

Introduction

Phenomenology of the thing and phenomenology of the living being

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to stress differences and relationships between two different types of phenomenological description: a *phenomenology of the thing* (founded on the notion of determination and on the ontological priority of extension) and a phenomenology of living being (founded on the notion of interlacement and on the ontological priority of the body and the flesh). The key point is the concept of essence: vague, morphological, inexact in Husserl; a *style of Being* in Merleau-Ponty. The given experience of the flesh is not pre-categorical, preliminary, antecedent (basic experience), but sub-categorical, something that is born from below, at a depth from which the natural families emerge through differentiation (vital experience).

Keywords: phenomenological essence, datum, extension, plena, material a priori, body, flesh, virtuality.

1. *The supremacy of determination*

In philosophy of mind it is ever more customary to speak of embodied cognition, of perception as a sensory-motor competence, of ecological, enactive, non-content-dependant theories (Hutto&Myin 2013, Gallagher 2006, O'Regan&Noë 2001, Noë 2004). This is a matter of perspectives which, for all their different nuances, look in the same direction: the establishment of an integrated and interactive cognitive approach, founded not so much on the static notion of representation as on the dynamic relationship between body (or organism) and environment.

From the phenomenological point of view, such a change entails a shifting of view from unidirectional and static notions (constitution, representation, content, intentionality) to reversible, dynamic and temporal notions (body, flesh, organism, enaction). At a deeper level, the notion of *datum*, together with the still more fundamental one of *determination*, is entering a crisis. Almost all the concepts in phenomenology are being more or less explicitly reconnected to these two fundamental notions. We might think, for example, about the

identity of the object as the synthesis of its appearances; about the noema as object in the *how* of its modes of actuality and of its determinations; about that which is material *a priori*, and upon which well-known characteristics such as colour and extension end up being reciprocally and necessarily based, leading to nonsense. Without the notions of *datum* and *determination*, all phenomenological description would lose its conceptual force. To speak of indeterminate experience would in fact mean, for Husserl, referring to an indistinct, disaggregated and chaotic flux of sensations. Without determination nothing would be manifest; nothing would, indeed, be ‘given’.

Thus, for Husserl, experience is essentially determined experience; identity, or invariance, in the variation. The task of isolating and putting into focus every experiential atom constituted by qualified determinations is that of eidetic reduction. Thus, eidetic reduction restores a certain way of interpreting experience; founded, on the one hand, on the theory of the whole and of parts and, on the other hand, on the primacy of the notion of extension: in order to be experienced, any non-independent part necessitates an extension onto which to spread itself. This is a matter of two presuppositions which generate a fragmented and aspectual experience. The priority of extension in fact enables that separability or frangibility of a whole which the qualitative dimension does not, by its own essence, foresee.

There belongs to the essence of extension the ideal possibility of fragmentation. It is then evident that every fragmentation of the extension fragments the thing itself — i.e., splits it into pieces, each of which once again has the full thingly character, that of material thingness. Conversely, every partition of the thing into things, every fragmentation, as such, of the thing, also fragments the extension of the thing. [...] Every corporeal quality of a thing “fills the spatial body;” the thing spreads itself out in the quality; in every one the thing fills its corporeality (its extension), and the same is true, at the same point in time, for all real qualities. And, naturally, what holds for the totality holds for every piece. In particular, each thing is different, each may have its different spatial extension and fill it qualitatively in a very different manner. (...) It must be said of every kind of quality that it may have its own special ways of filling spatial corporeality, covering it, extending itself over it. Yet it is necessarily a quality that fills. The thing knows no other extensive determinations besides pure corporeality (the primary quality) and the modifying sensuous qualities, the “qualifying” secondary qualities.(...) The thing is what it is in its real properties, but each one, taken separately, is not necessary in the same sense. Each is a ray of the thing’s being. But corporeal extension is not a ray of real being in that same sense; it is not in the same way (properly speaking, “in no way”) a real property. Rather, it is an essential form of all real properties. That is why an empty corporeal space is, *realiter*, nothing; it exists only to the degree that a thing, with its thingly properties, is extended therein. Better:

body is a real determination, but it is a fundamental determination (an essential foundation) and form for all other determinations (Husserl 1989: 33-34).

Conceiving of determination as invariant inevitably entails attributing an ontological primacy to extension. In any case, the priority of extension is easily justifiable: indeed, it is extension which, thanks to the homogeneity which it imposes, allows the thing to appear. On more than one occasion, Husserl refers to the intuitive properties as a patina or veil which covers an extension, thereby offering it qualification. We can take this so far as to say that for Husserl the *plena* are in fact fundamental (otherwise we would not have full phenomena, but only empty phantoms of phenomena), and yet not essential: it is in fact extension, and only extension, that is really essential. If the function of the material *hyle* is to fill an empty intentional structure without which the act would lose its direction, the function of the *plena* is to fill an extension without which the phenomenon would be destined to lose its own outlines, or its own perimeter, thereby making a mockery of its own phenomenal nature.

The phantom as a sensibly qualified bodily surface functions as a basic frame for the object of perception. The bodily surface can exhibit itself in continually diverse appearances, and likewise every partial aspect that comes into relief. (Husserl 2001a: 61)

The thesis of the priority of extension with the goal of constituting the sensible, material thing constitutes the central theme of the argument concerning the mathematisation of the *plena*, expressed by Husserl in *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*. According to this argument, real or possible empirical things are given, initially, in the sensible empirical intuition, only as “forms” of a “material”, of a *plenum* (*Fülle*) that is *sensible* (colour, sound, scent, etc.). For Husserl, the *plena* are in their essence inexact, vague, morphological. Therefore they cannot be geometrised or mathematised, nor therefore measured directly. The reason resides in the fact that, for a *plenum*, no possibility exists for extending towards an ideal limit. In the husserlian argument about the mathematisation of the *plena*, the distinction between direct and indirect is crucial. Indeed, the main (though not only) stratagem which Husserl traces in the method developed by Galileo consists precisely in the latter’s attempt at an indirect mathematisation of the *plena*: the concrete thing, composed of extension and *plena*, turns out in the first place to be split from its *plenum*. Every change in the *plenum* is then interpreted as having its own «counterpart in the realm of shapes» (Husserl 1970: 36). The final step consists in conceiving the order of the *plena* as endowed with a *necessary causal nexus* with the order of the forms, which allows Husserl to say that Galileo thinks «that everything which manifests itself as real through the specific

sense-qualities must have its mathematical index in events belonging to the sphere of shapes – which is, of course, already thought of as idealized – and that there must arise from this the possibility of an *indirect* mathematisation» (*Ibid.*: 66).

2. *Plena and extension*

In this way the Husserl's famous assertion that Galileo «is at once a discovering and a concealing genius [*entdeckender und verdeckender Genius*]» (1970: 51) takes on meaning. He *dis-covers*, in fact, the potentialities inherent in the operation of splitting the thing of experience, considered in its fullness, into one component which is extension and another which is qualified, and in considering the two components (in an artificial manner but one that is absolutely inspired on the operational level) as connected to each other by nexuses of a causal type. However, in doing this, Galileo conceals the effective nature of the thing of experience, a nature which Husserl defines as morphological, vague, fluid, and more adapted to description by the botanist than by the geometer. Indeed the latter refers to his own object of study exactly in the sense in which “one might draw a somewhat finer distinction between sharper and more confused separation or limitation, in the empirically vague sense in which, in ordinary life, one speaks of sharp points and corners as opposed to blunt or ever rounded ones. Plainly the essential forms of all intuitive data are not in principle to be brought under “exact” or “ideal” notions, such as we have in mathematics” (Husserl 2001: 15).

The geometer is not interested in *de facto* sensuously intuitable shapes, as the descriptive natural scientist is. He does not, like the latter, fashion *morphological concepts* of vague configurational types which are directly seized upon on the basis of sensuous intuition and which, in their vagueness, become conceptually and terminologically fixed. The *vagueness* of such concepts, the circumstance that their spheres of application are fluid, does not make them defective; for in the spheres of knowledge where they are used they are absolutely indispensable, or in those spheres they are the only legitimate concepts. If the aim is to give appropriate conceptual expression to the intuitionally given essential characteristics of intuitionally given physical things, that means precisely that the latter must be taken as they are given. And they are given precisely as fluid; and typical essences can become seized upon are exemplified in them only in immediately analytic eidetic intuition. The most perfect geometry and the most perfect practical mastery of it cannot enable the descriptive natural scientists to express (in exact geometrical concepts) what he expresses in such a simple, understandable, and completely appropriate manner by the words “notches”, “scalloped”, “lens-shaped”,

“umbelliform”, and the like-all to them concepts which are *essentially, rather than accidentally, inexact* and *consequently* also non-mathematical (Husserl 1983: 166).

An infinite world, here a world of idealities, is conceived, not as one whose objects become accessible to our knowledge singly, imperfectly, and as it were accidentally, but as one which is attained by a rational, systematically coherent method. In the infinite progression of this method, every object is ultimately attained according to its full being-in-itself [*nach seinem vollen An-sich-sein*] (Husserl 1970: 22).

The mathematisation of the *plena*, and with it the determination and the measurement, are therefore guaranteed by the passage from the approximate-ness of the sensible *plenum* to the exactness and ideality of form: that is, the possibility of variation while keeping to an ideal limit (the graduality of the more or less straight, the more or less level, the more or less circular underlies the possibility of rendering the straight still straighter in a tendency towards the infinite). The fundamental forms (straight lines, triangles, circles) are based on a descriptive feature proper to *extension*: variation in relation to an ideal limit. And besides, it is true that, concretely, real empirical or possible forms give themselves in sensible empirical intuition only as “forms” of a “material”, of a sensible *plenum* (*Fülle*). The stratagem operated by Galileo is the one later codified by Sellars’ conception of the double image (Sellars 1962): it consists in the splitting and emptying and, finally, the declaration of independence and ontological priority of one of the split parts, thereby originating that constructive style which, as some writers (Bergson, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty) have highlighted, characterises a substantial part of the scientific image, distinguishing it from the manifest image. The ideal clothing which the whole object ends up wearing guarantees the possibility of its fragmentation, and in so doing, the physicalisation of ontology.

What we experienced, in prescientific life, as colors, tones, warmth, and weight belonging to things themselves and experienced causally as a body’s radiation of warmth which makes adjacent bodies warm, and the like, indicates in terms of physics, of course, tone-vibrations, warmth-vibrations, i.e., pure events in the world of shapes. This universal indication is taken for granted today as unquestionable (Husserl 1970: 36).

In the end, there is nevertheless an aspect which Husserl shares with the stratagem he himself warns us against. Indeed if we pay attention, we see that “the Galilean stratagem” is in fact composed of two conditions. The first resides in the distinction (or splitting), starting from the fullness of the thing of experience, between extension and *plena*. The second resides in the elevation of one of the two parts (that is, extension) to the status of defining component. As we have seen, it is the second condition which makes possible the indirect idealisa-

tion of the *plena* and, in the final analysis, the mathematisation of the thing of experience. In reality, only the second stratagem, not the first, turns out to be critical for Husserl. In the distinction between extension and *plena*, the first of these is always accorded priority. Extension is the essential characteristic of the material object in contrast to the inessentiality of sensible qualification. It is true that without *plena* the object would be a mere empty something and yet it is this very being an empty something which defines the thing of experience as, precisely, *something*. The primacy accorded to extension becomes confirmed by the notion, central in Husserl, of material *a priori*. The *plena* have need of something *other* in order to become manifest, and this something other is of course extension. For Husserl, all the *plena* spread themselves onto an extension: to cite the best known example of the *a priori* material, a colour which does not spread itself onto an extension is nonsense, but it is similarly nonsense to speak of sounds or tactile qualities which do not spread themselves onto an extension. The *plena* therefore have, as an essential function, that of qualifying an extension which, *per se*, turns out to be something sensibly non-qualified. An especially interesting example of the material *a priori* is that pointed out by Husserl himself between movement and moved body.

it is impossible to form “abstract ideas” to separate the idea, e.g. of a movement from that of a moving body (Husserl 2001: 6).

Movement, in a manner analogous to the *plena*, is for Husserl a dependant part compared to bodily extension; an added component with the capacity to integrate. In the end, and against Husserl’s own intentions, the priority of extension over the qualitative dimension (*plena* and movement as transformation) renders phenomenology a sort of geometry of phenomena in which the material or qualitative component is conceived as residual with respect to the formal, extensive component. The thing contains in itself the possibility of subsisting emptied of any filling component, a possibility which renders Husserl’s phenomenology a sort of “neutral (or “unnatural”) counterpart of that which, on the natural plane, is the model proposed by the physical and mathematical sciences. The underlying idea is that experience is, first and essentially, experience of *things*: material, sensible, immaterial, animate, inanimate things; but invariably *things*. The fundamental characteristic of the notion of thing is having extension as an essential reference: in the case of the inanimate thing, sensible extension, onto which the *plena* are spread; in the case of the animate thing, the intentional or representational framework or structure, filled with the material *hyle*. In both cases, it is the extensive, or at least functional, aspect which defines the thing as in fact a thing.

3. *The blosse Sache*

It is precisely this assumption which is thrown into crisis by Merleau-Ponty. If for Husserl experience is essentially determinative, for Merleau-Ponty it means the object according to *this* or *that* mode in a secondary, derived modality in relation to the indeterminate, preliminary and environmentally-derived pre-comprehension which constitutes the most original and authentic layer of experience itself. This brings Merleau-Ponty, unlike Husserl, to distinguish, naturalisation from naturalness: if the aim of the former is to reduce “unnatural” elements (such as pure consciousness) to naturalistic elements, the aim of the latter is to reveal the real immersion of consciousness in the overall context of nature. Phenomenology is not naturalisable except at the cost of its elimination; and yet this does not entail the exclusion of natural behaviour. Acknowledging the relevance of natural behaviour, on the other hand, means acknowledging the value of indetermination to phenomenological description.

As is well known, within the overall frame of Husserlian thought there exists in reality a constellation of ideas that clearly look in the direction of overcoming the static notion of thing: the passive synthesis, the *Lebenswelt*, the pre-categorical, receptivity, the lower levels of constitution or latent constitution. These are notions which do not by any means aim at rendering explicit the link between original passivity and which therefore see in idealisation, and in the primacy of extension, only one of the features of phenomenology description. So it seems that, within the Husserlian setting, there exist at least two ways of understanding experience (hence that “strabismus” of Husserl’s phenomenology pointed out by Merleau-Ponty [2003: 72]). The former is connected to the *eidetic*: that is, the putting into focus of the notion of determination. The latter is connected to the *unreflective*, the original terrain on which determination is founded. In the first case, primacy is given to the notion of the thing of experience and to the modes (perspectives, aspects, adumbrations, etc.) through which the thing gives itself. First of all, the *blosse Sache* refers to a unity enclosed in itself (which, following Descartes, Husserl calls the sphere of the material thing). In the second place, the *blosse Sache* underlies an ontologically *stratified* conception: mere things have a layer of materiality, or rather of animality, which characterises them essentially. Lastly, the notion of the *blosse Sache* identifies, within such a stratification, the methodological priority of determination-extension, from which, by contrast, and precisely because it is *unextended*, the immaterial thing derives.

In this context, Merleau-Ponty asserts:

In this purified attitudes, we will meet purely material things such as tables, of which we encounter only the layer of materialism, or such as men, of which encounter only the layer of animality. This conception of pure things has a general tenor; we come spontaneously to adopt it when our I, instead of living in the world, decides to take hold of something [*erfassen*], to objectify it. In these conditions of this indifference is the pure thing. [...] The idea of Nature as sphere of pure things is the idea of the real, the in-itself, as a correlate of a pure knowing, and in a sense for Husserl this Nature contains everything, it extends itself of itself, without limit: this is what he calls the universe, the *Weltall*. Once we allow the idea of *Weltall*, we are obliged to put everything in it. There is not a decisive break between the stone and the animal or between the animal and the man (2003: 72-73).

For Husserl, there nevertheless exists a more primordial, original Nature, a «world before a thesis» (Merleau-Ponty 2003: 73), a world to which the Nature of the things constantly refers back. To an essential degree such a Nature involves an incarnate subject (*Subjekt Leib*). The centrality of the notion of corporeality will allow first Husserl and then Merleau-Ponty to take a crucial step. The body will be understood by both as first of all a kinaesthetic body: the thing appears as my body's function of movement, in the sense that «the movement of my body gives me naturally the means to deduct the appearances» (*ibid.*: 74) – for example, eliminating the jerking of the landscape with each step I take – and also as «undivided and systematic potency to organized certain unfoldings of perceptual appearance. My body is that which is capable of passing from one such appearance to another, as the organizer of a “transitional synthesis”» (*ibidem*). I do not have my body, but I live in my body, and by means of it I live in things. The thing is thus in some way *included* in the functioning of the body. Secondly, as the excitable body, the body is the place where sensations are localised. Therefore, for Merleau-Ponty, the excitable body is the site of the *reversibility* between subject and object, between sentient and sensible, soul and body, consciousness and material. That same reversibility which early Merleau-Ponty recognises in the notion of behaviour (Merleau-Ponty 1967).

The thing acts as a part of my body and the body appears as “a thing that feels” (as in the famous example of the left hand touching the right hand, used by Husserl in §36 of Ideas II and later taken up by Merleau-Ponty). Lastly, the body provides the base point for orientation. From it all places in space proceed, both because the location of the other places is defined according to the place where my body is, and because my body defines the optimal forms (the idea of a norm is founded on my body). The thing is thus taken by my body as being in a “cocoon” (*cocon*).

This experience, that of the body, is profoundly different from the noetic-noematic structure which for the most part characterises phenomenological

experience in Husserl, since it concerns not so much the notion of *datum* as the notion of *flesh*. The experience of the flesh must not be confused with the analytic notion of basic experience, or basic utterance (*Protokollsatz*). In this sense, it coincides neither with Husserl's *Erfüllung* nor with the verification process of the empiricist logicians, but with the eminently bodily experience, contact with the material, acknowledgement of the resistance and attrition which the material exercises on our sense organs. So this is not experience of a subject, since it is not located either *before* (along with the customary utterances, the observed data or the sensory stimuli) or *after* (as the ideal limit to a chain of tests and verifications or as the limit to a chain of intentional fillings) but, we could say, *under* the cognitive dimension. In this sense, the given experience of the flesh is not so much *pre-categorical*, preliminary, antecedent (basic experience), as *sub-categorical* (vital experience).

4. *The living being*

Along with this, it would seem almost inevitable to consider the flesh as an extra-epistemological notion, a sort of metaphysical principle which, being concerned with immersion in life, identifies processes that are epistemologically unassailable by their very nature. In reality, this conclusion is not necessary. What the experience of the flesh in fact indicates is not so much a cognitive leap, a categorical void, the way out of an epistemological frame of reference, as the attempt to perceive a *different* epistemological frame of reference. This would be a frame which replaces a description rooted in the notion of *thing* with a description rooted in the notion of a *living being* and which identifies in the qualitative dimension, with its incessant capacity for transformation, a point of absolute centrality.

The new idea of Nature, partly already detectable in Husserl and later brought to completion by Merleau-Ponty, also anticipates the centrality of the notion of essence, provided that by the term *Wesen* we no longer understand the *Eidos*, or the *Something*. In a marginal note to *The Visible and the Invisible* we read:

What is true here: what is not nothing is *something*, but: this something is not hard as a diamond, not unconditioned (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 109).

And again more explicitly,

The essence is certainly dependent. The inventory of the essential necessities is always made under a supposition (...); if this world is to exist for us, or if there is to be a world, or if there is to be something, then it is necessary that they observe such and such a

structural law. But whence do we get the hypothesis, whence do we know that there is something, that there is a world? This knowing is beneath the essence, it is the experience of which the essence is a part and which it does not envelop. The being of the essence is not primary, it does not rest on itself, it is not it that can teach us what Being is; the essence is not *the* answer to the philosophical question, the philosophical question is not posed in us by a pure spectator: it is first a question as to how, upon what ground, the pure spectator is established, from what more profound source he himself draws. Without the necessities by essence, the unshakable connections, the irresistible implications, the resistant and stable structures, there would be neither a world, nor something in general, nor Being; but their authority as essences, their affirmative power, their dignity as principles are not self-evident (*Ibidem*).

In fact, if there is such a thing as essence, it is not a rigid structure but fluctuation. The requirement for vagueness, plasticity and fluidity has a strong similarity to the Husserlian proposition of phenomenology as a morphological and inexact science. However, although Merleau-Ponty shares this requirement with Husserl on a general level, in the end it is realised by him in a profoundly different way. The essence to which Merleau-Ponty refers is not by any means aimed at determination but at creation; not at the authenticity of the *datum*, or of appearance, but at that of life and of the *élan vital* which it implies. The essence is not the *possible*, but the mode or style of a World; that which organises facticity along morphological and fluctuating lines, without however allowing such morphological vagueness, the same as that indicated explicitly by Husserl, to be concretised in something given. We could say that the essence is directed toward vital concretion rather than toward manifestation, toward the *style* in which a certain facticity is revealed and organised. What is here indicated by the word *style* is the fact that essences *emerge* into a unique world and *leave their mark* on a common terrain, so as to make fields of experience proliferate in such a way as to delineate (rather as happens in the family similarities noted by Wittgenstein) *families of facts* united precisely by a common *style*. The style to which Merleau-Ponty refers can also be conceived as an invariant amidst the variations; no longer, however, in the sense of *determination* but in the sense of the family of similarities which emerges from a unique terrain (since «and all the essences possible open upon one sole experience and upon the same world» [*Ibid.*: 110]). The essence is thus inscribed «not halfway between opaque facts and limpid ideas, but at the point of intersection and overlapping where families of facts inscribe their generality, their kinship, group themselves about the dimensions and the site of our own existence» (*Ibid.*: 116).

When I ask myself what the something or the world or the material thing is, I am not yet the pure spectator I will become through the act of ideation; I am a field of experience where there is only sketched out the family of material things and other

families and the world as their common style, the family of things said and the world of speech as their common style, and finally the abstract and fleshless style of something in general. [...] Every ideation, because it is an ideation, is formed in a space of existence. [...] Every ideation is borne by this tree of my duration and other durations this unknown sap nourishes the transparency of the idea; behind the idea, there is the unity, the simultaneity of all the real and possible durations, the cohesion of one sole Being from one end to the other. Under the solidity of the essence and of the idea there is the fabric of experience, this flesh of time, and this is why I am not sure of having penetrated unto the hard core of being; my incontestable power to give myself leeway (*prendredu champ*), to disengage the possible from the real, does not go as far as to dominate all the implications of the spectacle and to make of the real a simple variant of the possible; on the contrary it is the possible worlds and the possible beings that are variants and are like doubles of the actual world and the actual Being (*Ibid.*: 110-112).

This again authorises us to speak of universality, but in a radically different sense. What needs to happen in order for us to grasp the true, profoundly temporal nature of essence is in fact to give up the idea of «the essence that is intemporal and without locality» (*ibid.*: 112). Acknowledging the essentially temporal nature of essence means adding a new morphological character to this notion: not only that indicated by the adumbrated and fluctuating spreading of the *plena* on an extended surface, but also that indicated by the depth and variability of its duration. Furthermore, speaking of incarnate essence means conceiving the dimension of the qualitative in a totally renewed way. For the Husserlian theory of whole and parts, in the foundational relationship between extension and *plena*, and in the consequent constitution of an independent part, this last inherits from extension the frangibility which the *plena* in themselves would not have (one cannot, for example, fragment red); which once again supports the fact of extension's priority and foundational status. This extended homogeneity is now abandoned in favour of a qualitative heterogeneity in which what is essential is not so much, and not only, the actualisation of something, but also and above all the *movement* which conduces to such an actualisation.

5. *From below*

Merleau-Ponty seems no longer to detect in the eidetic intuition but in the flesh the conditions of possibility of the essence; or, we could say, using a Bergsonian idea, their *conditions of virtuality* (Bergson 1938). The flesh, in Merleau-Ponty, thus becomes that “raw being” from which springs a sort of involvement of the experience of experience itself; the ground from which emerge, by dehiscence, the familiar lines understood as *nodes, joints, veins*. The essences

to which Merleau-Ponty refers are therefore incarnate, temporal and localised. Not idea-limits but profiles, styles, modes of experience; ideas which make it impossible to strip experience of its facticity as of an impurity. We could say they are not born either “above” or “behind”, as happens in the Husserlian pre-categorical, but *from below*, in the depths, a depth from which the natural families emerge through differentiation. Viewing essence in this way requires the adoption of a paradigm of reference that is no longer spatial but temporal. And it is certainly not by chance that, in the course of his reflections on nature during his final years, Merleau-Ponty turned with renewed attention to the scientific revolutions concerning the concept of time in physics and, above all, in contemporary biology.

The adoption of a temporal viewpoint entails an openness to the immediate recognition of other durations than our own, so as to perceive those tendencies through which the evolution of the living thing proceeds not by determinations but by differentiations. Differentiation is in fact the modality through which the living thing is realised. On the other hand, a virtuality which is actualised is that which is differentiated from time to time, giving origin to different evolutionary lines, to different species understood not as relationships between actual objects (as occurs in biological mechanism and finalism), but as the incessant realisation of a virtual.

The dynamic between virtuality and actualisation (as opposed to the relation between two actualities) is consistent with some contemporary biological models, which tend to emphasise on the one hand organisms’ extreme variability and genetic mutability, and on the other, their marked tendency toward internal regulation and the preservation of their organic structure in equilibrium with the external environment. What emerges from this is a sort of “contingent finality” (Bailly, Longo 2011 and Longo, Montévil 2011 and 2014), characterised by the specificity of biological temporality compared to that in physics, and by the role played by the aleatory in the evolution of the living thing. With regard to the first of these aspects, biological time shifts the very pivot of actuality (connected to the present) to virtuality (connected to the past). The past, far from being a reservoir or magazine from which to obtain data, is memory, about which the present emerges incessantly. In biological time the primacy accorded to impressional consciousness (and in consequence, to the notions of *datum*, fixity, immobility, arrest) is replaced by the primacy accorded to retentional consciousness (and in consequence, to notions of tendency, movement, duration). This priority of retention is what, according to Merleau-Ponty, renders philosophically impracticable that “flyover thought” which characterised Husserlian phenomenology; a description too centred on the *datum*, and therefore on the present which that datum is from time to time

able to offer: a present which in reality is nothing but a virtual and artificial arrest of the incessant flow of time. Contrary to what is assumed by the classic phenomenological model, time is *effort*, an effort that generates tensions, tendencies and differentiations in the living thing.

With regard to the role of the aleatory in the evolutionary process, the evolution of life is read in some recent articles on the evolution of biological systems as the result of a complex relationship between the aleatory, disorder and order, in which uncertainty and disorder represent the motor principle of diversification and heterogeneity which characterise the evolution of life (Pagni 2015). Living material is thus characterised as permanently active and always far from attaining a state of equilibrium, and the structural stability of the organism is continually subject to cascades of changes and ruptures of symmetry connected to aleatory and irreversible events which tend on the one hand to preserve the unity of the organic body and, on the other, to identify each organism's singularity (Longo, Montévil and Poncheville 2013). In this case, too, we are quite some distance from that process of reification and objectivisation that characterises the phenomenology of Husserl and, on the other hand, very close to that «*masse intérieurement travaillée*» offered by the flesh; that is, from that *sensible mass* with respect to which, though a blind contact, consciousness is to *be born together (connaissance)*.

Every perception takes place in an atmosphere of generality and is presented to us anonymously. [...] So, if I wanted to render precisely the perceptual experience, I ought to say that *one* perceives in me, and not that I perceive. [...] Between my sensation and myself there stands always the thickness of some *primal acquisition* which prevents my experience from being clear of itself. I experience the sensation as a modality of a general existence, one already destined for a physical world and which runs through me without my being the cause of it (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 250-251).

In some place, Merleau-Ponty identifies this neutral structure with functioning (*opérante*) intentionality strictly linked to corporeality: an expression (*fungierende intentionalität*) which in Husserl serves to indicate the anonymous ante-predicative life that is able to confer sense before any explicit thematisation, but which in Merleau-Ponty now takes on a precise and radical ontological scope. In this sense, the notions of body, flesh, and chiasmus therefore serve to affirm, exactly as they do in Heidegger, the difference between ontic and ontological. But the direction towards which Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological gaze is directed is not related so much to the existential dimension as to the singularity of the living thing. It affirms that, contrary to what Heidegger maintained, it is not at all true that science *does not think*. Science can, much less drastically, begin to think in a *different* way.

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