

Corporeity and Metaphysics. Deconstruction between “Good“ and “Bad“ Dialectics

Jaroslav Trnka

In his last, unfinished workⁱ, we can find Merleau-Ponty approaching the possibility of thinking alterity, of thinking the disturbed ground, the origin, the *arché* – we can say to tremble metaphysics. Moreover, he situates this possibility into the subject of the body, which, unlike *time*, *death* or *the other*, doesn't count for a classical alterity motif. However, Merleau-Ponty is not an alterity-thinker and this possibility of his work remains suppressed.

The trace of this movement, which suppresses together with opening, will be compared with Jacques Derrida's deconstructive critique of metaphysics. We can situate this comparison within the space marked with three names: E. Husserl, F. de Saussure and G. W. F. Hegel. Both Derrida and Merleau-Ponty criticise Husserl's transcendentalism of essences and both of them are inspired by de Saussure's structuralism in this critique. These are the places where Merleau-Ponty opens the possibility of alterity. The places, where he closes it, reveal a distance between Derrida and him – a distance, which is opened in a symmetrical opposition to the distance between Derrida and Hegel. Derrida is thus situated in the middle – between Merleau-Ponty and Hegel. Between the good and the bad dialectics, to use Merleau-Ponty's expression. This is the uneasy, precisely demarcated position of deconstruction.

Anticipating Derrida's critique, Merleau-Ponty turns against Husserl's phenomenological transcendentalism, meaning the transcendentalism of essences as a universal ground of all facticity. Merleau-Ponty points out that a phenomenologist

practicing eidetic variation, can just seek essential *invariants*.ⁱⁱ This work always draws on facticity and can't hold essences in presence.ⁱⁱⁱ Like Derrida, Merleau-Ponty refuses to see an essence as a *telos* of eidetical variation, because this thought is based upon the difference of the fact and the essence, which should be judged at first.^{iv}

It is therefore necessary to reject a pure positivity of being (Merleau-Ponty) or a present ideality (Derrida), because this presence is delayed forever through its references to other facts, irreducible differences. Merleau-Ponty's inspiration, like that of Derrida's, comes of Ferdinand de Saussure and his idea of a differential character of language. There is no substance in the meaning, because it is a pure form, composed entirely of the differences between its units. For Merleau-Ponty, being is then the *texture of differences*. Every *quale*, a colour for example, is "less a colour or a thing, therefore, than a difference between things and colours, a momentary crystallization of coloured being or of visibility."^v And this texture should be thought in its dynamic character. Here, we get very close to the possibility of thought without *arché*. Every sameness is constituted through the reference to its otherness and no unity, being, or sense could escape, resist, or rule this movement. This counts also for me myself, for my flesh.

The idea of differential texture is combined with the thought of my flesh, through which I'm included in the visible, touchable, etc. Included without possibility of controlling it. It's true, that my body occupies the centre of the whole architecture of differences. But not like an organizer. Quite the opposite – my center position acknowledges inclusion of me inside the dynamism. "My body model of the things and the things models of my body [...]"^{vi} My flesh is the alterity of myself, the dependence of myself on my otherness, the original absence. Thus the flesh as a universal substance

of the world, an element of differences outside of the activity/passivity difference, could respond to Derrida's *différance*. And through my body, I could be opened to the possibility of a non-meaning. But in the last minute, Merleau-Ponty closes the possibility of the missing ground, the absolute otherness, the possibility of the void, which the right hand reaches at the moment, when it should grasp the left one.

The inclusion of ourselves in the world rests upon the possibility of self-touching or self-seeing. To find myself as a thing among things and not as a separated transcendental subject. But this presupposes the unity of my body – in order to touch myself, my hands and the rest of my body must be opened into the same world. Merleau-Ponty understandably refuses to explain this unity through the unity of my consciousness. For him, this unity is based on the essential possibility of reciprocal touch. My right hand touches the left one and the other way round: there is always “a possibility for reversion, reconversion of its language into theirs [...] and all together are a Sentient in general before a Sensible in general.”^{vii} Merleau-Ponty thus avoids a primitive self-presence through the institution of an universal communication. All parts of my body inscribe into their world reciprocally and create a unity. A unity based on transversal communication and reversibility.

However, the key moment of the reciprocal touch of my hands is still held in reserve. I'm always on the same side of my body. Before my left hand touches the right one, this ceases to be my touching hand and becomes a thing in the world. There is always a gap or a distance here. And, in the key moment, Merleau-Ponty *covers up* this particular deficiency: “[T]his hiatus between my right hand touched and my right hand touching, between my voice heard and my voice uttered, between one moment of my

tactile life and the following one, is not an ontological void, a non-being: it is spanned by the total being of my body, and by that of the world; it is the zero of pressure between two solids that makes them adhere to one another.^{“viii}

The broken integrity of *arché* is supplied with the totality of the body and the world, with the wholeness of the visibility space. Thus, Merleau-Ponty can use a typical metaphysical gesture – that, which he has criticised – when he talks about the possibility of exchange. For him, it is the reversibility, that is “always imminent and never realized in fact.”^{“ix} *De facto* – *never*. The problematic level of essences and “*de jure*“ reinstates its mastery^x in the form of the totality of the space of the body and the world. This wholeness grounds the possibility of the “reversibility which is the ultimate truth.”^{“xi} After all, Merleau-Ponty thinks the whole of beings as a harmonically differentiating reciprocity. Compared with the thought behind Derrida’s deconstructive reading of the metaphysical texts, there is an interesting impoverishment here. It could be seen in the three moments: 1. the priority of the *first* (or *active*) speech, 2. the absence of economy, 3. the emphasis on *differentiation* instead of *différance*^{xii}. This impoverishment reveals the mutual position of Derrida, Merleau-Ponty, and their common enemy: Hegel. Derrida appears in the middle of this arrangement. He criticises both of them in a different way but for the same reasons.

1. Merleau-Ponty famously criticizes the same moments of Husserl’s philosophy as Derrida does in his *Speech and phenomena*^{xiii}. There is no preceding ideality of the silent thought. Original self-presence is missing: “[...] my spoken words surprise me myself and teach me my thought.”^{“xiv} There is a necessity of the passage through the outside, through the otherness, through the flesh voice, which makes the return to oneself

possible. This way, it would be possible to read Merleau-Ponty close to Derrida. But the priority of the first speech means also its priority over the second speech or the writing. Merleau-Ponty refuses to concede to thought, which is written or quoted, its truthfulness. He insists upon the authentic voice, which is *creative*^{xv}: “Ideas that are too much possessed are no longer ideas [...]”^{xvi} It is easy to guess why: unlike first speech, which is defined as unquotable, a quotation or a writing can break the totality of the world, its wholeness. It can escape the original context, to drift and to sediment as disseminated. As a paradigm of the thought and the speech, there is an authentic, spontaneous gesture here. A musical improvisation, participating in the harmony of the situation and the world.^{xvii}

2. Derrida himself once recognized Merleau-Ponty’s first-speech analysis as an economical delay, necessity of using signs.^{xviii} But in *The Visible and the Invisible*, it is much more about the thought free – or intending to be free – of all economy. It is not about having recourse to signs as the outside of the meaning. The point is that the opposites of ideal/material, essential/factual, active/passive should be neutralized and *integrated* into the unity of expression. The speaker, acting in first speech, does not invest to gain. He doesn’t delay the return of presence in the economical gesture, because at the very moment, he is the participant of a universal harmony of the world in its entirety. Like a musician in Merleau-Ponty’s text, who “dashing on his bow” participates in the orchestral composition.

3. Contrary to Derrida’s *différance*, Merleau-Ponty’s idea of being as a differential texture is impoverished of the moment of the economical delay. To retain this moment, Derrida refuses to use the term “differentiation“. The second reason of this refusal is the implication of some preceding whole, unity or origin that undergoes the

differentiation.^{xix} And Merleau-Ponty in fact combines this term with the idea of a preceding unity. In one of the last working notes from November 1960, Merleau-Ponty writes, “The chiasm truth of the pre-established harmony – Much more exact than it: for it is between local-individuated facts, and the chiasm binds as obverse and reverse ensembles unified in advance in process of differentiation.”^{xx} And in the second note from the same time: “one sole explosion of Being, which is forever.”^{xxi}

Thus, Merleau-Ponty finally gives up the possibility to think a strong alterity in flesh – non-meaning, which comes exclusively in the form of the non-economical excess. “[...] the impossibility of meaningless or ontological void.”^{xxii}

This impoverishment of *différance* in the differentiation resonates with the difference between Derrida’s and Merleau-Ponty’s criticism of Hegel. Despite many resemblances, we could say that (contrary to Derrida) the main objection of Merleau-Ponty’s “dialectics without synthesis” does not concern the synthesis as *Aufhebung*, but the synthesis as a proposition, i.e. a meaning that paralyses the authentic movement of the thought. He speaks directly about a “relapse”^{xxiii} or a movement, a gesture, the first speech (that is unquotable), that falls into the writing, repetition. Merleau-Ponty believes that it is possible to avoid this fall, that means to avoid the economy, a calculation of delay. He believes in thought “that is capable of reaching truth because it envisages without restriction the plurality of the relationships and what has been called ambiguity.”^{xxiv} He believes in “a language of which he would not be the organizer, words he would not assemble, that would combine through him by virtue of a natural intertwining of their meaning, through the occult trading of the metaphor – where what counts is no longer the manifest meaning of each word and of each image, but lateral

relations, the kinships that are implicated in their transfers and their exchanges.”^{xxv} The dream of a pure heterology, remarks Derrida to another thinker.^{xxvi}

Différance, analysed in Derrida’s lecture of the same name, combines two basic moments: delay and distance, temporization and spacing, economy and non-economical excess. Both of these moments turn against the privilege of the living present, exploited by metaphysics. But only combining one with the second provides not the possibility of ending metaphysics, but the possibility of questioning its limits and soliciting its closure – the very task of deconstruction. Compared with this combination, the thought of Hegel and of Merleau-Ponty is distinctively impoverished. Each of them undergoes a different loss of meaning, but together they complementarily reinforce metaphysics. Hegel’s discourse is economical – a delayed return of the absolute Spirit to itself. But it lacks the dimension of spacing, an excess, a definite loss of presence. The living present thus undergoes just dialectical complication here (see *From restricted to general economy*). Merleau-Ponty’s dialectics without synthesis on the other hand lives in the element of spacing, differential references tending towards the other. But there is no economical delay, temporization here. He believes in the possibility of the thought outside of presence, living of the otherness, of the absence. Derrida states of his thought that it is strategic and adventurous. Hegel’s thought is in that case strategy without adventure; Merleau-Ponty’s thought is adventure without strategy. The metaphysics – and the empiricism confirming metaphysics.

Thus, we might say that Derrida is between Hegel and Merleau-Ponty *or* Derrida is between Merleau-Ponty and Merleau-Ponty, because actually we have to distinguish, we have to show the border dividing Merleau-Ponty’s thought. The border Merleau-

Ponty hesitates to cross – he just dreams about such crossing when he dreams about the dialectics without synthesis. We have to ask: Is *The Visible and the Invisible* an example of a “good” dialectic, “which is conscious of the fact that every *thesis* is an idealization [...]”^{xxvii}? If we had to compress *The Visible and the Invisible* into one single idea, it would be the irreducible *depth of Being* for the sake of which the dialectic gives up its extrapolating synthesis. Depth is what makes the good dialectic refuse the invocation of essences, which are hidden in it. The irreducibility of depth. Or rather: the *principal* irreducibility of the depth. “Dialectical thought by principle excludes all extrapolation since it teaches that there can always be a supplement of being in being [...]”^{xxviii} Trying to think the depth of being as a condition of a dialectic without synthesis, Merleau-Ponty falls back upon the principle, the law, the essential relation. Precisely onto that, which the dialectics forbids itself to relate to. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty doesn’t think the dialectic without synthesis: “the dialectic without synthesis *of which we speak*”^{xxix}. *The Visible and the Invisible* is much more an introduction to this dialectic, a metaphysical preface to the empiricism, which stays outside the project itself. Merleau-Ponty defends the depth of being and he needs a legitimacy of the principle – while, for the sake of this depth, he plans to leave behind any kind of principle. He dreams about stepping out into the dialectic without synthesis, but he knows, that it provides him no philosophical instruments for the defence of the depth – its own condition.

Thus Merleau-Ponty is split up between two texts and his last book is just the first one, preface of the second. It would be necessary to integrate them in a single one. Let’s call the discourses, which are capable of such integration the discourses of rupture. Derrida is one of their main authors. And what makes possible the integration is precisely

non-meaning, absolute otherness, excess. The discourse of rupture, written in Derrida's manner, situates itself at the border of metaphysics, in its language, using metaphysics's instruments of legitimacy (strategy) against metaphysics. But the metaphysical rhythm of his texts comes down to the moment of its own impossibility (excess): thanks to the rupture, which divides the meaning (content) of the text from its matter (concern), from the thing itself. Then the text opens to the other reading, or seeing, or a glimpse – because it is spacing, a *graphic*.^{xxx} A graphic that we can see with our body, which becomes a meeting place of alterity.

ⁱ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible; Followed by Working Notes*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, 1968).

ⁱⁱ cf. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, pp. 34-35, 109-110.

ⁱⁱⁱ cf. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 45.

^{iv} Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 112.

^v Ibid., p. 132.

^{vi} Ibid., p. 131.

^{vii} Ibid., p. 142.

^{viii} Ibid., p. 148.

^{ix} Ibid., p. 147.

^x cf. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 272: "It is that *reversibility* is not an actual *identity* of the touching and the touched. It is their identity by principle (always abortive) [...]." and p. 82: the other is "*practicable by right*". The "practicability" of the other is one of the important testimonies of Merleau-Ponty's suppression of alterity. For him, the difference between my body and the body of the other, between myself and the other, doesn't have a principal character. Both belong into the universally reversible whole. For Merleau-Ponty, the other therefore lacks her or his otherness.

^{xi} Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 155.

^{xii} Jacques Derrida, „Différance,“ *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago, 1972), pp. 1-28.

^{xiii} Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston, 1973), pp. 3-104.

^{xiv} Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "On the Phenomenology of Language," *Signs*, trans. Richard C. McCleary (Evanston, 1964), p. 88.

^{xv} Cf. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 153.

^{xvi} Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 119. The invocation of creation implies a possibility of the pure originality – without quotation.

^{xvii} The harmony is of course hidden (in depth), but still sufficient for the exclusion of alterity, or rather its reduction to ambiguity.

^{xviii} Jacques Derrida, "Force and Signification," *Writing and Difference*, p. 11.

^{xix} Derrida, "Différance," p. 13.

^{xx} Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 262.

^{xxi} *Ibid.*, p. 265.

^{xxii} *Ibid.*, p. 117.

^{xxiii} *Ibid.*, p. 93.

^{xxiv} *Ibid.*, p. 94.

^{xxv} *Ibid.*, p. 125.

^{xxvi} Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emanuel Levinas," *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago, 1978), pp. 79-153. The name of Emmanuel Lévinas and his notion of the Other also refers to the difference in criticism, pertinent to Lévinas and Merleau-Ponty from Derridean point of view. The critique of empiricism in both cases, but as a *style* on the one side and as a *project* on the other.

Interrogating the thought of Merleau-Ponty from the view of the orthography of alterity lets's make a reference to possibilities of the corporeal alterity in the thought of Lévinas. They are much more significant here, partially due to the proximity of the main theme of Lévinas. In his *Totality and Infinity*, corporeity constitutes the separation, fundamental for the sphere of the Same. The Same is capable of connection with the Other, without dialectical unification in some kind of the wholeness. The Same must be thought as a non-relative, thus absolute and concrete – so it can move towards the Other, without distorting or reducing its otherness. For Lévinas, it is necessary, to think the relation towards the Other outside of cognition, light, or consciousness, that is, outside the traditional space of phenomenology, organized through the primacy of living presence. Because of this necessity, corporeity – as a point of departure towards the alterity – would be also thought outside this space. Factually, this would be outside of the traditional *Leib/Körper* opposition, which corresponds with the opposition of presence and absence, thought on the basis of presence. Thus, despite the fact that body belongs to the Same, standing against the Other, the way how Lévinas understands it, could be very near to the deconstructive orthography of alterity, particularly through the thematics of the whole comprehension: in spite of Merleau-Ponty's touching and seeing, the main part play the phenomena of enjoyment, living from ..., nourishment. Intentionality of enjoyment is not transcendently constituted, but isn't universally reversible

either. The hungry intentionality that doesn't have an exterior correlate like a noema – the correlate becomes nourishment of the constitutor through the assimilation. It would be necessary to speak about reel inclusion of noema. The need, opposed to the desire, fulfils itself through the biting into. Corporeity brings its materiality, but it isn't just left to biology or chemistry. Affectivity, psychism, enjoyment is not the step towards the psychologism. Behind instinct, before reason: neither... nor... . Lévinas persists in moving in the middle of the metaphysical-empirical oppositions or just opposition. It would be necessary to speak about *lived Körperlichkeit* – and this is precisely the point, where the metaphysical closure trembles. Many items of this comprehension could be inserted in a deconstructive text; but after the insertion. It would be necessary to take them out of the faith in the power of metaphor, proper to Lévinas, and to place them in the *style* – to let them circulate in the frame of irony, in the graphic, crossing them out immediately – corporeity and affectivity.

^{xxvii} Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 94.

^{xxviii} Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 116.

^{xxix} Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 117, the emphasis is mine, JT.

^{xxx} Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emanuel Levinas“. See also Jacques Derrida, “From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism without Reserve,“ *Writing and Difference*, pp. 251-277.