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From the Overcoming of the
Epistemological Dichotomy to the
Recognition of the Ontological Diplopia**

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Merleau-Ponty, from the Overcoming of the Epistemological Dichotomy to the Recognition of the Ontological Diplopia

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Abstract

Between 1956 and 1960, Maurice Merleau-Ponty decided to devote his Thursday classes at the *Collège de France* to the theme of Nature. The leading problem at that time was the relation between the concept of Nature and the ontology's general theme. In such analysis, the study of the Nature was an introduction to its definition via the indirect ontology that characterizes the philosopher's final thought. Merleau-Ponty identifies in the history of Western philosophy an oscillating movement between a positivist thought and a negativistic thought, the latter reversing the prospects of the former without being able to eliminate it. Such ambiguity, inherent to the history of philosophy, consists in an *ontological diplopia* "from which cannot be expected no rational reduction after so many philosophical efforts, and about what interests us only to take possession entirely, as the vision takes possession of monocular images to make them one single vision" (*Résumés de Cours, Collège de France, 1952-1960*. Paris: Gallimard, 1968, p. 127). This way, the philosophies' ebb and flow between each one of these ontological perspectives is neither inaccuracy nor an indication of inconsistency, but rather "justified and founded in the Being" (id, *ibid.*). In face of them one could only expect that the philosopher recognizes this oscillating movement characteristic of modern philosophy and reflect about it in order to develop some concept of Being capable of sheltering the contradictions without simply accepting or overcoming them, nor alternately occupying these two self-exclusionary - and curiously interdependent - ontological positions.

From the initial project of refoundation of "certain psychological and philosophical notions in use" about perception (*Projet de travail sur la nature de la perception*, 1933), passing through the philosophical effort aiming to overcome the dichotomy between idealism and realism as seen in the *Phénoménologie de la perception* (1945), we find, in the late 1950s, Merleau-Ponty's appeal not to the reduction of the diplopia, but to its *recognition*. In this work, we aim to show how, through the examination of modern conceptions of the Nature, such approach oriented Merleau-Ponty's last philosophy towards the ontology of sensible that appears in his final works.

Keywords: Phenomenology, Ontology, Nature.

The Problem of Nature as a Prelude to Ontology

The Merleau-Pontyan criticism on the contemporary conception of Nature comes from his criticism to Cartesian and Sartrean philosophies, characterized by the author as possessors of a “bad dialectic”: once they are based on the conviction that we are by principle in the objective domain, both of them are framed on a “pre-dialectical ontology” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1968, p. 128) and have by result “many abstract constructions” impossibles of being founded on the human experience. “But what do we know about Nature allows us to make it play this ontological role? This we don’t ask ourselves”, claims the philosopher (id., p. 92). If, on one hand, the Nature is (on the Cartesian tradition and its appropriation by Sartre) being in itself, which is in reality, objective correlate of the conscience in the task of knowledge, on the other hand, the human being has a body that is part of the Nature; as a natural being the man exists, which means that his body is an opening (ek-stase) and in it the principle of identity doesn't apply. That is why, the main feature of the Nature that summons its investigation is the connaturality of fields regarded by the reflexive thought as essentially different:

Actually (...), we are on the presence of a riddle where the subject, the spirit, the history and the whole philosophy are interested in, because the Nature is not only the object, the partner of consciousness on the *face to face* of knowledge. It is an object from which we came, where our preliminaries started little by little being putted until the moment of establish themselves in an existence, and it keeps to support it and to supply its materials. Either the individual fact of birth or the birth of institutions and societies, the originate relation of man and being is not that one of the for-itself to the in-itself. By the contraire, he continues in each man that perceives. Overwhelmed by historical significations that can be in his perception, it borrows, at least on the crucial, its way of presenting the thing and its ambiguous evidence (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1968, p. 93-94).

Far from being limited to a form of regressive immanence, Merleau-Ponty’s ontology wants to develop the confrontation with the “real exterior”, which does not happen on a direct confrontation whose theme would be the annulation of one from the two terms in debate followed by an inexorable annulation from the other - the institutions of a pure subject and a pure object whose roles replace the infinity, in an alternation of data without exchange. The real exterior is not the extension, exteriority without mystery, but an “exterior with overlapping (*empiètement*)” (Merleau-Ponty, apud SAINT-AUBERT, 2008, p. 28)¹, a depth where we already are; not constructed, but natural, it underlays from the inside even before we have the condition to

¹La Nature ou le monde du silence (unpublished), [103](2)(A) e [119](11).

recognize it as another. This real exterior is an “inside that hunts us – and without doubt this is why we are propelled to exorcise it, building the myth of the object” (SAINT-AUBERT, 2008, p. 28).

Quoting Lucien Herr, Hegel’s commentator, Merleau-Ponty states that the Nature “is on the first day”; it “gives itself always as something already in front of us, but as new beneath our eyes” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1968, p. 94). “On the first day” and, nevertheless, “new beneath our eyes”, the Nature is full with all of the possibles, the depositary of all its actualizations, non-static and clear to the conscience – even because there is no an absolute consciousness in which the carnal texture is away. This incidence of the immemorial on the present disorients the reflexive thinking in which each fragment of the space and the set of them all only exist under its sight and through it, and in what every object, either past or present, as an exact correlative of a conscious act. However, if we do not resign ourselves to tell that a world where the conscious were subtracted or a Nature without witnesses would be reduced to nothing, then we found out which is the problem that the Nature evokes:

(...) the primordial being that is neither the being-subject nor the being-object yet is what disconcert the reflexion in all aspects: from it to us there is not a derivation or rupture; there is not the compact texture of a mechanism, neither the transparency of a whole previous to its parts. We cannot conceive neither if it engender itself – what would make it infinite -, nor if it is engendered from another – what would lead it to the condition of product and dead result. Like Schelling used to say, there is something in the Nature that makes it imposes itself even to God as independent condition of its operation (id., p. 95-96).

On the first year of his course devoted to the concept of Nature at the *Collège de France* (1956-1957), the philosopher proceeds to a recension of the historical elements which compose the physical concept of Nature without, however, the wish of performing a history of the concept. His goal is to understand the relation between the problem of the Nature and the “general problem” of ontology having the Nature as an introduction to the definition of the Being. It is about knowing if “the being is” is or is not an identical proposition; in other words, if it is right to say that “the being is” and that “the nothing is not”, and this from an indirect ontology – characteristic that seems to be usual to all ontologies according to Merleau-Ponty – addressing to the Being from the individual beings (id., p. 125). After, still on the first year, he begins a detailed study of scientific theories. This passage under review is itself structured by three levels: the physic Nature, the living being and the human body – the last two already on the academic year of 1957-1958. Next, he examines the conscious awareness of life and of culture on the contemporary thinking so he can better fix the philosophical significance of the concept of Nature.

Recension of Historical Elements that Composed the Concept of Nature

The long historical study over the conceptions of the Nature which precedes the study of the natural being properly said is capital since it allows to specify the question about the meaning of the natural being under the form of a specific problem. This problem appears from the observation of a tension and of an insufficiency which Merleau-Ponty ends affirming that they are constitutive of ontology such as it was historically established. This way, far from staying away at the philosophical question of the Nature, the historical exposition is an interested part on the determination of the sense of the natural being: it is through Cartesian metaphysics, that appears on it as an emblem of the occidental ontology, that Merleau-Ponty puts in evidence the ontological problem underlying the natural being matter. The philosopher decides to take as reference the Cartesian conception of the Nature because, according to him, that's the conception that still excels in the contemporary approaches of the theme. This conception reduces the facticity of the Nature to its *existence*: "even if God created immediately our world with the figure it has", writes him, "the immanent game of Nature's laws would have given for itself, and this laws drift with necessity of the attributes of the infinity being" (id., p. 97). It is a correspondent conception of truth that affirms the absolute clearness of the object to the understanding: "it has to be as we see, it is what is without hesitation, without erasure, without weakness, its reality does not handle a failure or a fissure" (id. *ibid.*). The existence becomes the privileged way of being of the Nature.

However, both the question of the necessity of the Nature's laws and the eternity of a creator God evoke the problem of the *nothing*: once that in order to think is necessary to be according to the mode of existence, the existence becomes a condition for the thought, and men, immersed "on the infinity plenitude" (id. p. 98) of the natural being, cannot think the nothing otherwise at the cost of denying the empiric evidence of the world. This is the "ontological complex" in which emerges the Cartesian idea of the Nature. It:

(...) forces every being, if it should not be nothing, be fully, with no gap, with no hidden possibilities. The Nature cannot bear anymore something hidden or veiled. It has to be a mechanism, so we can in principle derivate the figure of this world of laws that express the interior force of the infinite production (id., pp. 98-99).

Merleau-Ponty's reading of Descartes is clarified by the critic of the metaphysics that Bergson develops in *Creative Evolution* (1907). To this matter, the philosopher writes:

History and philosophically, our idea of the natural being as an object, in itself, that is this that it is because cannot be something else, emerges from the idea of an unrestricted being, infinite or cause

of itself, and this idea, for its turn, from the alternative between being and nothing (id. p. 99).

Contrasted with a possible nothing, the Nature is conceived as derived from an infinite being; it cannot emerge from nothing due to its plenitude of being. In virtue of the identity between God's understanding and his will, the Nature is for the understanding a realized possibility, a pure product, *natured* Nature (*Natura naturata*). Defined by the radical externality of its parts, it does not have unity beyond the one granted by its laws. Therefore, like Bergson realized, comprehend the Nature over the background of a possible nothing is denying to it every form of negativity, is mixing it with the thinkable.

This Cartesian idea of the Nature will survive on the common sense of scientists of the following centuries. Nevertheless, the thesis of the unity of Being and the essence must be denied on the instant that it is put, and this in the virtue of the denial of the negativity that drives to its proposition. To this matter, Renaud Barbaras comments:

Indeed, since the Being is opposed to the nothing, it cannot be otherwise being fully; but, for the same reason, *it is not necessary that it be*, and it is because its being includes not only the essence but its realization on the existence (BARBARAS, 2000, pp. 53-54).

Once the Being is understood upon the background of the nothing, one has to recognize in it a dimension of pure existence that stays outside of the essence. This means that "by maintaining the contingency of the creator act, Descartes kept the facticity of the Nature and legitimized another perspective about this existent Nature, beyond that one of the pure understanding" (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1968, p. 100). In fact, once the essence of the natural being offers itself to the understanding, to the *natural light*, its existence is only accessible by a natural inclination that leads me to believe on the existential reach of that my sensibility perceives passively. This seems to be the innovation introduced by Descartes on the metaphysics scenery, innovation that dictated the rhythm of the whole posterior transcendental tradition: knowing a natural object means recognize the meaning in which the object gives itself to the conscience, putting it "at distance" at the same time that it is present; in a word, it means recognize the meaning of being as a "being for" a subject - that is, *appearing as object*. I see the world and the world is what is given to me; its appearance is, *for me*, the measure of its being. So the experience is thought as an absolute coincidence or objective contact between the conscience and the object. The peculiar of the "anthropological philosophy" of Descartes is that, in this same gesture, the compound of soul and body - this "privileged part of the Nature" -, although disqualified from the point of view of the understanding, is also rehabilitated in virtue of its own attitude of putting me in relation with an existence. So - asks the philosopher - how to justify the pretension of the pure understanding to impose the definition

of the being and of the truth if it, by definition, is not designed to meet the existent world?

On the summary of the second academic year of the course on the concept of Nature (1957-1958), Merleau-Ponty states that in Descartes the duplication of meanings that the word Nature has - ranging between the meanings of "natural light" and "natural inclination" - sketches the existence of an "ontological complex" characterized by the tension between two ontologies that mark the whole history of philosophy and science hereafter: the first is called by the philosopher *ontology of the object*; and the second *ontology of the existent*. Merleau-Ponty sees here the "thematic" manifestation of an ambiguity that characterizes the occidental ontology: on one hand the conviction that the being is and that the sensible appearances are, relatively to it, incommensurable restrictive manifestations of the Being in-itself; on the other hand, that one that points out the fact that these appearances are as a general rule all that we can apprehend from the Being in its facticity.

Kant, for example, would have stayed on the verve of the ontology of the object: for Merleau-Ponty, the Critic of Pure Reason shows the Nature as a result of the sum of the objects of the senses, built to us from the *Naturbegriffe* of human understanding. Nevertheless, also on it the problem of the philosophy of the Nature reappears in a particular way. Kant would have gone beyond the Cartesian "anthropological philosophy" when he postulates - although without assuming - certain philosophy of the Nature characterized by what Merleau-Ponty denominates "the riddle of organic totality"; according to the premise that all of its facts are at the same time cause and effect of totality (and, this way, causes and effects of themselves), the organism paradigm introduces the problem of the auto production of the whole, this means: once the natural being has a spontaneous productivity non reducible to casual external relations but is an index of an interior that also is not the interior of the consciousness, of a natural production where form and matter have the same origin and this way "contests all analogy with human technique" (id., p. 104). Thereof happens the possibility that the Nature is more than an object. How to establish these totalities? Keeping side by side the order of casual explanation and the order of "totality" explanation? By the contraire; once both "features" of human knowledge refer to the actuality and compatibility of different perspectives:

One should think that they are jointly truth in the things and false only when excluding one another. The idea of a discursive understanding authorized to order our experience and devoted to this task implicates, at least, the one of a 'non discursive understanding', which would jointly establish the causal explanation and the perception of the whole. The philosophy of human representation is not false, it is superficial (id., p. 103).

However, if on a way Kant postulated a philosophy that oscillated before the definition of the Nature as a pure object to the understanding, would fit to the romantic philosophy the task to develop it. Schelling will be the one to

question the Cartesian idea of the necessary Being; to him, a substantially “positive” being refuses as a first being and by that as an ulterior reality of all objective knowledge. “But, while Kant left it over a not-knowing and a lack”, writes Merleau-Ponty:

Schelling considers as an ulterior reality the ‘abyss’ itself, defines the absolute as something that exists without reason (*grundlos*), like a ‘*sur-être*’ that supports the ‘great fact of the world’. At the same time that the absolute is no longer the Being cause of itself, absolute antithesis of the nothing, the Nature has not anymore the absolute positivity of the ‘only world possible’: the *erste Natur* is an ambiguous principle, ‘barbaric’ according to him, that can be overcome but it will never be like it did not exist (...). With a greater reason could not be in question the explanation of the natural production riddle for our judging faculty and our human reflexions (id. p. 106-107).

While Kant searched the solution for this riddle on the domain of thought and thinking, Schelling’s option will be, by a duplication of the reflexion, search the unthinking on the registry of fruition and experience; in one world, of the “intellectual intuition”, this “perception slumbered in itself where all things are myself because I am not yet the subject of the reflexion” (id. p.107). For him, Nature comprises an “original and eternal knowledge” unveiled by man; on this move, man introduces himself as a self-consciousness of the natural productivity, but without letting the expressiveness result to give place to an objectivation of the experience beyond the one present in the *ek-stase* of an intellectual intuition. It is about an “effort in order to handle the severity of the real world, to make the Nature something else beyond ‘impotence’ (Hegel) and an absence of concept” (id., p.108).

Continuing the historical analysis over the Nature concept on the first year, the philosopher addresses a hard critic to Bergson. According to him, this last would have pass “far from what Schelling has better” because he was installed “since the beginning on the positive” (id., p. 109) and because he never gave up on this principle. He missed the recurrence of the dialectic between positive and negative relatively to the status of the natural being and, over all, the reasons why the being should be dialectic. Even the subsequent developments of his philosophy would witness only an “unconscious” of the theme. If, in one hand, for him “the pure perception would be the own thing” on the other Bergson assumes that the perception is effectively made “in front of a ‘center of indetermination’” and comprehends “a distance to the thing” (id. p. 109-110). This way, according to Merleau-Ponty, the Nature in Bergson:

(...) is not only the perceived thing that fascinates the actual perception, it is first a horizon which we are far from, a primordial and lost non division, an unity that the contradictions of the developed universe deny and express in its ways, and by that we

have reason to include Bergson on Schelling's lineage. The review of the vital *élan* brings back the problem of the organic Nature in the same terms where the *Critique of Judgment* put: like Kant, like Schelling, Bergson wanted to describe an operation or a natural production that goes from the whole to the parts, but that owes nothing to the premeditation of the concept and does not admits a teleological interpretation (id. p.110).

From there would come Bergson's hesitations to describe life on the first chapters of *Creative Evolution*: introduce the vital *élan* as a cause that contains "eminently" its effects goes against his own concrete analysis. Curiously, it's there that we will find the solution to these paradoxes. It is from Spencer that Bergson re-finds the problems of the being, the positive and negative, the possible and actual; despite that these problems can be considered too abstract, the truth is that there is a virtue on "Bergson's positivity" - virtue that even Bergson could not handle: the urgency of a "possible organic" and a negativity on the interior of the Being. When addressing to the evidence of the natural being, Bergson would be formulating that question that is the question by excellence on the philosophy of Nature: the problem of the "natural being preexistence, already there" (id. p. 111).

Merleau-Ponty also retraces the path made by Husserl on the second volume of the *Ideen*, path in which the creator of the phenomenology starts from the most rigorous reflexive exigency to finish on the problem of the Nature. His proposal was not ruin the traditional comprehension of the Nature as object of the *natural sciences* - understood as a generator of truth -, but revealing the intentional life that founds it and constitutes it. "There is a truth of the naturalism. But this truth is not the naturalism itself", comments Merleau-Ponty (id. p.112). Despite the possibility of an objective tendency on the understanding, the philosopher and the scientist stay as holders of a body that is part of the Nature, and reducing the Nature and the consciousness to events in an universe of pure things (*blosse Sachen*) constitutes an extreme idealism: it means to take as first what is derived - the theoretical world instead of the primordial layer of perceived things or of "pre-theoretical things" that populates the life of consciousness before science; it also implicates the refusal of the decoding task on the intentionality that ground the objects of science - and that conducts the intuitive consciousness of objects to its objective determinations.

About that, Husserl proceeds to the description of *Kosmothéoros* on *Ideen II*. According to the reading of Merleau-Ponty, Husserl affirms that the intuitive properties of the thing depend on the properties of the body-subject (*Subjekt Leib*) that perceives them: my body is a "location field" where sensations install themselves and before whom things exist "as incorporate to my flesh" (id., p.113). On the other hand, my body also projects me in a universe of things that attract me with whose I establish the "pure knowledge" by forgetting the thickness of the "corporal pre-constitution" that holds them in. The thing perceived on the interlacing of my corporal life cannot be the real,

pure thing, because it's grasped on this carnal experience that happens in and over my body with no previous discernment of what in it is apparent or real and that is why my sensible body is not since always objective: he only will be when, escaping from pure fruition, I conceive its constitution from the perception of other bodies. Correlative, the "pure thing" alone only becomes "pure" when my body puts itself on systematic relations with other animated bodies:

The experience that I have of my body as a location field of an experience and the one that I have of other bodies while they *behave* before me, they come to meet each other and pass one through the other. The perception I have of my body as the residence of a 'vision', of a 'touch' and of an *I think* (...), and the perception that in him I have of another 'excitable', 'sensitive' body, and (...) holder of another *I think*, these two perceptions light and accomplish each other together. Since then I am not anymore entirely the incomparable lonely monster. I see myself. I subtract from my experience what is connected to my body's singularities. I am before a thing that is really a thing for all. The *blosse Sachen* are possible, as a correlative of an ideal community of incarnated bodies, of an intercorporeity (id. p. 114-115).

In his last works, Husserl proceeds to a sketch of the description of the pre-objective beings. Below the Cartesian Nature, made objective by the theoretical activity, Husserl sees emerge a previous layer never suppressed and that demands justification at the measure that the development of the knowing reveals the gaps of the Cartesian science. The philosopher risks to identify the *Earth* to this place of pre-objective spatiality and temporality. Before it is manifested and objective, the truth would be on the secret order of incarnated subjects: "On the source and depth of Cartesian Nature exists", according to Merleau-Ponty "another Nature, domain of a 'primary presence' (*Urpräsenz*)" (id., p.116) soil and principle of every carnal subject. This way, a philosophy turned to understand the natural being as an object and pure correlate of a consciousness rediscovers, on the exercise of a rigorous reflexion, a natural layer where the spirit is "as buried on the functioning of the bodies on the interior of the brute being" (id., *ibid.*). After the experience with Descartes' objective Nature and its inevitable Being, the European philosophy finds itself now before the Nature as an "oriented and blind productivity" (id., p. 117) without implicating in a return of the teleology.

The Ontological Diplopia of Modern Philosophy

So, Merleau-Ponty identifies on the history of occidental philosophy a movement that oscillates between a *positivist* thinking - according to it the Being is, God exists by definition, just as this world and the Nature necessarily

are, and the nothing doesn't have properties - and another one, *negativistic*, that inverts the perspectives of the first one however without eliminating it; for this last one, the first truth is the truth of doubt, the Being is contaminated by the nothing, my freedom is an infinity model and the world is a pure fact (id. p. 126-127). This duality intrinsic to the philosophy constitutes - on the term borrowed from Maurice Blondel - an *ontological diplopia* which the philosopher, after so many philosophical efforts around the theme, does not expect the rational reduction; on the other side, interests him only "take full ownership by" this diplopia, "as looking takes possession of monocular images to make them one single vision" (id. p. 127). According to Merleau-Ponty, this is the problem of Nature: it's not about sustaining this duality - because, as the study of Descartes shows, comes a moment when it leads to incompatible theses; nor, on the other hand, try to overcome it, once all the efforts to reduce these two terms to a third relives sooner or later the duality. The philosophies' ebb and flow between each one of these ontological perspectives is neither inaccuracy nor an indication of inconsistency, but rather "justified and founded on the Being" (id, *ibid.*). Before them one only could expect that the philosopher recognizes this typical movement of bascule of the modern philosophy and thinks over it with the goal to elaborate a concept of Being which shelters the contradictions without only accepting them or overcoming them, nor occupying alternately this two auto-excluding - and, curiously, interdependent - ontological positions (id.).

Therefore, there is no possible synthesis for the ontological diplopia; the only way out consists on "taking possession" of the duality, determine an original plan where the duality could be solved but on the interior of which it is also possible to make its genesis. It is about updating an original sense of the natural being which duality - of the punctual event and the determined object - is like an abstracted image. This demands unmaking the ontological complex characteristic of the classical metaphysics which its nucleus consists, as we have seen, on the triplicity of the nothing, the essence and the existence; it is in virtue of a same gesture that the nothing is put as prelude of the Being, that the latter is identified to the cognizable, and that this identification is contested by the appearance of a pure facticity that goes out of the essence. On other terms, what is at stake is the conception of the Nature as a set of occurrences spatiotemporally determined of generic realities.

The question that imposes is the mode of access to this natural being. On the measure that the pure philosophy is constantly threatened by the ontological diplopia, it is about the ground of the contemporary science that Merleau-Ponty finds elements to contest the ontological complex that guides the classical conceptions, and it is why the historical path about the Nature conceptions drives to an examination of the idea of the conceptions of Nature on the contemporary science - subject of his following classes. As he writes in the course notes, if we should not ask to science a new conception of the Nature - because science is not philosophy -, "we will find on it the enough to eliminate false conceptions of the Nature" (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1995, p. 120).

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