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LIFE AND INDIVIDUATION

WITH UNPUBLISHED TEXTS BY MERLEAU-PONTY AND SIMONDON

VITA E INDIVIDUAZIONE

CON INEDITI DI MERLEAU-PONTY E SIMONDON



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JENNY SLATMAN

THE SENSE OF LIFE: HUSSERL AND MERLEAU-PONTY ON TOUCHING AND BEING TOUCHED

Living beings are capable of surviving even when they lack a sense of smell, sight, taste, or hearing; but they cannot stay alive without the sense of touch. Therefore, if there were something like “the sense of life”, it would be the sense of touch. It is a biological commonplace that touch is essential to living beings.¹ Another commonplace is that a living being always implies a bodily being. Without a body, there is no life. Or, to be more precise, without a body, there is nothing that touches. But, of course, the body as such is not a sufficient precondition of life. Bodies can be dead as well. Dead bodies are only touchable; like stones they can be touched, but they do not touch. However, in this paper I will explain that the full sense of life only comes to the fore if we also take into consideration this mere touchable or dead “side”, this thinghood of the body. My thesis is that life can only be understood on the basis of the difference between living and inanimate or lifeless bodily matter. This is a difference that, while inscribed in the body, constitutes the body as a living body. Starting from Husserl’s and Merleau-Ponty’s analyses of touch, I claim that life is provided by the never coinciding reversibility between touching and being touched. My line of reasoning leads to the conclusion that a living being can only experience its own being alive while encountering, touching its own being lifeless. And this should be taken literally, not dialectically: in order to have a sense of one’s life, one needs to touch one’s own touchability which is one’s own dead, inert “side”.

To explain this rather peculiar conception of life, I draw primarily on Merleau-Ponty’s later thought, in which he develops his theory of reversibility and difference (*écart*) based on Husserl’s description of the two touching hands. Already in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, this description plays a crucial role since it is used for explaining the characteristics of the lived body (*corps vécu*). By means of “double sensations” that are provided by the experience of the two touching hands, my hand is taken not merely as a “bundle of bones and muscles”; for, “I can anticipate for an instant the integument or incarnation of that other right hand, alive and mobile (*agile*)”.² It is not just the fact that the touched hand can become the touching hand – or *vice versa* – that forms the basis for animation. Rather, animation is given when the touched hand can sense or touch its own being touched. The experience of being alive is the experience of sensing one’s own being touched. According to the analysis of the *Phenomenology of Perception*, this experience goes together with an experience of primordial subjectivity; I experience my touched body as *mine*.

Hence Merleau-Ponty uses the terms *corps sujet* and *corps propre*, which can be read as synonyms for *corps vécu*.

In the later works, the equation of the experience of being alive with primordial subjectivity is called into question. The reason for this is the shift in Merleau-Ponty's reading of Husserl's description of the two touching hands. Whereas the *Phenomenology of Perception* provides an interpretation of the phenomenon of touch in terms of tactile experience, the later works explain it based on the model of vision. Husserl also explained touch merely in terms of tactile experience and, in so doing, interpreted it as an immediate and direct self-reflection. Merleau-Ponty's later works eventually break with this thought of immediacy by projecting the structure of vision on the sense of touch. Like vision, touch needs a mirror to complete its reflection. This, of course, implies that the notion of the *propre* in *corps propre* becomes highly problematic. One's (lived) self can only be experienced by means of something strange or other, something *impropre*.

In this paper, I explain the way in which this element of strangeness is crucial to the constitution of the living being. For this purpose, I begin, in the first section, with a reading of some passages of Husserl's *Ideas II* in which the significance of touch for the constitution of the living being is described. In the second section, I point out that although Husserl clearly aimed at a description of the living being as a self-contained self, his analysis unavoidably had to recognize some 'otherness' that is essential to the self. In his book *Le toucher*, Jacques Derrida rightly points out this inconsistency in Husserl's work; but he does not provide a satisfactory alternative for understanding the living being that entails its own strangeness, its own death.³ In my view, this alternative is propounded by Merleau-Ponty's later philosophy. To make this clear, we first have to look at the specific way in which Merleau-Ponty understands the sense of touch. In the third section, I explain his conception of touch on the basis of a visual, narcissistic model. Like vision, touch cannot coincide with itself. And as I spell out in the final section, it is this ever-persisting difference between touching and being touched that constitutes flesh (*la chair*) as a matter of life and death. This philosophy of the flesh teaches us that life is given with the body as difference: the body that relates to itself but never coincides with itself.

1. *The constitution of a living being*

In *Ideas II*, Husserl discusses the different ways in which reality is constituted.⁴ In order to understand the question of constitution within his phenomenological project, it must be considered against the background of his criticism of naturalism. In *Ideas I*, the transcendental reduction was brought to the fore as the phenomenological tool for breaking with the natural attitude. This reduction purifies consciousness and even allows a hypothetical destruction of the world. But this transcendental purification is only a means

and not an end in itself. It is a means for understanding the meaning (*Sinn*) of the world as it appears to us. Or even better, it is a means for understanding the way in which meaning is given (*Sinngebung*). In phenomenological vocabulary, “constitution” is the technical term used for indicating this act of giving meaning. In the second volume of the *Ideas*, Husserl makes clear that constitution depends on the attitude adopted. Basically there are two different attitudes: the naturalistic and the personalistic. We should note that Husserl has refined his terminology here: the naturalistic attitude is not merely the same as the natural attitude. Rather, it is the attitude of science in which the natural attitude has been made absolute.⁵ To mark the difference between them, he claims that the naturalistic attitude is something *natural* – since it concerns nature – but is not *natürlich* since it is something artificial (*künstlich*). The personalistic attitude is exactly the opposite: it is *natürlich* but not *natural* (*Ideas* II, 189). In essence, the personalistic attitude precedes the naturalistic one; but in fact, the naturalistic attitude predominates over the personalistic one, especially in the domain of science. A clear exposition of the difference between these two attitudes implies a critique of the hegemony of naturalism in the sciences and makes a sharp distinction possible between the natural sciences (*Naturwissenschaften*) and the human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*), a distinction that had already been made by Dilthey.⁶

It is especially in the sciences of man that the distinction (and oscillation) between these two attitudes is important. Indeed, “man” has a double meaning (*doppeldeutig*): “man in the sense of *nature* (...) and man as *spiritually real* and as a member of the spiritual world (*Geisteswelt*)” (*Ideas* II, p. 150). According to the naturalistic attitude, man is a psychic Ego or soul (*das seelische*), and according to the personalistic attitude, man is a person or a spirit. What is of importance for our analysis here is that “psychology,” or the science of the soul or psyche, which is the science of the principle of life, is a natural science based on the naturalistic attitude. The soul thus crucially differs from the spirit.⁷ The soul is not a part of spiritual reality but rather a part of natural reality. For clarifying the notion of life in Husserl’s philosophy, I will thus concentrate on the analysis of the constitution of nature, leaving aside the constitution of spiritual reality within the personalistic attitude.⁸

As Husserl maintains, nature can be understood in two different ways, either as material nature or as animal nature: “Already at first glance what is striking here is the essentially grounded difference between nature in a more strict sense, the lowest and first sense, i.e., *material nature*, and nature in a second, broadened sense, i.e., things that have a soul (*beseelte*), in the genuine sense of ‘living’ (*lebendige*), *animal nature*” (*Ideas* II, p. 30). The essential make-up (*Wesensbestand*) of material nature is extension in the sense of Descartes’s *res extensa*. Material nature has a certain spatial corporeality (*Raumkörperlichkeit*) (*Ideas* II, p. 32). However, by distinguishing material nature from animal nature – which is the distinction between material reality and psychic (*seelische*) reality – Husserl does not adopt the Cartesian distinction between *res extensa* and *res cogitans*. Psychic or animated reality does not correspond with the idea

of a non-extended reality such as Descartes's *res cogitans*. An important difference with respect to Descartes's conception of the soul is that the soul is always in relation to something material: "It is in connection with what is material that the psychic is given to us" (*Ideas II*, p. 97).⁹

The psychic, however, does not connect to matter whatsoever. Husserl distinguishes two kinds of matter: sheer (*bloß*) matter and matter in the form of a *Leib*.¹⁰ And it is only the *leibliche* matter that can be joined together with the soul (*Ideas II*, p. 97). The psychic forms a new stratum (*Schicht*) that is constituted on the basis of *leibliche* matter. As such, the distinction between the two kinds of nature – the difference between material and animal (or animate) nature – amounts to a distinction in two types of matter. Sheer matter, the materiality of material nature, is characterized by extension. The materiality of the soul, by contrast, is formed by the *Leib*, which is something different than an extended thing in space. As I explain later in more detail, the spatial dimension of the *Leib* is characterized by a spreading out (*Ausbreitung*) in space rather than by extension (*Ausdehnung*). The contrast between these two types of materiality parallels the difference between life and death. Sheer matter is dead, inanimate matter: "When the soul departs, then what remains is dead matter, a sheer material thing, which no longer possesses in itself anything of the I as man (*Ich-Mensch*)" (*Ideas II*, p. 100). Living matter is *Leib*. Husserl explains that the psychic stratum "on top of" the *Leib* is not something that is added to the *leibliche* matter; rather, "the psychic subject has a material thing as his Body (*Leib*) because it is animated, i.e., because he has psychic lived experiences which, in the sense of the apperception of the human, are one with the Body (*Leib*) in a singularly intimate way" (*Ideas II*, p. 129).

Although Husserl constantly makes the (analytical) distinction between the psychic and the *Leib*, in fact we cannot really differentiate between the two. There is not first *leibliche* matter, which then becomes animated. More likely, the seeds of animation are already present in the *leibliche* matter itself. I would like to suggest that we could consider the relation between *Leib* and animation in an Aristotelian way. According to Aristotle, "[the] soul may [...] be defined as the first actuality (*entelecheia*) of a natural body possessing life; and such will be any body which possesses organs".¹¹ From this Aristotelian definition of the soul it follows that animation can only take place if the body has organs (*organikos*), if the bodily matter is already organized in a certain way. The soul can only realize or actualize life in matter that has the potentiality (*dunamis*) of being alive. In Husserl's analysis, we can retrace this intrinsic relation between animation and the way the bodily matter is organized. As we can read in the third chapter of Section 2 of *Ideas II*, the constitution of psychic reality can only be understood in line with the constitution of the *Leib*. Or more precisely, psychic reality can only be constituted through the *Leib*. For understanding the way in which psychic reality is constituted, and thus the way in which a being can be regarded as a living being, we need to analyze the constitution of the *Leib*. We will see that

the *Leib* is constituted by means of a typical organization of its matter. It is organized according to a certain reflectivity. And it is especially the sense of touch that provides this reflecting, mirroring organic organization.

In his theory of constitution, Husserl creates a hierarchy of different strata of being (*Seinsschichten*). Sheer matter is considered as the lowest substructure (*Unterstufe*); animated matter forms a higher stratum and is in a certain sense based upon this substructure. This substructure, however, will not be entirely replaced by the higher structure. The *Leib* that is based upon the substructure of the material *Körper* will always remain indebted to this *Körper*. We cannot think of a *Leib* without its *Körperlichkeit*. In fact, Husserl's use of the term *Leib* is quite ambiguous. This is for instance very clear in the following concluding passage from § 41: "We have seen how [...] a subject of Bodily-psychic faculties [...] is constituted, whereby the Body (*Leib*) comes to light (*auftritt*), at one and the same time, as Body (*Leib*) and as material thing" (Ideas II, p. 165). By saying that the *Leib* is both *Leib* and material thing, the term *Leib* is used in two different ways. The first "*Leib*" implies a being that is both something material and something else. The second "*Leib*" only refers to a being that is different from a material thing. Apparently Husserl wants to make clear that the body as *Leib* implies something other than just its being as a material thing; yet this "otherwise than material being" cannot be separated from material being. Or maybe we must say that there is not such a thing as a pure *Leib*.¹² Keeping this in mind, we can now explore the way in which Husserl defines the *Leib*.

If we take the body into consideration, we see that it demands a double perspective. On the one hand, the body is the organ of perception, but on the other, it can also be the object of perception. Moreover, in perception the body can perceive itself. This auto-perception can manifest itself in two different ways. If I touch my left hand with my right hand, the left hand can be experienced in two different ways. Firstly, it can be experienced as a thing with a certain extension and with certain properties. In this case, the left hand is the "physical thing left hand"; it is the intentional object that as such belongs to the touching of the right hand. The left hand is thus intentionally experienced (*erlebt*) by the right hand. But secondly, the left hand is also experienced as the localization of sensations (*Empfindungen*). The moment I touch my left hand, I find series of touch-sensations (*Tastempfindungen*) in this hand, and these sensations do not constitute physical properties such as smoothness or roughness and thus they do not constitute the physical thing "left hand". Rather, they constitute the experience that I feel in my left hand that it is touched; the touched hand senses (*empfindet*) its being touched. Husserl uses the neologism *Empfindnisse* (sensings) to indicate these localized sensations. It is by means of these *Empfindnisse* that the body as physical thing becomes the body as a *Leib* that senses – *es wird Leib, es empfindet* (Ideas II, p. 152). We can thus say that the Body (*Leib*) is constituted in a double way: first it is a physical thing or matter with extension and real properties; and secondly, "I find on it, and I sense 'on' it and 'in' it"

(Ideas II, p. 153). Or, as Husserl concludes, “Obviously, the Body (*Leib*) is also to be seen just like any other thing, but it becomes a *Body (Leib)* only by incorporating tactile sensations, pain sensations, etc. – in short, by the localization of the sensations as sensations” (Ideas II, p. 158-9).

Empfindnisse are not only produced by the fact that the body touches itself. Whenever I touch something or when I am touched by something, I can become aware of the sensations in my hand: if I perceive the coldness of the surface of a thing (which is a real property), I can also have the sensation of cold in my finger. The *Empfindnis* does not provide the state (*Zustand*) of the material thing hand (it is not the perception of my hand as a cold object); rather, it provides the hand itself, “which for us is more than a material thing” (Ideas II, p. 157). The *Empfindnis* does not constitute real properties; it constitutes the me-ness of my body. The localized sensations are mine, whereas real properties belong to the material thing. In other words, the *Empfindnisse* constitute the body as my own body (*le corps propre*, as Merleau-Ponty says), or even better, the body as subject. While perceiving the world (or perceiving myself in the case of the two touching hands), I have a bodily experience of myself as being the perceiving subject.

For Husserl, the subjectivity of the *Leib* only comes into being by means of the sense of touch: “The Body (*Leib*) as such can be constituted originally only in tactuality and in everything that is localized with the sensations of touch: for example, warmth, coldness, pain, etc.” (Ideas II, p. 158). Only in the tactual realm can we experience a double apprehension (*Doppelauffassung*), that is, the apprehension of two objects: the external object and the *Leib*: “the same touch-sensation is apprehended as a feature of the ‘external’ object and is apprehended as a sensation of the *Leib* as object” (Ideas II, p. 155). This double apprehension is unique to the sense of touch. Touch is the only sense that reflects itself by providing double sensations. Indeed, I cannot see myself seeing in the way I can touch myself touching. In order to see myself seeing, I need a mirror, as Husserl points out in a footnote; but even this reflected seeing of my own seeing does not have the same directness as the touching of touching. Seeing my own seeing eye in the mirror cannot be distinguished from seeing someone else’s seeing eye (Ideas II, p. 155). As such, vision cannot constitute the subjectivity or the me-ness of my body. The sense of touch apparently does not need a mirror.¹³ In reflecting itself, it confirms itself in a direct and bodily way. In touching, I substantiate my own bodily being by the very experience that it is *me* who is perceiving. It is this event that constitutes the experience of being more than just sheer matter, of being alive. It is the experience of being the subject of experiencing (*erleben*) and living (*leben*).

According to the double apprehension that takes place in touching, the body is both a material thing and a *Leib*. Referring to another distinction that Husserl makes, this implies that the body is material nature as well as animal nature. Humans and animals – living beings – have a certain spatiality since they have material bodies. But from the fact that they *have* material bodies it

does not follow that they *are* material: “According to what is specifically human and animal, that is, according to what is psychic, they *are*, however, not material, and, consequently, taken *also as concrete totalities*, they are *not material* realities in the proper sense” (Ideas II, p. 36). As already explained, material reality is characterized by extension. Another essential feature of this type of reality is that it is open to fragmentation (*zerstückbar*). Humans and animals, on the contrary, cannot be fragmented; they are indivisible unities. It is this unity that also characterizes the spatiality of psychic reality. Psychic reality is not extended (*ausgedehnt*), nor is it non-extended. Its spatiality is formed by a spreading out (*Ausbreitung*). Actually, Husserl does not really explain the phenomenon of spreading out without extension. We might want to interpret it in the following way. Whenever I touch something or am touched by something, I have localized sensations somewhere in my body, for instance in my hand. These localized sensations – sensings (*Empfindnisse*) – however, are not limited to my hand. They spread out in such a way that I have not only the experience of *my* hand, but also the experience of my hand as part of the indivisible unity that forms *my* body. We could therefore say that the phenomenon of spreading out constitutes the body as a unity or the body according to a corporeal scheme. And this bodily unity is not situated in the same way in space as are mere material things. Husserl explains this typical spatiality by conjuring up the basic phenomenological notion of adumbrations (*Abschattungen*). Phenomenal reality appears as a reality with real properties. It is not given at once; rather, it is always given through a manifold of adumbrations and sensuous schemes. This means that one and the same thing are presented in different horizons and perspectives, and that no single perspective can exhaust the possibilities of appearing. If we perceive, for example, a table, there is always one of its sides that we cannot actually perceive, and yet we still perceive one and the same table. The same holds for my hand. If my left hand appears to me as the thing, “left hand,” it appears through the constantly changing manifolds of adumbrations. The sensings (*Empfindnisse*) of my left hand, however, are not given through adumbrations or schematization. My body as mine, as subject, is given without any perspective. Consequently, Husserl argues that the *Leib* bears in itself the “zero point” of all orientations. (Ideas II, 166). The spatiality of the spreading out is an “absolute here”.¹⁴ And this absolute here does not appear through adumbrations. For this reason, the body as *my* body is not an intentional object.

If the body as *Leib* does not appear through adumbrations, it is not a phenomenon that can be described. And therefore we might even say that phenomenologically it is a *Fremdkörper*. Husserl, however, does not draw this conclusion. As we have already seen, he uses the term “reality” for defining psychic or animal nature, i.e., the nature of *Leib*. If the *Leib* is a certain form of reality, it also has some real properties. Since the *Leib* is not an intentional object that appears, these cannot be physical properties such as color, smoothness, smell etcetera. The only property that can be attributed to

the reality of the *Leib* is the capacity to be stimulated (*Reizbarkeit*).¹⁵ The animation of the body, the coming into being of a *Leib*, is given with the possibility of being stimulated (*gereizt*). In general we can say that this *Reizbarkeit* refers to the possibility of being touched, of *être touché*. Or to be more precise, it is the capacity of sensing one's own being touched.

2. A Fremdkörper

Even though Husserl might have "saved" the *Leib* for phenomenological description by attributing to it the property of *Reizbarkeit*, he has also complicated things. For, if the reality of the *Leib* is characterized by the possibility of being touched, *Leib* must be something touchable, and this means that, despite its own absolute here-ness, it needs a certain extension in space. Without such an extension, it could not be touched. It thus follows directly from Husserl's own analysis of the *Leib* that we must attribute *Körperlichkeit* to it. Hence, even in the phenomenological description, *Leib* cannot be isolated from *Körper*. Since *Leib* stands for one's own body, and *Körper* for the body that cannot be experienced (phenomenologically) as belonging to the sphere of ownness, this means that Husserl's descriptions lead us to an intermingling of ownness and otherness. Or perhaps even worse (for Husserl), we need to presuppose something strange or alien – a *Fremdkörper* – as constitutive for ownness or subjectivity.

Some sporadic "traces of otherness" in the text can lead us to this problem in Husserl's work. For instance, in a supplement to *Ideas II*, he explains that my body as ego involves something that is foreign to me (*ichfremd*): "My Body (*Leib*) is at one time an Object foreign to me (*ichfremdes Objekt*), is over and against (*gegenüber*) me just as much as other things are" (*Ideas II*, pp. 329-30). This alterity of my own body cannot be grasped by the ego. One might be inclined to portray Husserl as the philosopher of pure egology, but in his theory of constitution, he makes clear that there is a certain incapability of constituting one's own living body. The solipsistic perspective falls short of constituting one's own body. From this perspective, the *Leib* appears as "a remarkably imperfectly constituted thing" (*Ideas II*, p. 167). Or again, "[in] solipsistic experience... we do not attain the givenness of our self as a spatial thing like others... nor that of the natural Object 'man'" (*Ideas II*, p. 169). It is only by means of the existence of others and the phenomena of empathy (*Einfühlung*) and transference (*Übertragung*) that the constitution of my body as *Leib* will be completed. (*Ideas II*, p. 175). To constitute my *Leib* as a complete thing or object, I cannot rely on the solipsistic stance since I cannot perceive myself as a unity. But I can perceive the other as a unity, and subsequently I can transfer this unity to myself (*Ideas II*, p. 175). So, to obtain an experience of one's own sensing body as a unity, one needs an external viewpoint. I can sense myself as a sensing thing, but in order to sense this sensing thing as a unified and integrated living body that I call my own body,

reflection needs to make a detour via something other than myself. I can only experience my self as a united living body by assuming the *Körperlichkeit* of others. As such, my living body is essentially characterized by its being *Körper*, by the fact that it appears as *Körper* to others. We now see that Husserl's analysis of the *Leib* produces a serious phenomenological problem: whereas the notion of *Leib* was introduced to designate the body's ownness or me-ness, it is essentially linked up with something that is not "me", something I do not own.

Even though his own analysis touches on the problem of otherness, it was never really elaborated by Husserl. To make it more explicit, it might be helpful to turn here to Jacques Derrida's reading of Husserl in his book *Le toucher*. This text mainly concerns the question of the alleged immediacy and ownness (*propriété*) of the experience of the "touchant-touché". With an allusion to the work of Jean-Luc Nancy, to whom the book is dedicated, Derrida claims that the double apprehension in touching is only possible because of a certain detour via the "strange/foreign outside" (*le dehors étranger*, T, p. 200). He traces this "outside" - this exteriority - in the distinction between the two kinds of spatiality that Husserl makes, that is, the difference between *Ausbreitung* and *Ausdehnung*. Derrida makes it clear that *Ausbreitung*, although it only concerns *my* lived experience, already implies a certain form of exteriority: "C'est qu'une certaine *extériorité*, une extériorité hétérogène à l'impression sensible même réelle [...] *fait partie*, une extériorité perçue *comme* réelle *doit* même faire partie de l'expérience du touchant-touché" (T, p. 200). Indeed, if the sensings can spread out, there must be something in which and on which they can spread out. There must be a certain body or *Körper* in space, a body that is already extended, in which the sensings can spread out, even though the sensings themselves are not experienced as physical properties of an extended thing in space. Derrida reads this difference in space, this *espacement*, as phenomenology's own breakdown since it undermines "the principle of all principles": the privilege of intuitive plenitude (T, pp. 197-198). In his deconstructivist reading, he wants to show that the intimate experience of the touching-touched, which constitutes the body as *my* body, presupposes an alterity: "Sans doute le touchant et le touché, c'est moi, encore moi, dans l'impression sensible, mais si du non-moi [...] ne venait pas s'insinuer entre le touchant et le touché, je ne pourrais pas me poser comme moi" (T, pp. 200-201). There is no pure auto-affection in the experience of touch, but there is always this *espacement* (T, p. 205). In sum, the constitution of the *corps propre* always supposes the passage via the outside and the other. Derrida adds that this also implies a passage via death: "La constitution du corps propre ainsi décrite supposerait déjà le passage par le dehors et par l'autre. Et aussi par l'absence, la mort et le deuil" (T, p. 206).

As I see it, this difference between *Leib* and *Körper*, which is implicitly at work in Husserl's theory but is not made explicit, has been taken up by Merleau-Ponty. In the last section of this paper, I will explain how the

constitution of the *corps propre* through death, towards which Derrida points, can be made concrete by means of an interpretation of the phenomenon of the flesh. It is in terms of flesh and its internal *écart* that we have to conceptualize the relation between *Leib* and *Körper*, between ownness and otherness, between life and death. Derrida, however, does not read Merleau-Ponty in this way. Rather, he tends to neutralize the importance of the *écart* all-together. After his interpretation of Husserl in *Le toucher*, he also provides an analysis of Merleau-Ponty, concentrating on the latter's reading of *Ideas II* in *The Philosopher and his Shadow*. According to Derrida, this reading is unfaithful to Husserl in a double way (T, pp. 223-224). Firstly, by stating that there is no crucial difference between touching my own hand and touching someone else's hand, Merleau-Ponty reduces or neutralizes the difference that Husserl makes between *Urpräsenz* and *Appräsenz* (in § 44).¹⁶ Secondly, by applying the reflectivity of touch to the realm of vision, Merleau-Ponty neglects entirely the difference between touch and vision that Husserl makes (in § 37).

I am inclined to say that Derrida's observations are only partially right. It is true that Merleau-Ponty equates the experience of one's own body with the experience of someone else's body, and it is also true that he considers vision as a kind of touch. And yet, this does not imply that he cancels out alterity in the experience of the other or indirectness in vision, as Derrida claims (T, p. 218). In my view, it is exactly the opposite. Merleau-Ponty puts the experience of oneself and the experience of the other on par with each other, in order to show that there is always already alterity in the experience of oneself. The same holds for the equalization of touch and vision. Instead of denying that there is an indirectness of vision he makes clear that there is no directness in touch. In a way, Merleau-Ponty applies the "model" of touch to the sense of vision; but, conversely, he also applies the "model" of vision to the sense of touch. In the next section, I will focus on the way in which these two models are projected onto each other, and will explain how the idea of touch that stems from this mutual projection forms the basis of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of the flesh.

3. *Palpating Vision's Depth*

When Merleau-Ponty parallels vision and touch in *The Visible and the Invisible* by claiming that vision is a "palpation with the look" (VI, p. 134/177) or that the palpation of the eye is a "remarkable variant" of tactile palpation (VI, p. 133/175), this does not mean that every notion of touch can be projected on vision.¹⁷ In *Eye and Mind*, he rejects Descartes's idea of vision exactly because it is based upon a certain model of touch.¹⁸ In his *Optics*, Descartes explains vision in terms of light particles that act on the eyes. Vision is thus "an action by contact" that is comparable to the way in which a blind man touches (visible) things with his cane. By claiming that the blind "see with their hands", Descartes modeled vision after the sense of touch (EM, p.

170/37). Vision, in the Cartesian sense, is understood as something mechanical that is based upon immediate contact and impact; it is based upon the idea of the tactile as something that is experienced in an immediate and direct way. Such a mechanical idea of vision, of course, is not compatible with the phenomenological approach. Instead of being something that acts on my eyes, the visible is the correlative of my intentional act. Yet, Merleau-Ponty does not think of the visible as an object that stands in front of a perceiving subject. Indeed, “the world is all around me, not in front of me” (EM, p. 178/59). The perceiving subject is situated in the perceived world; vision is encircled by the visible. Clearly, Merleau-Ponty does not consider the visible to be something at a distance, beyond reach, when he rejects the idea of immediate contact in vision. In fact, he wants to describe the seemingly paradoxical idea of a “proximity through distance” that we experience in the visible world. If vision is a kind of palpation, it is not a palpation of the surface, it is not like the contact between two surfaces; rather it is a palpation in depth (*en épaisseur*).¹⁹

We could say that Merleau-Ponty, especially in *The Visible and the Invisible*, starts from a Bergsonian outlook. He does not oppose a subject to an object, but notices that “the visible around us seems to rest in itself. It is as though our vision were formed in the heart of the visible” (VI, p. 130/172). This echoes Bergson’s idea of pure perception as developed in *Matter and Memory*. Perception comes into being in the exteriority of things, not in the unextended interiority of consciousness. As Bergson claims, it is at point P that the image of P is formed and perceived. Perception in its pure state is “part of things”.²⁰ Merleau-Ponty interprets Bergson’s idea of perception in terms of proximity between the perceiver and the perceived.²¹ It is in order to explain this proximity in vision that Merleau-Ponty describes vision in terms of touch.²²

Husserl argues that the analogy between vision and touch can only be made in a metaphorical way, for instance, when we say that the eye is in touch with (*abtasten*) a thing by casting its glance over it (Ideas II, p. 155). This is just a way of speaking; it does not literally mean that the eye is touching something. For Merleau-Ponty, by contrast, the idea of a touching look should be taken as such: the look literally “envelops, palpates, espouses the visible things” (VI, p. 133/175). The literal meaning of a palpating look can only be understood if we give up the idea of isolated senses, the “crude delimitation” of the senses, which does not hold true for actual perception (VI, p. 133/176). First of all, vision should not be confined to visual sensations since it always supposes a certain movement of the eyes and hence a movement of the body. Vision and movement are intertwined: “We see only what we look at. What would vision be without eye movement? And how could the movement of the eyes bring things together if the movements were blind? If it were only a reflex? If it did not have its antennae, its clairvoyance? If vision were not prefigured in it?” (EM, p. 162/170). If we consider vision as a faculty that is intermingled with movement, we can compare the relation between seeing

and the seen to the relation between the touching and the touched. In the same way that I can experience that my touching hand is touched, I can experience that my seeing eyes/body can be seen because there is an intrinsic correlation between the movement of the eyes and the changes they produce in the visible world (VI, p. 134/176-177). I can see myself seeing because my seeing is reflected by the visible (like my touching is reflected by the touched). The seeing eyes do not provide self-reflection based on visual sensations alone. Rather, my seeing is seen since my seeing body constantly requires to be reflected. Without such a reflection, seeing would consist of a mere passive reception devoid of movement, which has nothing to do with actual seeing. Indeed, I cannot see without looking, without moving my eyes, without having a certain view point; and for having a certain position in the visible, the seeing needs to be seen. It is thus by explaining vision in relation to movement that Merleau-Ponty can compare it with touch.²³

To explain how vision takes shape in the nearness of visible things – like Bergson’s pure perception – Merleau-Ponty models it after the sense of touch. More importantly, however, is the fact that he, conversely, models touch after the sense of vision. In so doing, he suggests that self-reflection, which is as intimate as the touched-touching, is always already mediated by something outside itself. In accordance with the model of vision, self-reflection is mediated by the mirror. As we have seen above, Husserl denounces the idea of self-reflection in vision because it is based upon the indirectness of the mirror. Merleau-Ponty, by contrast, argues that the touched-touching can only take place by means of a “haptic” mirror. Since object and organ of touch need to be in close contact with each other to provide touch sensations, one might be inclined to consider touch as the sense of immediacy. This is how Husserl takes it when he disapproves of self-reflection in vision. In fact, however, he cannot really uphold this idea of immediacy. Indeed, a genuine immediacy in touch would imply a pure *Leib*. We have seen that such a *Leib* does not exist for Husserl because of its intertwinement with the *Körper*. So, by claiming the immediacy of touch, on the one hand, and, by explaining the *Leib* in terms of *Leibkörper*, on the other, he contradicts himself. I would argue that Merleau-Ponty enlightens this problem when he describes self-reflection in touch in terms of mirror reflexivity.

If we take into consideration Merleau-Ponty’s article “The Philosopher and his Shadow,” we see that he is not merely interested in the phenomenon of touch as such when he discusses Husserl’s example of the two touching hands.²⁴ Rather, he wants to reveal a “sort of reflection” that is accomplished by one’s body. This bodily reflection is “a relation of my body to itself which makes it the *vinculum* of the self and the things” (S, p. 166/210). It is also because of this bodily reflection, he adds, that the self is linked up with the other: “In learning that my body is a ‘perceiving thing’ (*chose sentante*), that it is able to be stimulated (*reizbar*) it, and not just my ‘consciousness’ – I prepared myself for understanding that there are other *animalia* and possibly other men” (S, p. 168/212). Here we see an important difference between

Husserl's use of the example of the two hands and Merleau-Ponty's. For Husserl, the phenomenon of the touched hand that can sense its being touched stands for the coming into being of a bodily self, a bodily subjectivity. Merleau-Ponty, on the other hand, conjures up the reflexivity between touching and being touched, to explain the intrinsic relation between my body and things around me, between my body and others. As we know, the idea of a bodily subject is a crucial theme in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy – if not the most important one – but he immediately qualifies it by demonstrating that the alleged selfhood of this subject is a relative one. In contrast with Husserl's solipsistic approach at the beginning of his analysis Merleau-Ponty stresses the fact that, from the outset, the constitution of the *Leib* implies a certain impact from outside, from something that is not my own. My subjectivity is not the simple result of a pure *self-reflection*. This explains why Merleau-Ponty puts an emphasis on vision instead of touch. Whereas we might have the impression that localized touch sensations could be understood according to a restricted solipsistic perspective, the localization of vision as something visible clearly always implies a look from the outside.²⁵

By stressing the intimacy between the living body and its surrounding things, Merleau-Ponty's analysis of bodily self-reflection results in a far more complex conception of the living being than Husserl's. Husserl introduces the notion of *Empfindnis* to explain how the body is more than just a material thing, that it is also a sensing thing, a living thing. Merleau-Ponty, on the contrary, refers to this bodily self-reflection in order to explain the affinity between the sensing body and other material things. We could therefore say that, whereas Husserl stresses the animation, the being alive of the *Leib*, Merleau-Ponty shows that the lived body always entails its thinghood, its *Körperlichkeit*, which, in fact, implies its being inert, lifeless. In the next and last section, I explain the idea of the living body's constitutive deadness by means of an analysis of the phenomenon of the flesh.

4. *Flesh: a Matter of Life and Death*

The notion of the flesh seems to refer immediately to the realm of the tangible. Indeed, if we think of something incarnated, we think of something that can be touched or grasped. Minimally it is the opposite of the intangible, of what slips through one's fingers, of what evaporates. According to Merleau-Ponty, however, flesh is not just some material thing that can be touched. He calls it an "incarnated principle" – something between a thing and an idea – or an "element" (VI, p. 139/184). Flesh is an "ultimate notion"; it is "not the union or compound of two substances, but thinkable in itself" (VI, p. 140/185). This suggests a certain (Spinozian) monism. Of course, it is true that Merleau-Ponty uses the notion of flesh to overcome dualism. However, if we considered his philosophy as a rehabilitation of monism, flesh could not be understood as a single and identical substance. Instead of being

a thing, it stands for a relation: a relation with itself (*rapport à soi-même*). Therefore, it is not obvious that flesh is to be understood as something tangible and should not thus be explained according to the model of touch. To grasp the meaning of this relation with itself, it is more adequate to use a visual, or preferably, a narcissistic model. It is in this direction that Merleau-Ponty leads us when he calls flesh a “mirror phenomenon” (VI, p. 255/309). It is the mirror that provides something like a self, a *corps propre*, a living being that senses its own being sensed. Yet at the same time, it constitutes this self only as a self that is mediated by something that is not self: the mirror image.

In his later work, Merleau-Ponty no longer uses the term *corps propre*. I would say that this notion is replaced by the figure of Narcissus that appears in several of his texts.²⁶ An account of selfhood that is clearly based upon the idea of narcissism is provided in *Eye and Mind*: the self that comes into being through seeing oneself seeing or touching oneself touching is “not a self by transparency, like thought, which only thinks its object by assimilating it, by constituting it, by transforming it into thought. It is a self by confusion, narcissism” (EM, pp. 162-163/18-19). This corresponds, to a certain degree, with the Freudian theory of primary narcissism. At the root of this theory lies the distinction between the drive (*Trieb*) of self-preservation and the sexual drive or libido (popularly interpreted as the distinction between hunger and love).²⁷ Now, narcissism comes into being when the infant becomes more than just the site of self-preservation. This happens when it takes itself as a love-object in which its sexual libido can be cathected. The cathaxis (*Besetzung*) of libido in oneself is only possible if a certain representation of oneself is defended. It is at this point that the infant is no longer just a functional, biological organism but has become a psychological instance. Now we can speak of a genuine “ego”, and this “ego” consists first of all in a representation of one-self in which the libido is cathected. So here we see the importance of something imaginary for the constitution of (psychological) subjectivity: the libido is not cathected in the body as a biological organism, but in its representation, its image.²⁸

The psychoanalytical theory of narcissism teaches us that one would not accomplish one’s own wholeness or unity without one’s own image. The mirror image plays an equally important role for the notion of self in Merleau-Ponty’s later work. Without the mirror, one cannot think of oneself as a self. It is interesting to note that this is not at all in line with Husserl, who argues that the mirror is only a fallacious device. He claims that if I see my own eye in the mirror, I see it in the same way that I see the eye of an other. I do not see my own seeing, but I see something which I judge to be my own eye (Ideas II, p. 155). Merleau-Ponty would say that this is a Cartesian conception, according to which the mirror image does not really belong to the one who looks in the mirror.²⁹ He contests this idea and claims that, although the mirror image might imply a certain alienation, it is not something entirely alien to me. My mirror image belongs to me. For this he refers to Paul

Schilder who maintained that, when smoking a pipe before a mirror, he did not only feel the burning surface of this pipe where his fingers were, but also in “those ghostlike fingers, those merely visible fingers inside the mirror” (EM, p. 168/33). Here again, we see that Merleau-Ponty deliberately confuses touch and vision: I do not only see my own mirror image but I also feel it. And I feel it as something that belongs to me. Schilder’s observation could be interpreted as a kind of transitivity, or even as the Lacanian *méconnaissance* which stands for the fact that one cannot distinguish between oneself and one’s mirror image, between oneself and the other.³⁰ Merleau-Ponty’s narcissism, however, does not imply a complete fusion of oneself with one’s mirror image. Narcissistic recognition – be it visual or tactile – nonetheless supposes a separation between the self and its image. Indeed, Narcissus was fated never to reach his love object – his own mirror image. Between himself and his image remained an unbridgeable difference.

The mirror produces a difference; it breaks with the immediacy of a self-contained feeling of self. In the philosophy of the flesh, this difference does not only appear in the visual domain. On the contrary, Merleau-Ponty describes this narcissistic difference uniquely on the basis of the experience of the two touching hands. Having discussed the reversibility between touching and being touched (and seeing and being seen), he stresses that we should not forget that it is always an imminent reversibility that is never realized in fact: “My left hand is always on the verge of touching my right hand touching the things, but I never reach coincidence; the coincidence eclipses at the moment of realization, and one of two things always occur: either my right hand really passes over to the rank of touched, but then its hold on the world is interrupted; or it retains its hold on the world, but then I do not really touch *it* – my right hand touching, I palpate with my left hand only its outer covering” (VI, pp. 147-148/194). It becomes evident here what is meant by the flesh, as mirror phenomenon, being the principle of difference. It produces an *écart* or *bougé* between the touching and the touched, between the seeing and the seen. The experience of touching and being touched can never coincide, can never take place at the same moment. It is this *écart* that enables me to have a double experience of my body, that I can “hear (*entend*) myself from within and from without” (VI, p. 148). I would therefore state that the *écart* is a very pertinent figure for describing the relation between *Leib* and *Körper*, including both their difference and their mutual dependency and solidarity.

Let us return to Derrida’s reading of Merleau-Ponty, according to which he interprets the *écart* as a non-coincidence that is always related to a coincidence (T, p. 238). Merleau-Ponty seemingly neutralizes his own philosophy of difference by allowing the *écart* to ultimately amount to an adhesion to Self (T, pp. 241-242).³¹ It is particularly the idea of Self that bothers Derrida here. Evidently, for him, a philosophy of difference cannot go along with an idea of Self. In the case of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, I do not find this argument convincing. For, the self that is described here – that of

Narcissus – is not a self-contained self. The relation of self to self (*soi à soi*) is not characterized by identity or coincidence. One cannot think of this self without the *écart*! Derrida simply does not expand on the significance of the *écart* for the constitution of self and characterizes Merleau-Ponty's thought as a philosophy of the "living present" without alterity and indirectness. This apparently too swiftly reached conclusion results from his neglect of the persistence of the *écart* in the self.

What is thus required is a summary of the consequences of a philosophy of the *écart* and an explication of the manner in which such a philosophy affects the concept of life and the living being. I have tried to demonstrate through my reading of Merleau-Ponty that it is only by means of the *écart* that we can fully understand the constitution of a living being. The idea of the *écart* was implicitly announced in Husserl's ambiguous description of the *Leib*: *Leib* is something completely different from *Körper*, yet there is no *Leib* without a *Körper*. Still, instead of explaining the relation between these two in terms of difference or *écart*, Husserl describes it as a hierarchical relation between a higher and lower stratum, in which the higher (*Leib*) contains the lower (*Körper*). This hierarchical constitution is based on an allegedly pure and complete self-reflection provided by the sense of touch. Indeed for him, *Leib*, as distinguished from *Körper*, implies an experience in which the sensed and the sensing completely coincide, hence the notion of *Empfindnis*. This ultimately means that *Körper* (the body that can be sensed) and *Leib* (the body that senses its being sensed) coincide. Husserl thus describes the relation between *Leib* and *Körper* in terms of coincidence, failing to notice that the experience of *Leib*, of being alive, is effectively the experience of difference (*écart*). If we follow Husserl's reasoning, we can conclude that, in his theory of hierarchical constitution, the *Körper* is absorbed by the *Leib*. Then again, he characterizes the *Leib* as the capacity to be stimulated (*Reizbarkeit*), which means that he must prioritize the *Körper* that is touchable and extended. Obviously Husserl himself struggled with adequately conceptualizing the phenomenon of incarnated lived experience. The only and rather disappointing answer he provides is the description of *Leib* as *Leibkörper*.

Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of the flesh enables us to understand the living being in non-positivistic terms. As such, it circumvents the problem of choosing between either *Leib* or *Körper*, or the combination of these two. Flesh is neither the one thing nor the other. To be more precise, it is nothing, or it *is* not. In Heideggerian terms we could say that it is not a being (*Seiende*). More likely it is the event of Being (*Sein*) alive. After all, the flesh is an "element" of Being, not a being. It is what makes the fact be a fact (VI, p. 140/184). The philosophy of the flesh, therefore, is not simply a philosophy of incarnation. It is not about the materialization (or personification) of immaterial or spiritual being. Flesh is not the aggregate of matter and spirit. Beyond this idea of incarnation, the philosophy of the flesh reveals the experience of being alive as an experience of difference, of differencing. Whenever I can sense myself being touched, I can experience myself being

alive, not because the touching and the touched coincide, as Husserl would have it, but precisely because the coincidence always slips away. It is in the experience of difference between myself (the one who is touching) and myself (the one who is touched) that I can experience myself as being alive. Without this difference, I would be reduced to an untouchable and unaffected mass.

If we look more closely at the difference or *écart* that constitutes the living being as being alive, we see that we cannot think of it without also considering something that is dead. The experience of being alive implies indeed a difference, and therefore a relation, between life and death. While touching myself, my touched body – even when I can feel its warmth and its pulse – is not just the living body. The experience of myself as being touched constitutes the body as an intentional object with properties such as warmth and liveliness but, as we have seen already, the experience of myself as being alive is not based on this kind of intentionality. The experience of being alive is an experience without adumbrations and perspectives. My body that I can touch and that is always at my side during my entire life is not the same as the body that is alive. In itself, the touched body is a dead thing, like any touchable thing. As modern advanced prosthetic techniques show, many parts of this thing can be replaced by other dead things. My body is not experienced as a living body merely because it is touchable. The experience of being alive implies that touchability is itself sensed (which is the true meaning of the *touché-touchant*). In touching one's own touchability, one constitutes one's own being alive while touching one's "dead side". Here we see that if we interpret Husserl's theory of the living being according to a narcissistic, yet strictly phenomenological, model, we arrive at a notion of life that exceeds the opposition between life and death. It is nothing else than the difference – the *écart* – between these two. For, ultimately, the sense of life consists of touching one's own touchability, which is one's own dead matter.

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NOTES

- 1 This was already recorded by Aristotle who claims in his *On the Soul*: "For since the living animal (*zooion*) is a body possessing soul, and every body is tangible, and tangible means perceptible by touch, it follows that the body of the animal must have the faculty of touch if the animal is to survive". Aristotle, *On the Soul*, The Loeb Classic Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, [1957] 2000), 434b12-14.
- 2 M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London, New York: Routledge, 1962), p. 93; *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Galimard, 1945), p. 109.
- 3 J. Derrida, *Le toucher: Jean-Luc Nancy* (Paris: Galilée, 2000). (Abbreviated as T). Chapter VIII is dedicated to a reading of Husserl's *Ideas II*.

- 4 E. Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, Second Book (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989), (Abbreviated as Ideas II).
- 5 Therefore, Merleau-Ponty remarks that the natural attitude as such is not yet a real theoretical attitude: "The natural attitude really becomes an attitude [...] only when it becomes a naturalist thesis". In *Signs* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 163; *Signes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), p. 206, (Abbreviated as S).
- 6 But, according to Husserl, this distinction had not really been elaborated. See § 48, Ideas II.
- 7 Although Husserl's conception of psychology was inspired by the then recent development of modern (experimental) psychology, it is clear that he considers the psychic not solely as a mental, cognitive capacity. The psychic is the capacity of experience (*Erleben*) and life (*Leben*). In that sense, Husserl's psychology is attuned to the classical idea of the *psychè* as developed by Aristotle. Jacques Derrida even speaks of a "reprise littérale" of *De Anima*. See, J. Derrida, *Le toucher*, Jean-Luc Nancy, p. 189.
- 8 Here we see a crucial difference between Husserl and Merleau-Ponty. In *Ideas II*, Husserl makes it very clear that the constitution of the living body, the *Leib*, takes place within the perspective of the naturalistic attitude. The *Leib* should be understood as a natural object, even when it differs essentially from inanimate objects (*Körper*). Merleau-Ponty, on the other hand, understands the living body from the personalistic attitude, i.e., the attitude that is prior to reflection. Effectively, he interprets the personalistic attitude from an existential perspective: it is the attitude that goes along with pre-reflective being in the world. See for example, "The Philosopher and His Shadow" in *Signs* (p. 163/206-207). Although this shift from Husserl's philosophy of consciousness to Merleau-Ponty's existential philosophy is important for understanding the relation between these two philosophers, this paper is not the place for elaborating it further.
- 9 See also the following passage from *Ideas II*: "In itself the case would be thinkable [...] that a psychic being would appear and be actual while lacking a *material* Body, a normal thing of nature as underlying the psychic determinations. But this does not imply that a Body in every sense is lacking or could be lacking" (*Ideas II*, p. 100). And as he explains later, if we consider psychic reality as something real, with an objective existence, we cannot think of the soul without body: "For a psychic being to be, to have *objective* existence, the *conditions of possibilities of intersubjective givenness* must be fulfilled. Such an intersubjective experienceability, however, is thinkable only through 'empathy', which for its part presupposes an intersubjectively experienceable Body that can be understood by the one who just enacted the empathy as the Body of the corresponding psychic being" (*Ideas II*, p. 101).
- 10 One common English translation for the German words *Leib* and *Körper* are "Body" and "body". I find this a rather unsatisfactory translation since it fails to differentiate between life (*Leib, leben*) and death (*Körper, corpse*). Therefore, I prefer to use the original German terms.
- 11 Aristotle, *On the Soul*, 412b.
- 12 As Bernhard Waldenfels aptly mentions: "The pure body, or to put it in German, a *Leib* without a *Körper*, belongs to the periphery of Cartesianism: *sentio, ergo sum*. But becoming aware of what one feels and giving it some expression means more than merely feeling it". In "Bodily Experience between Selfhood and Otherness", 2002, published on the internet: <http://www.cfs.ku.dk/Waldenfels-opening-lecture.pdf>.
- 13 As Derrida mentions: "Le rapport à soi du toucher opère donc sans intropathie ou représentation analogique: quand je me touche de la main ou du doigt, *il n'y a aucun effet de miroir haptique*". Jacques Derrida, *Le toucher*, p. 196 (my emphasis).
- 14 In the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty describes this zero point as the body's permanence: my body is always with me, even though it is never really for me, in front of me (p. 90/106).

- 15 “So the capacity to be stimulated in general becomes a universal title for a class of real properties which have quite another source than the properly extensive (and therewith material) properties of the thing and which in fact pertain to a quite different dimension” (Ideas II, p.164).
- 16 In *The Philosopher and His Shadow*, Merleau-Ponty writes: “My right hand was present at the advent of my left hand’s active sense of touch. It is in no different fashion that the other’s body becomes animate before me when I shake another man’s hand or just look at him” (S, p.168/212).
- 17 M. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968); *Le visible et l’invisible* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), (Abbreviated as VI).
- 18 M. Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind” (translation Carleton Dallery), in *The Primacy of Perception* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964); *L’œil et l’esprit* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), (Abbreviated as EM).
- 19 “Infinite distance or absolute proximity, negation or identification: our relationship with Being is ignored in the same way in both cases. In both cases, one misses it because one thinks one will ensure it more effectively by approaching the essence or the thing as closely as possible.” And therefore, he says, “We should have to return to this idea of proximity through distance, of intuition as auscultation or palpation in depth” (VI, p. 128/170).
- 20 H. Bergson, *Matter and Memory* (New York: Zone Books, 1988), p. 64.
- 21 In *Matter and Memory*, Bergson describes the proximity of perceiver and perceived as “immediate intuition” (p. 75). As we will see, Merleau-Ponty does not adopt this idea of immediacy since he explains the notion of proximity in terms of *écart* and non-coincidence.
- 22 “What is this prepossession of the visible, this art of interrogating it according to its own wishes, this inspired exegesis? We would perhaps find the answer in the tactile palpation where the questioner and the questioned are closer, and of which, after all, the palpation of the eye is a remarkable variant” (VI, p. 133/175).
- 23 Although Husserl did not take into account the relation between vision and movement, he did recognize the importance of movement for the constitution of the *Leib*. As already mentioned, he claims that the *Leib* is originally only constituted in tactuality; but then he adds: “Furthermore, the kinetic sensations play an important role. I see how my hand moves, and without it touching anything while moving, I sense kinetic sensations, though as one with sensations of tension and sensation of touch, and I localize them in the moving hand” (Ideas II, p.158). In fact, Merleau-Ponty claims that vision is always associated with movement and thus with kinetic sensations.
- 24 M. Merleau-Ponty, “The Philosopher and His Shadow”, in *Signs* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964).
- 25 It is not by accident that theories of alterity, such as Jean-Paul Sartre’s or Jacques Lacan’s, take as their paradigm the look (*le regard*).
- 26 For an analysis of the recurrence of the figure of Narcissus and the mirror, see my *L’expression au-delà de la représentation. Sur l’aïsthésis et l’esthétique chez Merleau-Ponty* (Leuven-Paris: Peeters-Vrin, 2003), pp. 114-121.
- 27 S. Freud, “On Narcissism: An Introduction”, In *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis* (London: Penguin Books, 1964), p. 70.
- 28 The importance of the imaginary for the constitution of the self was taken up and elaborated by Jaques Lacan in his article on “The Mirror Stage as formative of the Function of the I”, in *Écrits. A Selection* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1977).
- 29 Merleau-Ponty describes the Cartesian conception of the mirror image as follows: “A Cartesian does not see *himself* in the mirror; he sees a dummy, an ‘outside’, which, he has every reason to believe, other people see in the very same way but which, no more for himself than for others, is not a body in the flesh. His ‘image’ in the mirror is an effect of the mechanics of things. If he recognizes himself in it, if he thinks it ‘looks like him’, it is his thought that weaves this connection. The mirror image is nothing that belongs to him” (EM, p. 170/38-39).

- 30 J. Lacan, "The Mirror Stage", p. 6.
- 31 For this argument, Derrida refers to the following passage from the working notes: "To touch oneself, to see oneself, is to obtain such a specular extract of oneself. I.e. fission of appearance and being – a fission that already takes place in touch (duality of touching and the touched) and which, with the mirror (Narcissus) is only a more profound adhesion to Self" (VI, pp. 255-256/309).