

THE EVOLUTION OF MERLEAU-PONTY'S CONCEPT OF THE BODY

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AMONG those who have challenged the implicit assumptions of modern psychology, Merleau-Ponty occupies a prominent place. Much of *The Structure of Behavior*, the *Phenomenology of Perception*, as well as *Le Visible et l'Invisible*, were geared to the task of discovering the inadequacies of the philosophy underlying the sciences, including psychology. Merleau-Ponty ceaselessly discussed contributions of scientific experimentation to prove that they explode the ontological framework—generally implicit—in which they are presented. He did not wish to assign to the scientist the task of the metaphysician. But, as de Waelhens said, he knew that the scientist, as all men, spontaneously thinks in function of an ontology which, by long custom, is considered natural, even though it is in opposition with the views of natural experience in which scientific experience is rooted.¹ For instance, the fact that the scientist is included in the very matter he studies belies the dualistic view which most scientists spontaneously adopt as their ontological framework: namely, the I, the surveying mind, as opposed to objects known. Rather, Merleau-Ponty thought that this subject-object dichotomy is a second experience or elaboration. The original experience includes the union of the two. This was especially emphasized by him in his later works: "After all, the physicist of whom I speak and to whom I attribute a system of reference, is also the physicist who speaks. After all, the psyche of which the psychologist speaks, is also his. This physics of the physicist, this psycho-

¹ DE WAELEHENS, A. *Une Philosophie de l'ambiguïté*. Louvain: Publications Universitaires de Louvain, 1951, pp. 13f.

logy of the psychologist, announce that henceforth, for science itself, the being-object can no longer be being itself; "objective" and "subjective" are recognized as two orders constructed hastily in the interior of a total experience whose context must be restored in all clarity."²

Merleau-Ponty interpreted the modern evolution of thought as leading to a rejection of dualism, and he saw the victory over the opposition between body and mind as the most striking characteristic of philosophic thought in our century. In the spirit of this revolution of thinking he wanted to deliver the death blow to dualism. Dualism consisted in this that the body was described as a thing among things, a factor in a reciprocal causal process, while the mind or soul was considered the origin of everything we call knowledge or openness. The great credit of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is that he has shown that bodily being is already existence, openness to and dialogue with the world. The body 'understands' its world, it is permeated with intentions and thereby gives meaning to its surroundings. The world of meaning in which we live manifests everywhere the structure of our bodily existence.³

In his essay "Man and Adversity", Merleau-Ponty observed that our century has wiped out the dividing line between "mind" and "body", and sees human life as through and through mental and corporeal, always based upon the body and always (even in its most carnal modes) interested in relationships between persons. For many thinkers at the close of the nineteenth century (as well as today), the body was a bit of matter, a network of mechanisms. The twentieth century has restored and deepened the notion of flesh, that is, of animate body.

In psychoanalysis for example, it would be interesting, says Merleau-Ponty, to follow the development from a conception of the body which for Freud was initially that of the nineteenth century doctors to the modern conception of the experienced, 'lived' body. "Did not psychoanalysis take up the tradition of mechanistic philosophies of the body—and is it not still frequently understood in this same way today? Does not the Freudian system explain the most complex and elaborate behavior of adults in terms of instincts and especially sexual instincts, that is to say physiologically, in terms of a composition of forces beyond the grasp of our consciousness?... Perhaps things seemed this way in Freud's first works, and for a hurried reader; but as his own and successor's psychoanalysis rectifies these initial ideas in

² MERLEAU-PONTY, M. *Le Visible et l'Invisible*. Paris: Gallimard, 1964, p. 38.

³ KWANT, REMY. *The Phenomenological philosophy of Merleau-Ponty*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1963, pp. 238ff.

⁴ MERLEAU-PONTY, M. *Signs*. Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 1964, translated by Richard C. McCleary, p. 225.

contact with clinical experience, we see the emergence of a new idea of the body which was called for by the initial ideas."⁵

In one of his earliest works Freud wrote that "psychical facts have a meaning." This meant that no human behavior is simply the result of some bodily mechanism, that in behavior there is not a mental center and a periphery of automatism, and "that all our gestures in their fashion participate in that single activity of making explicit and signifying which is ourselves."⁶

At least as much as he explains the psychological by the body, Freud shows the psychological meaning of the body, "its hidden or latent logic." Thus, Merleau-Ponty remarked, we can no longer speak of the sexual organ taken as a localizable mechanism, or of the body taken as a mass of matter, as an ultimate cause. "Neither cause nor simply instrument or means, it is the vehicle, the fulcrum and the steadying factor of our life. None of the notions philosophy had elaborated upon—cause, effect, means, end, matter, form,—sufficed for thinking about the body's relationships to life as a whole, about the way it meshes into personal life or the way personal life meshes into it. The body is enigmatic; a part of the world certainly, but offered in a bizarre way, as its dwelling, to an absolute desire to draw near the other person and meet him in his body too, animated and animating, the natural face of mind. With psychoanalysis mind passes into body as, inversely, body passes into mind."⁷

In the last analysis, our bodies bear witness to what we are; body and spirit express each other and cannot be separated.⁸ A living body's slightest reflex expresses the total subject's fundamental way of being in the world.⁹ Each person is nothing more nor less to us than this structure or way of being in the world. The body incarnates a manner of behavior.¹⁰

In attempting to overcome the historical tradition of philosophical dualism, Merleau-Ponty posits the term "being-in-the-world," a pre-objective view which effects in man the union of the psychic and the physiological. This union of soul and body, distinguished from every modality of *res extensa* and of *cogitatio*, is not a mere amalgamation of two mutually external terms but is effected in the movement of existence itself.

It is this movement which establishes man's world—a world of meaning in which his existence as subjectivity is one with his existence as body and

⁵ *Signs*, p. 227.

⁶ *Signs*, p. 228.

⁷ *Signs*, p. 229.

⁸ MERLEAU-PONTY, M. *Sense and Non-Sense*. Northwestern University Press, 1964, p. 173.

⁹ *Sense and non-sense*, p. 108.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

with the existence of his world. So it is that every human action has a meaning provided by man's being-in-the-world. —a being-in-the-world which delivers itself to and finally bases itself in habitual action.¹¹

The fact, however, that Merleau-Ponty's doctrine of the body is not that of the Cartesian body-soul dualism is due ultimately to the temporal nature of human experience itself; "The fusion of soul and body in the act, the sublimation of biological into personal existence, and of the natural into the cultural world is made possible... by the temporal structure of our experience."¹² And if indeed the body is to be understood at the level of naive consciousness in its temporality, the body cannot be said to be (objectively) *in* space and time.¹³ On the contrary, the body is *of* space and time,¹⁴ for the primordial significance of the body belongs on the pre-objective level of experience and is more adequately understood as a 'work of art' than as an object, in the sense that a work of art is essentially an expression indistinguishable from the existence that expresses it.¹⁵ Or the body can be understood as the expression of existence in the way that speech is an expression, —for speech "... is a manifestation, a revelation of intimate being and of the psychic link which unites us to the world and our fellow man."¹⁶ Rather than being merely "one object among all the rest",¹⁷ the body has a "sense-giving function"¹⁸ as is disclosed not only in speech but also in the phenomenon of sexuality which is not a "fortuitous content of our experience,"¹⁹ but a phenomenon which (like the body) permeates existence in our being-in-the-world:²⁰ "Sexuality... is dramatic because we commit our whole personal life to it,"²¹ for sexuality demonstrates that the body is of the nature of existence itself: "... the body expresses total existence not because it is an external accompaniment to that existence, but because existence is the central phenomenon of which body and mind, sign and significance are abstract moments."²²

Since the phenomenon of the body belongs at the most primordial level of existence, this means that "to be a body is to be tied to a certain world... ", since "the body is our general medium for having a world."²³ Since being

¹¹ MERLEAU-PONTY, M. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Humanities Press, 1962, p. 86.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 84.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 196.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 199.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 166.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

a body is therefore being-in-the-world at a pre-objective level,²⁴ the temporality and spatiality of this primordial existence are pre-objective in the sense that primordial existence is itself pre-objective. This is the reason that Merleau-Ponty writes: "We must therefore avoid saying that our body is *in* space or *in* time. It *inhabits* space and time."²⁵ In other words, the body's spatiality is that of 'situation' and not 'position',²⁶ for existence 'includes' space and time in this primordial relation to the world.

Being involved in a reciprocal relation with the psyche, the body is a "provisional sketch" of man's total being²⁷ and is the "focal point of living meanings"²⁸ which moves toward its equilibrium. The body, therefore, becomes man's expression in the world, the mirror of his being at a pre-personal and pre-objective level.

Man taken as a concrete being is not a "psyche joined to an organism, but the movement to and fro of existence which at one time allows itself to take corporeal form and at others moves toward personal acts."²⁹ Psychological motives and bodily occasions may overlap because there is not a "single impulse in a living body which is entirely fortuitous in relation to psychic intentions, not a single mental act which has not found at least its germ or its general outline in physiological tendencies. It is never a question of the incomprehensible meeting of two causalities, nor of a collision between the order of causes and that of ends. But by an imperceptible twist an organic process issues into human behavior, an instinctive act changes direction and becomes a sentiment, or conversely a human act becomes torpid and is continued absent-mindedly in the form of a reflex. Between the psychic and the physiological there may take place exchanges which almost always stand in the way of defining a mental disturbance as psychic *or* somatic. The disturbance described as somatic produces, on the theme of the organic accident, tentative psychic commentaries and the 'psychic' trouble confines itself to elaborating the human significance of the bodily event."³⁰

This is the position Merleau-Ponty had reached by the middle 1950's. However in subsequent years he felt he had not been sufficiently radical in his thinking, and hence he kept questioning the foundation of knowledge and existence. Through his growing reflection, he felt the need to radicalize yet more his early views. Not that he would change all. His early thought, as he

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 140f.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

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said, would be “reintegrated into his new thinking, would remain ‘significant’, and keep ‘its truth’.” In a note of January 1959, he considered the task of a proposed book (the never completed *Le Visible et l’invisible*). In it he clearly stated his desire to rethink, and specifically to deepen and rectify *The Structure of Behavior* and *Phenomenology of Perception*. “But all that—which takes up again, deepens and rectifies my first two books—must be done entirely in the perspective of ontology—the description of the perceived world on which this first volume concluded is considerably deepened.”³²

Even a superficial reading of the works of this last period reveals a preponderance of such words as: Being, fundamental, reflection. Most of the questions he raised led him to the same ontological foundation: what he called “savage being”. Merleau-Ponty remained faithful to his search for foundations which led him beneath perceptual knowledge to its root in savage Being. He remained faithful to his antidualism which led him now beneath the duality of consciousness-object to their common root: savage Being. He remained faithful to his view of the phenomenal body, which led him to its affinity with the world and their common root: savage Being. He remained faithful to his rejection of absolute knowledge, even more so, as man inhabits Beings,³³ and hence “the philosophy of God-like survey... is over.”³⁴

He even sought now, as opposed to his earlier views, to dig beneath the operative intentionality of phenomenal body and world. He had said that this relationship “is not a thing which can be any further clarified.”³⁵ He now attempted this very clarification, urged on by his extreme anti-dualism.

He referred in a note of July 1, 1959 to the fact that *Phenomenology of Perception* could not solve the problem it posed because he had then maintained the dualism of consciousness and object—even though joined by operative intentionality. The ‘fact’ of the phenomenal body and perception can only be explained by digging beneath this duality to “brute or savage Being”, which is ontologically first. The phenomenal body is a certain visible which has been deepened in an invisible sense. Both phenomenal body and world are of a “common cloth”: savage Being.³⁶

Perhaps he spoke even more clearly of this primordial unity underlying the intentionality of consciousness and world when he said that the philosopher must ask “if it is closed, if it is self-sufficient, or if it is not open, as an *artefact*, on an original perspective of natural being, if... there is not a horizon of brute being and brute mind from which the constructed objects and

³² *Le Visible et l’invisible*, p. 222.

³³ *Signs*, p. 13.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

³⁵ *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. XVIII.

³⁶ *Le Visible et l’invisible*, p. 253.

significations emerge."³⁷ In the most important part of the completed section of *Le Visible et l'invisible*, the chapter entitled "L'entrelacs—le Chiasme", he again described perception but tried to reach the unity underlying it. He asked "How is it that my regard, enveloping things does not hide them, and, after all, veiling hem, unveils them?" And he answered in an inserted note that it is because both seer and seen share a more basic union: "It is because the regard itself is incorporation of the seer in the visible, searching again for itself, who is of it." (qui en est).³⁸

There is, as it were, a pre-established harmony between the perceiver and the perceived. He knows how to question it to obtain the best perception. It is "as if he knew them before knowing them." How can this "inspired exegesis arise?"³⁹ Because there is a "crisscrossing" within the perceiver himself of, for example, touching and touched. And this, in turn, is possible because the relation of perceiver and perceived "is made from the interior of Being."⁴⁰

It is difficult to reach or talk about this underlying unity—just because it "underlies" the perceptual and predicative levels with which we are normally concerned and about which we normally speak. We know savage Being "laterally—as a background not as a figure". In his Preface to Dr. Hesnard's book, *L'Oeuvre de Freud*, Merleau-Ponty compared the effort of phenomenology to reach this "latency" with psychoanalysis.⁴¹ Being, he said, "is around it [consciousness] rather than before it." Since such Being is "by definition hidden", it may be called a "pre-Being." It is only grasped laterally, as a "latency" underlying the acts of consciousness.⁴²

Therefore, Merleau-Ponty turned to an examination of perception again, particularly to the role played in it by the phenomenal body, because in and through perception he hoped to gain access to brute Being: "The fact is that sensible Being, which is announced to me in my most strictly private life, summons up within that life all other corporeality. It is the being which reaches me in my most secret parts, but which I also reach in its brute or untamed state, in an absolute of presence which holds the secret of the world, others, and what is true."⁴³

He now said explicitly that there were "more things in the world and in us than what is perceptible in the narrower sense of the term."⁴⁴ Here we meet difficulties of terminology again. On the next page, he said that the

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

⁴¹ HESNARD, *L'Oeuvre de Freud*, Paris: Payot, 1960, Preface, p. 8.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁴³ *Signs*, p. 171.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

"sensible world" is "the universal one"—but not before he had explained that by "sensible being", "the universal from of brute being", he meant "everything sketched out" in things,—"even as divergences and a certain absence." That which is "grasped through experience", "the being which can be given in a fundamental and original presence. . . is not the whole of being, and not even all being there is experience of. 'Negativities' also count in the sensible world."⁴⁵ Sensible being thus comes to mean everything man is open to in any way.

Thus, in summary, we see that in later years Merleau-Ponty did not speak as much of a primacy of perception but spoke more than previously of the interrelation of the predicative and pre-predicative levels. He sought a deeper explanation of things than the man-world relationship of perception, and concluded that perception was only possible because both perceiver and perceived were related within the unity of the same Being.

The investigation of Merleau-Ponty's later years thus kept issuing in unity and Being. The central awareness with which he wrote *Le Visible et l'Invisible* is of the primordial unity which is at the base of the distinction between consciousness and object, between spirit and matter, which is expressed by the words "j'en suis", or I belong to it, i. e., nature, Being. He intended to show how visible nature manifests itself "as a body which feels itself and which actualizes the hidden sensitivity of nature."⁴⁶ Although he had previously emphasized the oneness of body and soul which is the phenomenal body, he repeated this, and proceeded to emphasize also the union of the phenomenal body and world, and consequently of man and man. Starting from this "compound of soul and body" which "we are",⁴⁷ he discovered what makes perception *possible*: the attachment of consciousness to Being. But that which makes it possible to perceive is not *itself* perceived.⁴⁸ "By principle", we overlook and "misunderstand Being", preferring beings which consciousness has posed, the figures it has made stand forth from the background of Being common to it and them."⁴⁹

That which *makes* the body human, which makes it *be* a phenomenal body, and not just a thing or an objective body, is the crisscrossing in it of seeing and seen, touching and touched—even of seeing and toucing. Merleau-Ponty spoke of this as the "chiasma" which is a figure of crossed lines: "There is a human body when, between the seeing and the seen, between

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

⁴⁶ KWANT, REMY, *From Phenomenology to Metaphysics*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1966, p. 45.

⁴⁷ *Signs*, p. 177.

⁴⁸ *Le Visible et l'Invisible*, p. 301.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 302.

touching and the touched, between one eye and the other. . . a blending of some sort takes place—when the spark is lit between sensing and sensible, lighting the fire that will not stop burning until some accident of the body will undo what no accident would have sufficed to do.”⁵⁰ That the chiasma of seeing and seen, touching and touched, is broadened to include a chiasma between the seen and the touched, is expressed in the following passage: “We must become accustomed to thinking that all the visible is cut out of the tangible, each tactile being promises in some way visibility, and there is impingement, stepping over, not only between the touched and the touching, but also between the tangible and the visible which is inscrusted in it as, inversely, itself is not a zero of visibility, is not without visual existence.”⁵¹ Merleau-Ponty claimed that it was because “the same body sees and touches” that the visible and tangible “belong to the same world.”⁵²

The body is the same kind of being as the sensible world in which it is found. “Visible and mobile itself, my body counts among the things, it is one of them. . . But since it sees and moves itself, it holds the things in a circle about itself; they are part of its full definition and the world is made of the very stuff of the body.”⁵³ For example, when my hand moves, it does not simply bump against things: my hand moving toward the ashtray has already shaped itself according to the shape to be touched, before the touching; the contours are prepared for each other. The way the hand and the thing interlock is even more striking when we think of the feeling dimension: if I caress velvet I find myself stroking it in a certain way, but without having to figure its distance from me or the degree of pressure I ought to exert. But, says Merleau-Ponty, not only my hand but I am myself tangible. Because I have two hands I can touch one with the other; so I am not foreign to the world of tangible things, but in it. “My feeling hand cannot be openness toward the world if it is not sensitive to itself. . . our hand must be both sensitive and sensible at the same time.”⁵⁴ And it is precisely because the hand is itself tangible that it can feel. “The thickness of the body, far from competing with that of the world, is on the contrary, the sole means that I have of going into the heart of the things, by making myself world and by making them flesh.”⁵⁵ Thus there is a primordial overlapping, a true mutual reference, of the feeling and the felt, of the touching and the tangible. Now we must remember that it is through movements that hands touch

⁵⁰ MERLEAU-PONTY, M. *The Primacy of Perception*, edited by James M. Edie. Northwestern University Press, 1964, p. 163-164.

⁵¹ *Le Visible et l'Invisible*, p. 177.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 177

⁵³ *The Primacy of Perception*, p. 163.

⁵⁴ *Le Visible et l'Invisible*, p. 176.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

and are touched: movement is an initiation into the tactile world and opens it up.

The same analysis is true of the field of vision: my body moves along what it sees and sees only by moving its eyes. The field of the visible inscribes the field of all possible bodily movement, and when I see, I pull my whole body along with the looking. Vision really only begins when the eyes have been launched into movement, and this means when my whole body is activated. I control the tactile field with my sensitive hands and the visual field with my moving eyes but my seeing is a sensitivity of the same order as my touching, so the two kinds of reality belong together, and again there is overlapping, this time of the visual field and the tangible field.

This clearly implies that the body cannot be made up of two parts or be of two different substances (one material and the other conscious)—“the animation of the body is not produced by the assemblage of parts one against the next, nor is it produced by the descent into it of a mind come from elsewhere, which would still be to suppose that the body itself is without an inside and without a ‘self’. Rather a human body is there when, between the seeing and the visible, between the touching and the touched. . . there occurs a sort of criss-crossing, when the spark of the sensitive-sensible catches on.”⁵⁶

Therefore we must see that Merleau-Ponty is pointing to an original phenomenon of unity in the body itself, of itself with itself. The body is visible for itself because it sees itself, tangible for itself because it touches itself, etc. We can conclude with Merleau-Ponty that it thus knows what sensible being is *in general* because it is itself a sensible being that is sensitive to itself. My body is a perceiving perceptible; it must thus be conceived of as the actualization of a possibility which is inherent in the being of the world.

This leads us to see that the body must be conceived of as an exemplar of sensible reality—it is only because of and through the body’s experience of itself as touching and touched that it can be introduced into the dimension or realm of tangible reality. The body is a perceptible reality which perceives itself so it can open itself to everything which is similar to it. By the same activity too the perceiving body constitutes the world into a field which has its own identity—tactile, visual, etc. “The perceiving body is a wordly reality which at the same time transforms the things into a world. . . they appear to the body themselves.”⁵⁷ I is an exemplary sensible in short because “it offers to him who inhabits it the wherewithall to feel everything that resembles it outside, in such a way that, caught up in the fabric of the things, it draws it wholly to itself.”⁵⁸ It is a being that in seeing itself is introduced

⁵⁶ *The Primacy of Perception*, p. 162.

⁵⁷ KWANT, REMY, *From Phenomenology to Metaphysics*, p. 55.

⁵⁸ *Le Visible et l’invisible*, p. 178.

to the visible not as a particular configuration but as the exemplar, the dimension of the visible, and it is this being that Merleau-Ponty names with the term 'flesh'. This flesh is neither matter nor mind but something like the notion of an "element" in the sense of a general thing which is between the mind and the matter of reality.

There is an 'interiority' of the body which "no more precedes the material arrangement of the human body than it results from it." He said that if our eyes could see no part of our own body, or if we had only lateral vision and could not blend the field of our two eyes, or our hands could only touch other things, while prevented from touching our own body, the "body would not reflect itself"; it would not be "really flesh"; "there would be no humanity."⁵⁹

Merleau-Ponty frequently returned to the description of the chiasma. Certain perceptibles, he said, "have not only hidden faces but an 'other side', a "perceiving side": "all depends, in short upon the fact that it is the lot of living bodies to close in upon the world and becomes seeing, touching bodies which (since we could not possibly touch or see without being capable of touching or seeing ourselves) are *a fortiori* perceptible to themselves."⁶⁰

These two 'sides' of our body, the body as sensible and the body as sensing are what "we formerly called objective body and phenomenal body."⁶¹ The chiasma of the two within man is possible because there is chiasma between man and world—better, an underlying unity between the two—because they are both "flesh": "He who sees can only possess the visible if he is possessed by it, if he is *of it*." In the margin of his manuscript he here added that the original presence is the flesh.⁶² Let us see how he thought through to this notion of flesh.

He spoke of the objective and phenomenal body as being two "leaves" of our body. The leaf which is "thing among things" belongs to the order of objects; the leaf which senses to that of subject.⁶³ The body's double belonging to the order of "object" and of "subject" reveals to us relations very unexpected between the two orders. If the body has this double reference, it can not be by an incomprehensible chance. It teaches us that each order calls for the other.⁶⁴ Merleau-Ponty repeated that the body is "of it"—that it belongs to the visible, to things, that "it is detached on them, and to that extent detached from them."⁶⁵ This is important and is repeated a few pages

⁵⁹ *The Primacy of Perception*, p. 613.

⁶⁰ *Signs*, p. 16.

⁶¹ *Le Visible et l'Invisible*, p. 180.

⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 177-178.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 180.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

later, where he said that *I am* this very turning back of the visible on itself. It is this which constitutes man (and animals) as opposed to a mere thing: "...there is a relation to itself of the visible which traverses and constitutes me as seeing, this circle which I do not make, which makes me, this rolling up of the visible on the visible, may traverse and animate other bodies as well as mine."⁶⁶ "In learning that my body is a perceiving thing, that it is able to be stimulated—it, and not just my "consciousness"—I prepared myself for understanding that there are other *animalia* and possibly other men."⁶⁷ The body may touch and see things only because it is "of their family, itself visible and tangible. It uses its being as a means of participating in their. Each of the two is archetype for the other. The body belongs to the order of things as the world is universal flesh."⁶⁸

Merleau-Ponty's thought moved on to reject the metaphor of "leaves". In that view, only one of the body's leaves (the sensible) would be one with the rest of the world. The body does not have "two leaves or levels, it is fundamentally neither only thing seen or only seer, it is Visibility now wandering and now gathered together."⁶⁹ "The body sensed and the body sensing" are better compared to "the front and back side" of a garment or sheet of paper than to leaves or levels, which latter comparison still seems to juxtapose. Rather, the two "coexist in the living, upright body."⁷⁰ Since Merleau-Ponty had established such an interlacing of phenomenal body and world, he finally asked: "Where place the boundary of body and world, since the world is flesh?"⁷¹ What did he mean when he said the world is flesh? What did he mean by this word "flesh", which we have found him using and linking with the chiasma of man and world? His later works introduced reversibility (chiasma) into every sphere, and it was sooner or later accounted for by the unity of "flesh". One of the clearest presentation of "flesh" is in *Le Visible et l'invisible*, where he elaborated the chiasma. He said that the reversibility of touching and touched, seeing and seen, has taught us that "there is vision, there is touching, when a certain visible, a certain tangible, is turned back on all the visible, all the tangible, of which it is part, or when suddenly it finds itself *surrounded* by them, or when, between it and them, and by their commerce is formed a Visibility, a Tangible-in-itself, which belongs properly neither to the body as fact nor to the world as fact. This "generality of the Sensible-in-itself, this inborn anonymity of Myself" is what Merleau-Ponty termed flesh.⁷² There is no name in

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 185.

⁶⁷ *Signs*, p. 168.

⁶⁸ *Le Visible et l'invisible*, p. 181.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 183.

traditional philosophy for this, he added: "Flesh is not matter, in the sense of particles of being which could be added or continued to form beings. . . neither is it 'psychic' material. . . In a general fashion, it is not fact, nor sum of "material" or "spiritual" facts. . . Flesh is not matter, nor mind, nor substance. To designate it, one must use the old term "element", in the sense it was used to speak of water, air, earth, and fire, that is, in the sense of a *general thing*, half way between a spatio-temporal individual and the idea, a sort of incarnate principle which signifies a style of being everywhere a piece of it is found. Flesh is in this sense an "element" of Being.⁷³ Flesh is "not a fact or sum of facts, and yet it adheres to *place* and *time*." In fact it inaugurates place and time, makes possible and even demands facticity. Merleau-Ponty added a point that may indicate a change in his thinking: it is flesh which makes things have a meaning.⁷⁴ Did this mean that man was no longer the ultimate source of meaning for him, as he was in the earlier works? Flesh is the "formative milieu of object and subject."⁷⁵ We must think about it, "not starting from substances, body and mind, for then it would be the union of contradictories, but we must think of it, as we said, as element, concrete emblem of a manner of general being."⁷⁶ Shortly after beginning his reflection on perception and on the chiasma and flesh which makes it possible, he said that the "mystery" of visibility is "indeed a matter of a paradox of Being, not of a paradox of Man."⁷⁷ Thus again he seemed to go beyond man, toward Being, as an "explanation."

Having discovered with man a chiasma of sensing and sensed, Merleau-Ponty felt that this chiasma is what *constitutes* the phenomenal body. And the very reason the perceiving body *can* perceive things is because both the body and things are made of the same element of Being, a generality called "flesh". The living body is this visible turned back on itself—hence, in a sense, there is a kind of reflecting, as well as generality, even on the perceptual level.

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⁷³ *Ibid.*, pp. 183-184.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 193-194.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 180.