

The concept of 'body schema' in Merleau-Ponty's account of embodied subjectivity¹

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Our idea of the body codetermines our idea of subjectivity

In the second book of his *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy* (1989), Edmund Husserl introduced a perspective on our body that had the potential to bring an entirely new view on subjectivity. Distinguishing 'one's body' ('Leib'), a body intertwined with a 'soul', from mere physical bodies ('Körper'), Husserl demonstrated the functional characteristics of the living body that cannot be grasped exclusively from a third-person perspective (ibid.: pp. 152–169). Of course, our body is part of the objective world, 'integrated into the causal nexus of material nature' (ibid.: p. 167), and linked to other objects by causal, physico-chemical relationships. Yet, apart from all the objective properties it shares with other objects, our body possesses a complex of experience-related values that an external object can never have: it is the 'zero point of orientation' (ibid.: p. 165f.) for the perception of objects; it is a 'bearer of localised sensations' (ibid.: p. 162); and I can 'freely' or 'spontaneously' move it (ibid.: p. 168), which makes it the 'organ' and the 'means for all my perception' (ibid.: p. 167).

By opening up this new 'phenomenological' perspective on the body, Husserl took a step that founded a twentieth century tradition of interpreting the subject's body that breaks with a long and well-rooted European tradition of understanding subjectivity. Ever since Descartes defined our body as a 'res extensa', a pure material extension foreign to the essence of subjectivity (Descartes 2008: Second meditation), Western culture has understood the body as essentially irrelevant for subjective processes. In other words, even if we accept that our body factually limits our subjective experience in some way, we do not usually understand it as something defining its very nature. (On the other hand, we certainly cannot give a sufficient account of what we experience as subjectivity by simply reducing it to a third-person, objectivistic explanation.) Inversely, a transformation of the idea of our body, particularly as introduced in some of Husserl's

descriptions, also requires a transformation of the definition of the subject – ‘mind’ or ‘consciousness’. If my body is no longer an object among other objects, a machine inexplicably connected to me, but rather the ‘vehicle’, ‘agent’ or ‘fulcrum’ of my existence, as Merleau-Ponty wrote (2012: p. 84, 1968: p. 171, 1964c: p. 229), then the essence of my subjectivity is linked to the way I rely on my body and to the possibility of how I can eventually transform it.

In Husserl, the possibility of such a reversal of our idea of subjectivity based on a reconsideration of the role of the body is without doubt present. Contemporary commentators claim, for example, that Husserl’s phenomenological notion of embodied experience offers an alternative to mind-body dualism (Behnke 1996, 2011), or that his interpretation of embodiment ultimately leads us to consider the subjectivity as a fundamentally historical and social phenomenon (in a Merleau-Pontyan context, cf. e.g. Zahavi 2002). Merleau-Ponty himself, however, did not have at his disposal the vast corpus of Husserl’s posthumously published research manuscripts on which contemporary commentators usually rely. Based principally on the works published during Husserl’s lifetime, the second book of *Ideas* (Husserl 1989), and several late fragments (Husserl 2002; cf. Van Breda 1962), Merleau-Ponty perceived Husserl’s innovative account of the lived body as not quite in harmony with the usual Husserlian conceptual framework based on the idea of correlation (cf. e.g. Merleau-Ponty 1970: p. 82, 2000b: pp. 303f.).

For indeed, from the intellectual perspective for which every possible phenomenon has to be considered as ‘constituted’ in the consciousness, that is, as ‘correlated’ to the meaning-giving ‘acts’ of the consciousness, the lived body is endowed with ‘abnormal’ qualities (Husserl 1989: pp. 63ff., 1973: p. 280). As Husserl writes, in some of the oft-quoted passages from his *Ideas*: ‘... it is a remarkably imperfectly constituted thing’ (Husserl 1989: p. 167). The obvious reason for this is that, as an object of consciousness, the body simultaneously seems to contribute to the way in which consciousness relates to objects. Consequently, but no less paradoxically, the unity of the body is described by Husserl as the unity of co-apprehension of the subjective and objective dimensions, and therefore a ‘double unity’ (or a ‘two-fold unity’, ‘Doppeleinheit’; Husserl 1989: p. 170), a ‘sensing thing’, a ‘subjective object’ (Husserl 1989: p. 159, 1971: p. 124; quoted in Merleau-Ponty 1964b: p. 166). (For Merleau-Ponty’s explicit interpretation of the second book of Husserl’s *Ideas*, cf. in particular Merleau-Ponty 1964b: pp. 166ff., 1995: pp. 104–113, 2000c)

Merleau-Ponty soon took notice of Husserl’s difficulties with the phenomenon of the body and wanted no longer to confront them as paradoxes, obstacles or exceptions, but to accept them as a point of departure for the development of a new philosophical perspective (cf. e.g. Merleau-Ponty 1996: p. 380). From this perspective, he elaborated their description

with the help of Gestalt psychology, psychopathology, physiology and psychoanalysis. Merleau-Ponty's early analyses of the pathology of perception thus already show, for example, that the unity of the body is not given as a system of correlation of certain subjective sensations to certain objective qualities (Husserl's 'double unity'), but rather that the body-object shows itself as a difference or deviation from the norm established by the body-subject, the performer of perceptual intentions which establishes the standards of interaction with the environment. On the other hand, the body-subject does not establish these standards by itself and as if from outside of the world, but precisely based on the way in which it organises its relationship with the realities *within* the world, thanks to the body and symbolic systems functionally analogical to it. The body-object and the body-subject are therefore not irreducible phenomenological and ontological 'strata' of the body, which would mutually exclude each other, as in Husserl. Rather, both these dimensions have to be understood as abstracted from the original unity of a subject always already intentionally *related to* the world, but also *situated within* it.

The question remains, however, how the original unity of the body, which appears as 'pre-subjective' and 'pre-objective', can be positively grasped and formulated. We need a systematic conceptual framework, different from Husserlian correlationism, in which the circularity in the body would not appear as a paradox – where it would be accepted as an original phenomenon, and thus serve as a starting point for a new, non-Cartesian interpretation of subjectivity. Although we can find elements for such a solution in Merleau-Ponty's early work (1963, 2012), he himself later saw much of it as insufficient, precisely because it did not provide such a new framework and only showed that neither of the two reductionist positions is valid by itself. In the following, we will see how the notion of body schema later served for Merleau-Ponty as one of the major elements for the conceptual solution of the problem we have just outlined.

The circularity between the experiencing and the experienced

First, let us more precisely describe how an embodied subject relates to its surrounding world. Such exemplary phenomena as spatial orientation, visual depth or movement attest to an intrinsic mutual reference between a living body and its environment. These phenomena are never exclusively 'subjective' representations or 'objective' givens. Based on examples taken from Max Wertheimer's experiments (Wertheimer 1912), Merleau-Ponty showed, for example, that an 'objectively' or 'subjectively' identical situation can be perceived both as 'oblique' or 'vertical', depending on how the subject concretely 'appropriates' the surrounding space (cf. Merleau-Ponty 2011: pp. 41–54, cf. 2012: pp. 253–265). That is, our sense of

'verticality' is closely linked to, and dependent on, what we accomplish in such a 'vertical' space and how it phenomenally reacts to our actions (e.g. when we walk upright, the ground moves horizontally). The perception of orientation such as 'verticality' is thus a norm for some activity, a temporary 'standard' open to transformations depending on how this activity can be concretely realised.

Merleau-Ponty's aim was to generalise these findings. In these and similar cases, a subject experiences *in the world* something that is fundamentally linked to his/her attitudes, possibilities, capacities and abilities; and vice versa, the subject has only these powers at his/her disposal inasmuch as the appropriate surroundings call out for them. When I walk, for example, and I perceive the space between trees as a void, the perceptual meaning I experience is linked to my ability to move and thereby to control the way in which my spatial environment phenomenally transforms. A subject conceived as a contemplating conscience, a pure synthesising activity or the 'faculty of judging' (Descartes 2008: p. 23) would lack any reasonable resource permitting it to differentiate between an 'obstacle' and 'walkable space', for both phenomena would be 'objects' synthesised from aleatory bits of 'sensory givens' according to a neutral a priori logic. In reality, however, a landscape is a passable space that invites me to invest my capacities to change my position; a face is the site of gestures of which I myself am capable and the meaning of which I can situate into my own emotional and cognitive world. When they are turned upside down, for example, a transcendental consciousness considers them only as identical objects from a different perspective, whereas, in fact, they are no longer the sites for my powers to be employed and therefore become completely different realities, which are foreign and unrecognisable for me.

The perceptual experience in general thus contradicts our natural belief that the objects we perceive exist, for us, independently of whether we experience them and which of our powers they invite us to invest in them. Merleau-Ponty showed that the meaning of the perceptual world is given to us as dynamic mutual referring of a subject-related perspective, attitude, or activity and object-related availability for that perspective or attitude. Although we cannot develop this question more in detail here, Merleau-Ponty also believed that this description of perception requires a radical transformation of our idea of understanding or intelligence in general and that correspondingly, the role of language and all symbolic systems has to be understood as analogical to the role our body has in the perceptual experience as the agent of a particular 'grasping' (Merleau-Ponty claims, for example, that the language 'is a second body'; 1995: p. 273).

The subject of circular relationship with the world: the living body as body schema

When Merleau-Ponty attempted to revise his definition of the embodied subject in his 1953 lectures (2011) so he could fully account for the circularity in the experience which we have just described, he took as a point of departure the notion of 'body schema' originally developed by neurologists (Merleau-Ponty's primary sources are Head 1920; Head and Holmes 1911–1912; Lhermitte 1939; Schilder 1923, 1950). According to Head's seminal definition, the body schema is a preconscious 'standard against which all subsequent changes of posture are measured' (Head and Holmes 1911–1912: p. 187; quoted in Schilder 1950: p. 12; cf. Gallagher 2005a: p. 19; cf. Merleau-Ponty 2011: pp. 138f., 141). Based mainly on the definitions of Head and Schilder, Merleau-Ponty understood the body schema as a practical intuitive diagram of one's relationships with the world, a 'register' where all of one's attitudes and actions are 'noted', and which therefore provides the reference norm in contrast to which one perceives something as specifically spatially and temporally related to one's body and to its activities (Merleau-Ponty 1970: p. 7, cf. 1995: pp. 270ff., 2011: pp. 126ff., 2012: pp. 100ff.).

In 1953, Merleau-Ponty develops his position from *Phenomenology of Perception* (2012), where he already studied the concept of body schema and rejected its early 'associationistic' and later 'formalist' interpretations, which attempted to conceive it as the result of an empirical accumulation or as an a priori form (Merleau-Ponty 2012: pp. 100–105). On the one hand, such disturbances of one's relationship with the body as autotopagnosia (in which a subject has lost the capacity to grasp conceptually some parts of his/her own body, but has maintained practical access to it) shows that the body schema is not a set of ideas or representations of consciousness, a mental entity (Merleau-Ponty 2011: p. 139; in contemporary literature, cf. e.g. Paillard 1999). On the other hand, the body schema is not a body-object either, a physical entity, as we can see in the example of certain pathological illusions, such as the amputee's 'phantom limb'. In these cases, the 'overall practical activity' continues following the original body schema, in spite of the fact that the subject has lost the objective physical part on which the activity needs to be based (Merleau-Ponty 2011: pp. 137–140, cf. 2012: pp. 78–91; in contemporary literature, cf. in particular Gallagher 2005a: pp. 86–107).

The body schema has to be more specifically defined as a preliminary 'attitude', 'privileged position' or 'point of departure' that we need to have at our disposal while confronting a particular situation in the world and the objects in it (Merleau-Ponty 2011: pp. 133, 138f.). Due to the necessary mutual implication between the perceived phenomenon and the body as the point of departure for an action and the background for a

perception, our position and attitude must be continually readjusted according to what we intend to perceive and how precisely this intention is fulfilled or not by our environment. As a preliminarily established structure, the body schema is therefore continually transformed and ‘reanimated’ via movement, differentiated and dedifferentiated. The world in front of us acquires a different level of structuration depending on our relative (in)ability to adopt an appropriate position, posture or to carry out an appropriate movement. In sleep or at rest, for example, when we are not facing any practical situation to deal with, the body schema loses its differentiation and becomes less structured (cf. Merleau-Ponty 1970: p. 9, 2010: pp. 138ff., 2011: pp. 160–165). In such situations, correlatively to the lowered level of articulation of our body schema, the differences between, for example, left and right or above and below become vaguer. Similarly, the ‘compensatory’ movements in patients with apraxia can be interpreted as attempts to bring back the pathologically weakened articulation of their body schema (Merleau-Ponty 2011: pp. 139–141). In contrast to these cases where the articulation of the body schema is weakened, situations requiring our active participation demand a particular position, posture or movement of the body, which in turn contributes to their finer and differentiated perception.

These above descriptions of the body schema require us to change our understanding of the relationships between our ‘practical’ body (the body as a departure point and referential norm for our actions and perceptions in the world) and the body-object (the body as the target of our actions and perceptions). The body as ‘schema’, that is as a dynamic norm and agent of perception, has itself the capacity to ‘sediment’, or acquire the function or the value of a body-object (Merleau-Ponty used the expression ‘to sediment’ repeatedly in this context, cf. e.g. 2011: p. 148). Based on his interpretation of Schilder (1950), Merleau-Ponty asserted that the visual layer of the body schema – the image we have of our own body from the exterior – results from a fixation or objectification of our practical-motor body schema (Merleau-Ponty 2011: p. 148; in the more recent literature, this relationship is described between ‘body-image’ and ‘body-schema’, cf. the following section of this chapter). The same idea is shown negatively by the fact that a subject dealing with apraxia still has access to his body as an object of perception, speech and gestural pointing, but no longer as a point of departure for an action (cf. the well-known case of patient Schneider, Gelb and Goldstein 1920; Merleau-Ponty 2011: pp. 139ff., 2012: pp. 139ff.; for a contemporary description, cf. e.g. Paillard 1999); this means that, in apraxia, the sedimented, objectified structure remains, while the set of practical functions that helped to build it is damaged and inaccessible.

If the body-object were one of the fundamentals of our practical body, such relative dependencies and disconnections, as seen for example in apraxia and autotopoagnosia, would be incomprehensible and factually

impossible. Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of the body schema thus excluded the widely spread idea that the body as performer of our intentions presupposes the body-object as one of its preliminary components or layers. In Merleau-Ponty's understanding, this thesis is valid on the epistemological level, as we have seen in the examples of our perception of the body, but also on the ontological level, for the very idea of the ontological dimension of objects must be traced back to the context of the constitution of the object in our (bodily) experience (cf. Merleau-Ponty 1995: pp. 104–113; Merleau-Ponty 2000: pp. 215–234).

Despite this partial clarification in the 1953 lectures, the difference and exact relationship between the practical 'infrastructure' and the objectified 'superstructure' of the body remained an open question for Merleau-Ponty. He found that the objectified body must be 'connected' to the practical, but also that it acquires a 'relative independence' (cf. Merleau-Ponty 2011: p. 157). Inversely, we must be able to maintain the objectified superstructure in contact with the practical infrastructure, or it becomes, as in some pathologies, a mere 'mask' of the original bodily functions, their simplified and reduced imitation (cf. Merleau-Ponty 2011: pp. 148, 157f.). Merleau-Ponty eventually asserted even more strongly that whatever is built upon the practical infrastructures continually re-established on the level of the body schema, including symbolic systems such as language, 'would collapse if ever the body ceases to prompt their operation and install them in the world and our life' (Merleau-Ponty 1970: p. 9).

Despite its somewhat open-ended character, Merleau-Ponty's 1953 interpretation of the body schema sheds considerable light on the subject-object paradox we have seen with Husserl: between the body-performer or the dynamic reference level for the experience and the body-object, there is neither parallelism or one-directional determinism, but dynamic circular referring which, moreover, results in an asymmetric relationship, in which the body-performer 'reanimates' our relationships with the world by differentiation, whereas the objectified superstructures based on it enable to fix these relationships by 'sedimentation' and thereby make them resistant to change. Merleau-Ponty presents here an elaborated systematic interpretation of the relationship between the body-performer and the body-object, a relationship which still seems to be far from clarified even in the contemporary discussions in neurology, cognitive science and their philosophical interpretation. We will see this point in more detail in the following section.

The originality of Merleau-Ponty from the contemporary perspective

Contemporary scholars dealing with embodiment underline that it is necessary to clearly distinguish 'body image' and 'body schema' (Gallagher

1986, 1995, 2005a: pp. 17–40, 2005b; Gallagher and Cole 1995: pp. 369ff.; Gallagher and Zahavi 2008: pp. 145f.; Paillard 1999: p. 197). Gallagher pointed out ‘a long tradition of ambiguous terminological usage’ of body image and body schema in many disciplines, in particular in neurology and its philosophical interpretations (Gallagher and Cole 1995: p. 370; cf. Gallagher 1986). With respect to this difference, ‘body image’ has recently been defined as ‘a conscious idea or mental representation that one has of one’s own body’; an experience of one’s body as one’s ‘intentional object’, which can acquire several forms, such as percept, concept or affect (Gallagher 2005a: p. 25). In contrast to this, ‘body schema’ has been defined a set of ‘various neural motor programs command[ing] muscle groups’ and remaining ‘below the threshold of my awareness and outside of my personal control’ (Gallagher and Cole 1995: pp. 369, 373); or as ‘a system of sensory-motor capacities that function without awareness or the necessity of perceptual monitoring’ (Gallagher 2005a: p. 24; with an almost identical definition in Gallagher 2009: p. 118).

The difference between body image and body schema was also implicitly addressed by Merleau-Ponty, who was never prone to the terminological and conceptual confusion criticised by Gallagher and other contemporary authors. Although several of Merleau-Ponty’s neurological sources *did not* clearly maintain this difference (Lhermitte 1939; Schilder 1950), throughout both *Phenomenology of Perception* (2012) and his 1953 lectures (2011), Merleau-Ponty interpreted Head’s and Schilder’s ideas under the heading of the concept of ‘schéma corporel’ precisely in order to distinguish it clearly from an ‘object of knowledge’, image or representation intentionally possessed by the consciousness (Merleau-Ponty 2011: p. 140; cf. Carman 1999: p. 218; Merleau-Ponty 2012: pp. 100ff; translator’s introduction, Merleau-Ponty 2012: p. XLIX; Saint-Aubert 2011: p. 29). For Merleau-Ponty, the body schema is not an idea grasped by our understanding, because it has perceptual character, it is ‘concrete, visible as a drawing’, it provides ‘knowledge without concept, totality without idea’, it ‘does not need interpretation’. On the other hand, the body schema is not mere particular ‘contents of perception’, because it ‘indicates an order’, it ‘indicates the essential’ (Merleau-Ponty 2011: pp. 133f.). As a reference level, or a norm of experience, Merleau-Ponty understands the body schema in contrast to both particular sensory ‘contents’ and general ‘idea’ which can be formulated in language.

The importance of these distinctions becomes more apparent when we open the discussion of the relative phenomenal presence of the body schema and, correlatively, the question of how to situate it in relation to the ontological dimensions of subject and object.

Paillard, for example, recently stated that the schema is ‘registered’ but ‘not perceived’, that it provides a ‘clear localisation without sensory detection’ (1999: pp. 198, 201). Gallagher and Cole (1995) relied on the notion

of 'proprioception', 'proprioceptive awareness' or 'proprioceptive information', which they defined as 'a felt experience of bodily position' consisting in 'subpersonal, physiological information – the result of physical stimuli at certain proprioceptors' (pp. 376f.). The authors also claimed that, to a great degree, 'the body schema functions to control body posture and movement nonconsciously' (p. 385).

Gallagher essentially concentrated on showing that the body schema is not a body image – not an intentional object of explicit consciousness. In a more recent publication (2005a), he explained that the body schema functions in a 'pre-noetic' or 'non-conscious way', although 'there are reciprocal interactions between pre-noetic body schemas and cognitive experiences' (p. 35). In other words, I can become aware of some of aspects of the body schema, although it 'is always something in excess of that of which I can be conscious' (p. 38). Gallagher claimed even more strongly that 'posture and the majority of bodily movements operate in most cases *without the help of bodily awareness*' (p. 28, italics added), the 'awareness' being itself defined *in opposition* to intentional conscious perception, as 'marginal awareness' (p. 27) or 'non-observational self-awareness' (p. 29). This position ultimately leads to a relativisation of the phenomenal presence of the body schema, clearly visible in Gallagher's claim that 'whether and to what degree body awareness is a constant feature of consciousness is [...] a matter of individual differences, and differences in situation [...]' (p. 28).

In contrast to Merleau-Ponty's systematic explanation based on the conceptual ground-figure, norm-deviation pair, these above characteristics seem to have weaker explanatory potential, for they assert that the schema is simultaneously 'felt', 'registered' and given as 'information', but 'non-conscious', 'not sensorily detected' and not (entirely) present to our 'awareness'. The body schema must be clearly situated in relationship to consciousness if we are to understand how it can 'interact' with the body image, or the objectified body, as Gallagher and others claim. In this respect, a relativising or simply negative explanation of the phenomenal status of the body schema is not satisfactory.

Functionally, Paillard and Gallagher (with his collaborators) attempted to articulate the difference between body image and body schema with the help of the opposition between 'knowing what' and 'knowing how', interpreted more precisely as the difference between 'what' (body image) and 'how to use it' (body schema), and 'where' (objective space) and 'how to get there' (practical space) (Paillard 1991; Paillard 1999: pp. 207f.; cf. Ryle 2009); or between 'noetic contents' and 'pre-noetic performance of the body', or 'implicit processes or operations' (Gallagher 2005a: pp. 32, 17; cf. also Strawson 1997). Ontologically, however, these distinctions seem to be interpreted following the opposition between subjective and objective dimensions, and thus without the ontological novelty of Merleau-Ponty, for whom these dimensions must be understood as an indivisible system,

where every pole has some meaning only in reference to the other (a similar criticism is addressed to Gallagher by Saint-Aubert 2013: pp. 44f., 52ff.). With the distinction of body image and body schema, Paillard believed he had met the distinction between the ‘cognitive’ brain and sensorimotor ‘machinery’ (1999: p. 212). Gallagher claimed, in addition to the previously explained relativisation of the phenomenal presence of the body schema, that the prenoetic body-schematic function ‘happens’ as a ‘performance’ or ‘process’ (2005a: pp. 29, 32, 17).

On the one hand thus, Gallagher’s efforts to distinguish between body image and body schema obviously converged with Merleau-Ponty’s, who explicitly claimed that the body schema ‘is not perceived’, that it ‘precedes explicit perception’ (Merleau-Ponty 2011: p. 143). On the other hand, the positive characteristics of the body schema on the phenomenal and ontological level seem different for the two authors. In contrast to Gallagher, Merleau-Ponty (2011) explained that, precisely because the variations in the articulation of the schema systematically arouse variations in the perceived world, the body schema ‘is also a specific structure of the perceived world’ and that the perceived world ‘is rooted’ in it (2011: p. 144).

In other words, the ‘perception and the experience of one’s own body are implicated in each other’ (Merleau-Ponty 2012: p. 132, note 71), one’s body is the ‘unperceived term at the centre of the world toward which every object turns its face’ (Merleau-Ponty 2012: p. 84). The ‘unperceived’ body is ‘a structure of the perceived world’ precisely in as much as it provides the reference level for every particular perception and serves as the ‘background’ of every perceived ‘figure’ of the world. As such, the body schema is not phenomenally opposed to the perceptual contents, it is precisely that part of perceptual contents which serves as a reference level for the phenomenality – it is ‘the limit or degree zero of visibility, the opening of a dimension of the visible’ (Merleau-Ponty 1964a: p. 21). As a ‘specific structure’ of the perceived world providing the reference in contrast to which something appears, the body schema must be therefore understood as something which is *in principle* constantly present in our perceptual experience. For Merleau-Ponty, the body schema is not only a factual, but ‘metaphysical necessity’ (Merleau-Ponty 2012: p. 93), and as such a *systematic* part of our experience of the world, its presence cannot be relativised, as it seems to be by Gallagher (cf. the citations on p. 44, in particular 2005a: pp. 27f.).

Conclusion

The statement that a subject is embodied means, for Merleau-Ponty, that it is open to empirical, historical events and their arbitrary transformations, without nevertheless being only their function. As a concept summarising Merleau-Ponty’s position, the body schema has to be understood as a

preliminarily established reference level, in regard to which all the particular contents of experience make sense in the first place, but which can be re-established if some of these contents require its systematic adjustment. In Merleau-Ponty, the body schema therefore does not have the status of an objective reality and cannot be exhaustively identified with a physical process occurring in the body. Rather, the notion of body schema helps Merleau-Ponty to approach his goal to develop a conceptual framework that would make it possible to dynamically integrate the third-person (objective, external) and first-person (subjective, reflexive) perspectives on the body and on human existence in general (cf. e.g. Merleau-Ponty 2000a: pp. 11–13). This effort has to be understood in contrast to those conceptual frameworks, where it is unclear how these two dimensions can ever have mutual influence on their respective roles and how they can impact on each other.

A comprehensive interpretation of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of the embodied subject in relation to contemporary knowledge certainly requires a more elaborated clarification (for a further commentary on the body schema in Merleau-Ponty and Gallagher, cf. Saint-Aubert 2013: pp. 43–59). The originality of Merleau-Ponty's approach, however, can already be seen in the fact that he understood the 'image' or 'perception' (be it of one's own body) and its 'background' provided by our body 'schema' *as an indivisible dynamic system of the establishment and shifting of norms and deviations from them*, and not primarily as an opposition between subjective 'mind' and objective 'machinery' or 'process'. Merleau-Ponty's different understanding of the phenomenality of the body schema thus also entailed a different ontological conception of the subject.

According to Merleau-Ponty, the body-agent carries us to (or maintains us at, or prevents us from getting to) a particular point in space and time and thereby establishes a perspective, from where we experience something as given with such and such characteristics. More importantly, the body-agent does it *principally from within* the world and could not do it from outside or without being part of it: only as situated *inside* the world and being *part of it* – that is, as being perceptible as an object – can the body-subject take a stand, adopt an attitude from which it can experience something under a particular perspective. The fact that we are, as subject-bodies, part of the world of objects thus has, for Merleau-Ponty, a transcendental value – that is, it is not merely accidental, or limiting and negative characteristics, but it is constitutive of subjectivity.

'My body', claims Merleau-Ponty, 'sees only because it is a part of the visible in which it opens forth', it 'would not be able to see if it were not visible, because it would lack a point of view' (Merleau-Ponty 1968: pp. 153f., 1995: p. 286). Here, Merleau-Ponty does not want to say that we need the 'machinery' of the eye in order to see. He wants to say that what a subject experiences mirrors the subject's standing among other

beings, which is not possible without the subject being simultaneously perceptible as an 'object', for then he would not have any standing. The body schema is precisely a summary and the demarcation of a subject's various standpoints – visual, haptic, motor – in regard to the beings that surround him.

Merleau-Ponty thus convincingly showed that, in order to clarify that and how we experience 'thanks' to our body and as 'embodied' subjects, it is not enough to scrutinise our body as an object. Rather, we must show how this body-object serves as a reference for some experience.

Note

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