of spirit, that they are recorded in the 'register' of being, that the object is nothing other than the cluster of these adumbrations...The world is the *field* and in this respect always open.²²

Now this openness should be excluded from the level of the self-constitution of lived-experiences in inner time-consciousness, in the same way that, in Husserl, it constitutes the origin of appearing. In this context, we find a specific application of the concept of dehiscence. Merleau-Ponty already had the intention of desubjectivizing this origin of appearing in *Phenomenology of Perception* and the temporal self-constitution of lived experiences. There, he attempted to deprive subjectivity of its mastery over meaning-bestowal through the 'I', without, for all that, negating subjectivity as such. Even in his later work, this seems to be what is at issue.

Again we find in the working notes several reflections on protoimpression and retention that are of supreme interest for our questions. In the programmatic essay, "The Philosopher and his Shadow," we can already read a passage which emphasizes the value of sense-perception in the 'here' and 'now':

All understanding and objective thought owe their life to the inaugural fact that with this color (or with whatever the sensible element in question may be) I have perceived, I have had, a singular existence which suddenly stopped my glance yet promised it an indefinite series of experiences, which was a concretion of possibles real here and now in the hidden sides of the thing, which was a laps of duration given all at once.²³

According to this exposition, the sensible is "Being at a distance." It is "the fulgurating attestation here and now to an inexhaustible richness." Yet what does "suddenly stopped my glance" and "here and now" mean for Merleau-Ponty?

We cannot embark upon the discussion that this question deserves. Let us limit ourselves to examining how Merleau-Ponty critically address the Husserlian "here and now." What constitutes the "receptive" element of absolute consciousness in Husserl? Merleau-Ponty asks this question in his working note from May 1959, "Husserl Time-consciousness":

Impressional consciousness is not an actual insurmountable or ineluctable terminal-point, as a slow-motion recording can show, but rather already something that transcends, a certain something "(a shape, and not an

²² VaI, p. 185.

²³ Signs, p. 167.

individual),” so that such an impressional consciousness “is not a coincidence, a coalescence [...] and much less (as Husserl says) an act or an apprehension, nor a nihilation (Sartre), but rather dehiscence, as it becomes graspable to us through the body schema, which provides the grounding of space *and time*.²⁴

The presence of each content of lived experience thus seems to be an aberrant presence, a presence at a distance, so to speak. Hence, in every present self-givenness, there is a moment of negativity, a coinciding that is in principle lacking. However, the lacking terminal fullness signifies, for Merleau-Ponty, an opening of the distance, a distance that corresponds to the transcendent character of the contents of lived experience, a dehiscence or aberration that makes it possible for something to appear. This negativity is not the fruit of egoic activity: “I am not even the author of that hollow that forms within me by the passage from the present to retention, it is not I who makes myself think any more than it is I who makes my heart beat. From there leave the philosophy of *Erlebnisse* and pass to the philosophy of our *Urstiftung*.”²⁵ Here we again we see the project of the later Merleau-Ponty.

For the purposes of our inquiry this means that the phenomenological difference can no longer be grasped as the difference between lived experience and the transcendency of the object in the medium of the pure phenomenon of self-givenness, for in relation to the givenness of the sensible, both are non-originary. “The solution – if there is one – can only lie in examining this lay of sensible things or in becoming accustomed to its enigmas.”²⁶ Here Merleau-Ponty makes another programmatic declaration in his essay 1959 essay, “The Philosopher and his Shadow”:

That “for-itself” of lived experience – that which as “pure thinking” or as “self-appearance,” an appearance *qua* pure appearance was laid down as a foundation for the intentional phenomenon – is deduced: “The perceptual separation (*écart*) as making up the “view” such as it is implicated in the reflex, for example – and enclosing being for itself by means of language as differentiation. To be conscious = to have a figure on a ground – one cannot go back any further.²⁷

Yet Merleau-Ponty does indeed seem to go back further when he brings the bodiliness pertaining to perception into play, and here I would like to point to a new context in which the concept of dehiscence plays an essential role.

²⁴ VaI, p. 191.

²⁵ VaI, p. 221.

²⁶ Signs, p. 168.

²⁷ VaI, p. 191.

“The self-perception is still a perception, i.e., it gives me a *Nicht Urpräsentierbar* (a non-visible, myself), but this it gives me through an *Urpräsentierbar* (my tactile or visual appearance) in transparency (i.e., as a latency) – My invisibility for myself [...] comes from the fact that I am he who: 1) has a visible world, i.e., a dimensional body, and open to participation; 2) i.e., a body visible for itself; 3) and therefore, finally, a self-presence that is an absence from self – The progress of the inquiry toward the *center* is not the movement from conditioned to the condition, from the founded unto the *Grund*: the so-called *Grund* is *Abgrund*. But the abyss one thus discovers is not such *by lack of ground*, it is upsurge [...] of a negativity that *comes to the world*.”²⁸

However, in this process my body is “made” out of the very same flesh, so to speak, as the world, and as Merleau-Ponty writes in the very same working note, “this flesh of my body is shared by the world, the world *reflects* it, encroaches upon it and it encroaches upon the world (the *felt* (*senti*) at the same time the culmination of subjectivity and the culmination of materiality), they are in a relation of transgression or of overlapping.”²⁹

Viewed from this perspective, dehiscence comes into the world thanks to the bodiliness pertaining to lived experience, and thanks to the flesh, in which the world *qua* perceived and sensed in lived experience participates. Thus one could understand the flesh of the world, on hand, as an articulation based on the concept of dehiscence, in which dehiscence is a property of lived experience thanks to the bodiliness that pertains to it, in which dehiscence is an incarnation (an originary one, to be sure) and thus not a belated embodiment or incorporation of something would have already had its existence in itself.

One could effectively read his working note on “depth” in that way. According to this note, “It is hence because of depth that the things have a flesh: that is, oppose to my inspection obstacles, a resistance which is precisely their reality, their ‘openness,’ their *totum simul*.” Where does depth itself come from according to Merleau-Ponty? This is the most important reason for returning to the connection between time and the dehiscence that takes place through embodiment: “depth is *urstiftet* in what I see in clear vision as the retention is in the present – without ‘intentionality’ –.”³⁰

²⁸ Ibid., p. 249–50.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 248.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 219.

Thus the dehiscence of sensible content in retention would be a witness of what constitutes the spatio-temporal character of embodiment [*Leiblichkeit*] (grounded in the schema of the body) and the spatio-temporal character of the transcendency of the world (grounded in its own ontological and phenomenologically developed character of “being at a distance,” *être en écart*) as depth. Now, as Merleau-Ponty says, the fact that this dehiscence is instituted originally “without intentionality” in the flesh, as well as in retention as an opening, and even as the depth of the world itself in its transcendency, one would at the very least have to read this as evidence of the fact that the dehiscence pertaining to retention is not an achievement on the part of consciousness, is not an act of consciousness. For consciousness itself, with all the appearances and self-appearances which consciousness has and has of itself, originally emerges as the dehiscence of a sensible content. On the one hand, consciousness and “self-consciousness” are grounded in the retention of the object of conscious sense-perception, and, on the other hand, in the distance of what is sensed (distance as its ontological character).

“This *separation* (*écart*) which, in first approximation, forms meaning, is not a no I affect *myself* with, a lack which I constitute as a lack by the upsurge of an *end* which I give myself – it is *natural* negativity, a first intuition, always already there – ”³¹

If dehiscence is not founded on my means of intentional consciousness, nor the passive accomplishment specific to retention alone, if its origin is to be discovered on a deeper level, in what direction should we direct our search? We must take our direction here from the thesis of the flesh as universal medium or milieu of communication between the body of the perceiver and the senser, on the one hand, and the sensibility of the world, on the other. If, for the later Merleau-Ponty, phenomenization gets off the ground by means of a dehiscence based in the flesh, then it becomes intelligible that the proto-spatiality of lived experience is taken up as an embodied act of sense-perception in the gap between it and what is sensed, without this proto-spatiality thereby being sublated. The depth of worldly contents thereby points to the retention of the object of sense-perception, as we have seen. Is it possible to proceed from this interlacement toward a phenomenological elucidation of the origin of the dehiscence of phenomenality, and thus the origin of appearing?

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 216.

The following note from Merleau-Ponty points in the direction of another possible perspective, in which it is not the subjective body (*Leib*) that is at the center, but rather the body in the natural *statu nascendi*, on the way to itself or to subjectivity. In the note, “Perception – Movement – Primordial Unity of the sensible field – Transcendence synonym of incarnation – Endo-ontology – Soul and Body – Qualitative integration and differentiation” from January 1960, we read the following:

Absolute primacy of the World and of Being for a ‘vertical’ philosophy which really takes perception in the present. [...] The unicity of the visible world, and, by encroachment, the invisible world, such as it presents itself in the rediscovery of the vertical Being, is the solution of the problem of the ‘relations between the *soul* and the *body*’. [...] When the embryo’s organism starts to perceive, there is not a creation of a For itself by the body in itself, and there is not a descent into the body of a pre-established soul, it is that the vortex of the embryogenesis suddenly centers itself upon the interior hollow it was preparing – a certain fundamental divergence, a certain constitutive dissonance emerges...³²

This other perspective would be that from which dehiscence is regarded as a property of the natural world itself. When this tendency is carried to the extreme, one can see dehiscence instituted in the physiology of the living organism, as Merleau-Ponty considers:

The vision-touch divergence (not *superposable*, one of the universes overhangs the other) to be understood as the most striking case of the overhanging that exists within each sense and makes of it ‘*eine Art der Reflexion*’. This divergence, one will say, is simply a fact of our organization, of the presence of such receptors with such thresholds, etc. ...I do not say the contrary. What I say is that these *facts* have no *explicative* power. They express differently an ontological relief which they cannot efface by incorporating it to one unique plane of physical causality, since there is no physical explanation for [...] our anesthesiology – phenomenology is here the recognition that the theoretically *complete*, full world of the physical explanation is not so, and that therefore it is necessary to consider as ultimate, inexplicable, and *hence as a world by itself* the whole of our experience of sensible being and of men.³³

This seems to be the final perspective to which phenomenology recurs in the later work of Merleau-Ponty, its intention being to ontologically rehabilitate the sensible.

³² Ibid., p. 229–234.

³³ Ibid., p. 256.

Conclusion

The fact that the appearances cannot be principally perceived as a pure experience, expected existence in itself in a region of consciousness or (eidetic) content not contaminated by a mundane body placed into the world, is considered Merleau-Ponty's fundamental insight into the nature of appearance. According to his late philosophy, this principal limit of Husserl's classical phenomenology can be positively grasped and exploited through the following observation: a difference existing between the experience and the experienced can be viewed from out of a divergence or passage of the experience into the experienced and *vice versa*. And this divergence can be seen as based on the essential incarnation of the experience and the temporality proper to this mundane bodily condition of experience. It is this divergence that creates a space to allow the objects to enter my perception so that my perception would perceive the objects in their place, in the world. In his late philosophy, therefore, Merleau-Ponty considers the nature of appearance through a new concept of a flesh (*la chair*), which he understands as a common matter of the experience and the world. The differentiating moment, which provides the basis of the phenomenalization, would share the experience with the phenomenon, with all it meets in the world and which the experiencing subject oneself is not. In the flesh of the corporeity of the world, as a sensuously experienced existence, a divergence occurs primarily in the experiencing itself. Phenomenalization is not even a result of experiencing, *Stiftung* in Husserl's sense of an intentional act, not even an event of an openness, which would have always already overpowered the experience, it is rather a sort of *Urstiftung*, which takes place in the ontological medium of the flesh and is characterized by a mutual transcendence of the appearing – *das Erscheinenden* – into the experiencing – *das Erleben* – and appearing experience into itself – *das Selbsterscheinen des Erlebens* – as well as a transcendence of the experiencing – *das Erleben* – into the experienced mundane exterior – *das weltliche Erlebte/Erscheinende*. An emphasis on the mutual intertwining does not mean that the divergencies are obliterated in the late Merleau-Ponty's project by coincidences of the bodily experience with itself, not even in two surroundings adhering to each other. On the contrary, the divergence is the main attribute of the phenomenality, which, as the flesh, is the common matter of the world and consciousness in the dimension in which they have originally encountered one another.

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