"phenomenological hermeneutics of science" maintain the disciplinary gap between philosophy and the practice of science. They position the philosopher into the limited role of external commentator on the doings of experiments and qualitative projects. Here, in turn, the physical scientists may not be sufficiently challenged to step outside of their metaphysical comfort zone of materialism. Merleau-Ponty would not have endorsed an academically departmentalized approach to the relation between philosophy and the practice of science. Moreover, his style of phenomenology entreats researchers to admit that we are all already in the position of the phenomenological philosopher as much as we are doing science. As he writes with regard to the social sciences: "Philosophy is not a particular body of knowledge; it is the vigilance which does not let us forget the source of all knowledge" (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 110). The source of all knowledge, Merleau-Ponty refers to here is, of course, the immediacy of directly lived experience that is the ground of all fields of knowledge. Merleau-Ponty's intra-ontology is asking for an interdisciplinarity relationship between philosophy and the practice of science that is of a much more intimate order. Understanding this new ontology is hard enough, but how to exactly methodologically practice this new vision of science is the hard challenge ahead of us.

« 12 » In conclusion, a harder problem may, rather, be the pedagogical one. If philosophy is implicit to all bodies of knowledge and therefore not a self-contained discipline, then the approach Merleau-Ponty and Bitbol are taking is to further dissemble the disciplinary boundaries between the role of the philosopher and that of the actively engaged scientist. The concrete implication of this would be to offer a wider philosophical training to scientists and to, in turn, further invite philosophers to widen the scope of their research to include, beyond textual exegesis, an applied practice based on a phenomenologically renewed empiricism. So, how exactly should we envision the concrete pedagogical process for such future scientist/philosophers – otherwise called neurophenomenologists? What would be the appropriate curriculum and how could we institutionalize such training programs in the currently structured academic world? 03

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# Experiential Metaphysics and Merleau-Ponty's Intra-Ontology

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**> Abstract** • A summary of the major metaphysical positions reveals them to be variable enough that they do not deny experience to the researcher. Further, Merleau-Ponty's intra-ontology and related terms are fleshed out.

## Introduction

« 1 » As is usual in his work, Michel Bitbol has produced a concise essay with sharp insights that cut through layers of accumulated philosophic assumptions to take a fresh look at the sources of one of the major philosophical questions of the ages – the ontological source(s) of the mind-body problem. Bitbol's unique background in quantum theory, Buddhist meditational practice, and phenomenology provide him with a tripartite vision with which to interrogate the traditional metaphysical positions employed in Western philosophy. After a glance through these major paradigms and their dismissal, Bitbol proposes his own combination of Francisco Varela's *neurophenomenology* and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *intra-ontology* that he indicates could lead to dynamic knowledge based in subjective transformation rather than more accumulation of passive objective analysis.

« 2 » I feel his dismissals of the major metaphysical viewpoints as themselves based in objective analysis while disregarding experience is somewhat hasty. Further, I am unsatisfied with his necessarily brief discussion of intra-ontology, which touches so lightly on its subject that many readers will be confused. As I result, I did further research on the topic. With this in mind, I propose these questions for investigative guidelines:

## Metaphysics

« 3 » Bitbol reviews the traditional metaphysical positions, seeing no help for the mind-body problem in the monism of

either *idealism* or *materialism* since each speaks for only half of the issue. *Dualism* only succeeds in keeping mind and matter separate.

« 4 » His further review is an effective rhetorical device, but perhaps a bit experientially reductive. He next quickly touches on *neutral monism* but does not note that this position has been expounded in various articulations from Baruch Spinoza to C. D. Broad, William James to Bertrand Russell, etc. He sees the position as fundamentally objective (a "view from nowhere") and physicalist, but the term "neutral" has also been used to mean unknown or unknowable. In this latter sense, experience has been indicated as the only way this neutral essence can be fully "known." Alan Wallace (2006), for example, has attempted to equate the Buddhist void consciousness with the quantum void or vacuum, going beyond the mind-world schism. David Brubaker (2009) even attempts to link Merleau-Ponty with Buddhist scholarship in discussing the neutral nature of *nothingness*. However, as Bitbol notes, there is no indication of the dynamism of Max Velmans or the reversibility of Merleau-Ponty.

« 5 » Velmans's (2008) postulate of *reflexive monism* is based in dynamism, as Bitbol notes, but sees as still carrying vestiges of dualism. It is an example of a "hybrid" in his Klein bottle thought experiment. Velmans would likely respond that his notion was more flexible than that, even to the point that it can function as neurophenomenology.

« 6 » The double take of Bitbol's on Varela's radical neurophenomenology (§47) can be applied equally well to Whiteheadian *panexperientialism*. Bitbol claims, however, that panexperientialism is "embedded within the standard concept of nature and just make[s] room for experience as if it were some additional ingredient of it" (§27). This is certainly not the case for the panexperientialism of Whiteheadian metaphysics – the unfolding reality *process* advances as momentary occasions of experience, which then "perish" and become part of the objective world. Alfred North Whitehead (1978: 167) succinctly states that "apart from the experiences of subjects there is nothing, nothing, nothing, bare nothingness."

« 7 » These considerations take me to the following question: Are the metaphysical positions of *neutral monism*, *reflexive monism*, or *panexperientialism* more derived from objective analysis (i.e., materialism) than experiential exploration (i.e., phenomenology)? Q1

## Intra-ontology

« 8 » I first understood Bitbol's use of Merleau-Ponty's concept of intra-ontology to be just another way to express the idea of insight learning, that is, inner transformative experiential understanding over mere impartial, objective measurement or data analysis, but the implication of the researcher in the research goes much deeper than that. Bitbol indicates this, but it took this reader further investigation to understand. What is intra-ontology?

« 9 » The short and somewhat messy answer is that intra-ontology follows from what is commonly known as the "observer effect" in quantum physics – i.e., that the act of observation changes the phenomenon observed, such that it is impossible to speak of a phenomenon without simultaneously referring back to an observer. The prefix "intra-" denotes that we are embedded in and enveloped by the world we are studying in such a way that our knowledge is finite in comparison to the world's infinitude. The longer answer is below in two parts.

« 10 » To understand the basic idea of intra-ontology, it helps to understand some related ideas, namely: *radical reflection*, *flesh*, and *chiasm*. These ideas will be contrasted with the notions of "high-flying thought" and belief in an objective world.

« 11 » Merleau-Ponty first proposes the method of intra-ontology in his unfinished work *The Visible and the Invisible* (1968). However, a similar nascent concept already appears in his earlier work *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962). In that work, Merleau-Ponty proposes the method of "radical reflection" as an alternative to the "high-flying thought" (*la pensée de survol*), which Merleau-Ponty claims has been practiced by the majority of philosophers before him. The essential feature of high-flying thought is the belief in an objective world that exists independently from its relation to an observer and whose characteristics remain the same independently of that relationship.

« 12 » In contrast to the high-flying thought of objectivism, "radical reflection is conscious of its own dependence on an unreflected life that is its initial, constant, and final situation" (Merleau-Ponty 1962: xxiii). By doing a "phenomenology of phenomenology," radical reflection concludes that previous philosophical attempts to "bracket" or suspend belief in the existence of the world are always incomplete because they are premised on a fundamental affirmation that there is something to doubt – namely, the phenomenal world as it appears to me throughout everyday existence. The world marks the "horizon of horizons" within which our existence resides. From this, two consequences follow: first, we are always in some relation to the world, such that it cannot be doubted; second, the world's existence exceeds and envelops our own existence, such that no phenomenon is ever fully present to us all at once. For Merleau-Ponty, this perspectival withdrawal of phenomena is yet indicative of their presence. Existing within the world and worldly things being never present to us all at once entails that we are never fully present to ourselves all at once. There are parts of us that exceed their appearance to our conscious awareness – this is the mark of our belonging to a reality beyond visible phenomena, as Merleau-Ponty described it.

« 13 » *Radical reflection* begins from the admission that the classical attempt of thought to grasp its own roots and close itself inside of a hermetically sealed sphere of immanence in which only apodictic truths can present themselves necessarily fails. We can neither stand outside of the world to make it an object of our perception, nor can we stand outside of ourselves.

« 14 » With Merleau-Ponty's notion of reversibility of the *flesh*, we have to wonder about our assumptions to do with the body's separation from the world. We will need to relate it to the concept of *chiasm*. Now, chiasm is a rhetorical structure in which two elements (say, A and B) are repeated in such a way that, in the repetition, the first element is swapped with the second element: AB becomes BA. A chiasm establishes something like an inverted mirror relationship between two figures. Merleau-Ponty deploys the notion of chiasm to denote this reversible relationship

between "inner" and "outer" experience, between "perceiver" and "perceived," between "body" and "world."

« 15 » A working note reads: "[…] inside and outside turning about one another" (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 264). The dialectical and chiasmic interplay between perceiver and perceived leads Merleau-Ponty to write that "We might say that we perceive the things themselves, that we are the world that thinks itself – or that the world is at the heart of our flesh" (ibid: 179). The world appears as a mirror of our own existence, and likewise, we mirror the world. We are two mirrors facing each other.

« 16 » Since Merleau-Ponty's radical phenomenology is as much creative discovery as logical investigation, I wonder: What is the purpose of Merleau-Ponty's attempt to *express* the anti-metaphysics that he names an *intra-ontology*? Q2

## Conclusion

« 17 » The body and the world share the same flesh. They each reflect and encroach upon the other in a chiasmic relationship. The boundaries between "inside" and "outside" are blurred – instead, perception gives us an "inside of the outside and an outside of the inside" "turning about one another."

« 18 » We cannot adopt a *high-flying thought* that dissociates perceiver and perceived from each other to consider each independently. The act of perception produces effects in both the perceived thing and the perceiver. We cannot imagine a "subjective" world that exists discretely from an "objective" world; the flesh of the world is simultaneously subjective and objective. Here it may be helpful to recall the notion of double sensation – every moment of my vision is doubled by a vision of myself; everything that I touched is doubled by my being touched. These two aspects of perception never coincide in an absolute identity, but they can never be dissociated from each other, either – they constitute a *two-sided being*, like the verso and recto of a page, a "unity-in-difference."

« 19 » Intra-ontology begins from those premises. I said earlier that the "observer effect" provides a short and messy illustration, and now I hope that it is obvious why I called it *messy*. The idea that the world is "changed" by observation implies that we can speak of a world that exists *before* its appearance to a perceiver, which Merleau-Ponty explicitly rejects. Perception reveals to us that the world certainly pre-existed its appearance to us, but the anteriority of the world is revealed only through its presence to us. Merleau-Ponty's notion of chiasmic flesh adds to the observer effect a mirror relation of perceiver and perceived that cannot be dissociated from each other, because each forms half of a whole.

« 20 » Now that I have finished this brief exegesis, I can understand why Bitbol turned to the four-dimensional image of the Klein bottle. The one image is the same idea that I have attempted to elucidate but much more succinct.

« 21 » Indeed, Bitbol's essay is complete in itself. It makes the strong point that our traditional metaphysical positions are too much embedded in the viewpoint and philosophical method that brought them forth, to wit, objective analysis. Epistemologically speaking, the only knowledge such "high-flying" metaphysical positions can produce is objective, discarnate, and impersonal. Though I suggested that some of these positions may leave openings for transformative experience, Bitbol is quite correct in noting that in philosophy, broadly speaking, this has rarely happened. Merleau-Ponty's radical intra-ontology may be one way to indicate understanding to transform the person understanding.

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