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HUMANITY IS ANOTHER CORPOREITY ANIMAL AND HUMAN BODIES IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF MERLEAU-PONTY

1. Introduction

Thinking about animals is necessarily related to human identity. The entire history of philosophy has attempted to define the essence of human beings from the starting point of our differences from animals. Properly speaking, the lacks that characterize animal lives are what define human beings as such: whether we speak of language, culture, cooperation, technology, or something else, human beings are the *exception* and are separated from the natural and animal world. Although science and contemporary ethology state that human beings differ from animals in degree and not in kind, the philosophical definition of human being as *animal rationale* remains; consequently, a deeply rooted humanism and a philosophical logo-centrism still characterize the majority of philosophy.[1]

In truth, the real problem regarding the anthropological difference does not concern animals: focusing scientific research on animal intelligence or mental capacities, in order to bring animal and human behavior closer together, will not resolve the enigma. Looking for human abilities in animal behavior actually reiterates human exceptionalism. According to Giorgio Agamben:

1 See Toadvine (2007).

> "It is possible to oppose man to other living things, and at the same time to organize the complex – and not always edifying – economy of relations between men and animals, *only because something like an animal life has been separated within man*, only because his distance and proximity to the animal have been measured and recognized first of all in the closest and most intimate place. (Agamben 2002: 16; italics mine)"

The separation between animal and human being – the caesura – is actually *within* humankind and humanism. Animality – the definition of the essence of animals – actually establishes the identity of human beings. It might be said that, in a certain sense, animality does not exist, or more precisely that it exists just as a word. The Animal is but a human category, a word that humans use to define (certain parts of) *themselves*. What actually exists is a vast range of living beings, each with its own specificity and uniqueness. This is the fundamental lesson of Jacques Derrida's *The Animal therefore I Am*:

> "Animal is a word that men have given themselves the right to give. These humans are found giving it to themselves, this word, but as if they had received it as an inheritance. They have given themselves the word in order to corral a large number of living beings within a single concept: 'the Animal,' they say. And they have given themselves this word, at the same time according themselves, reserving for them, for humans, the right to the word, the name, the verb, the attribute, to a language of words, in short to the very thing that the others in question would be deprived of, those that are corralled within the grand territory of the beasts: the Animal. (Derrida 1999: 400)"

Saying *the Animal* – pronouncing the very word – involves the flattening and eradication of the specificity and the difference among living beings.

Thus, the main thesis of this article is grounded precisely on the following premise: overcoming human exceptionalism does not coincide with the cancellation of the differences between the animal and the human being – or better, between living beings – nor does it coincide with an adhesion to a

reductionist human/animal continuism. On the contrary, the path I would like to trace starts from the valorization of the specificity and uniqueness of each and every living being in order to find a common ontological ground between what we call *animal* and what we call *human*.[2] I will refer to the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, particularly to his reformulation of the concepts of organism, behavior, and body. For Merleau-Ponty, corporeity – in the sense of *being* a body (*Leibsein*) – constitutes the common ground between animals and humans on which he lays the foundation of his relational ontology.

Starting from his first work *The Structure of Behaviour*, Merleau-Ponty tries to abandon any sort of dualism and *aut-aut* reasoning. For this reason, Merleau-Ponty cannot accept the definition of the human being as a rational animal, as an animal *plus* something more: "The concern is to grasp humanity first as another manner of being a body – to see humanity emerge just like Being in the manner of a watermark, not as another substance, but as *interbeing*, and not as an imposition of a for-itself on a body in-itself" (Merleau-Ponty 1995: 208).

It is this corporeity that opens to a structural ambiguity, the body interpreted neither as a pure subject nor pure object, but as a natural subject. The body, on Merleau-Ponty's account, is the absolute here, the installation of the first and original coordinates, or *Nullpunkt*, in the words of Husserl. As we will see, this reasoning leads to an ambiguous, chiasmic, and relational ontology: natural and animal worlds already contain culture, symbolism, and excess. Animals already possess something that cannot be reduced to deterministic physical and chemical laws: they are equipped with structures and relational capacities, with significant and dynamic interrelationships with the environment. For this reason, the anthropological difference is not an absolute one: what makes human beings unique is not the addition of consciousness (or reason, or language, and so on), but rather their *distinct corporeity*: "Reciprocally, a human being is not animality (in the sense of mechanism) + reason. And this is why we are concerned with the body: before being reason, humanity is another corporeity" (Merleau-Ponty 1995: 208).

2 According to Calarco, we can assert that there are three ways of conceptualizing the human/animal relationship: through *identity*, through *difference*, and through *indistinction*. The thesis of this article is grounded on the premises of the difference-based approach, but the outcome is very different from Derrida's (Calarco, 2015).

2. *Being* organism

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, from his first works on behavior and perception to his last (and unfinished) works on ontology, is internally coherent: on the one hand, Merleau-Ponty takes on the problems left open by Edmund Husserl; on the other hand, he address the problems of science, in particular of contemporary psychology and ethology. His aim is to overcome the limitations of dualism by substituting it with a phenomenology that is open to the ambiguity inherent in life and nature. His work is an endless investigation into the ontological continuity between natural world, animals, and human beings. In particular, Merleau-Ponty always tries to think about human specificity without detaching humans from the natural dimension. In a note in The Visible and the Invisible, dated March 1959, he synthetically talks of the "becoming-nature of man which is the becoming-man of nature" (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 185).

In his overall project, thinking about the animal – as a unique and specific manner of living – takes fundamental importance: analyzing the living being as an *event*, as an *être-au-monde*, is the first operation in the quest to find human roots in nature. Merleau-Ponty accordingly realizes this already in his first work, *The Structure of Behaviour*. At the very outset, he immediately declares his main purpose:

> "Our goal is to understand the relations of consciousness and nature: organic, psychological or even social. […] We will come to these questions by starting 'from below' and by an analysis of the notion of behaviour. This notion seems important to us because, taken in itself, it is neutral with respect to the classical distinctions between the 'mental' and the 'physiological' and thus can give us the opportunity of defining them anew. (Merleau-Ponty 1942: 3–4)"

The purpose – "to understand the relation of consciousness and nature" – deals with the fundamental problem of phenomenology, i.e. with the question about the transcendental relationship between subject and object.

The methodology – "starting from below" – demonstrates the importance Merleau-Ponty attributes to the ongoing debates between phenomenology and science, and to recent discoveries in psychology. The starting point of his reflection is thus focused on two neutral terms: organism and behavior.

First of all, it is necessary to understand what the organism is *not*:

> "'Organism' is an equivocal expression. There is the organism considered as a segment of matter, as an assemblage of real parts juxtaposed in space and which exist outside of each other, as a sum of physical and chemical actions. All the events which unfold in this organism possess the same degree of reality and there is not, for example, the distinction between the normal and the pathological. Is this the true organism, the sole objective representation of the organism? (Ibid.: 151)"

The atomistic conception, according to which an organism is nothing but an assemblage of its parts juxtaposed in space, does not describe the essence of the organism, or its meaningful organization. There is a *quelque chose* that eludes a reductive comprehension: the overall structure of the organism and its behavior, i.e. a significant interdependence among its parts, an irreducible totality. Against any reductive and mechanistic approach, Merleau-Ponty states that, "the organism cannot properly be compared to a keyboard on which the external stimuli would play and in which their proper form would be delineated for the simple reason that the organism contributes to the constitution of that form" (Merleau-Ponty 1942: 13). Far from reducing the animal to a machine of varying complexity, Merleau-Ponty stresses the immanent significance of each living being. The *true* organism is a concrete, significant, and indecomposable totality:

> "[T]he gestures and the attitudes of the phenomenal body must have therefore a proper structure, an immanent signification; from the beginning the phenomenal body must be a center of actions which radiate over a 'milieu'; it must be a certain silhouette in the physical and in the moral sense; it must be a certain type of behaviour. (Merleau-Ponty 1942: 157)"

Two major influences are of note here: on the one hand, the deep influence of the *Gestaltpsychologie* and its central concept of *Gestalt* (form-structure); on the other hand, the organismic theory of Kurt Goldstein and Viktor von Weizsäcker. It would take us too far afield to give an in-depth analysis of the notion of *Gestalt* and its influence on Merleau-Ponty's philosophy;[3] it is, however, essential to underline the importance it assumes in this context. In these first reflections, the notion of *Gestalt* allows Merleau-Ponty to circumvent a mechanist approach to the organism, while at the same time not falling prey to vitalist hypotheses. Form, in Merleau-Ponty, is first of all a *process*, "whenever the properties of a system are modified by every change brought about in a single one of its parts and, on the contrary, are conserved when they all change while maintaining the same relationship among themselves" (Merleau-Ponty 1942: 47). Understanding the organism and behavior as *Gestalt* allows one to track down a meaning within life and living being, or "intelligibility in the nascent state" (Merleau-Ponty 1942: 207). Structures are, in fact, unities without conceptualization, open unities in which a primordial signification emerges. Applied to living beings, the notion of structure allows us to understand the behavior of the organism while avoiding the extremes of mechanism and vitalism.

The organismic theory is of central importance here. The aim of this approach, in fact, was to propose a biological methodology that differs from the atomistic one. Kurt Goldstein aspired to understand living beings (and humans in particular) by overcoming equivocal concepts that had influenced – in a negative way – biological and psychological studies: inferior and superior behaviors, the notion of simplicity, regulation by hierarchy, and the classic distinction between normal and pathological based on quantitative criteria. In contrast, Goldstein's approach is holistic and organismic, founded on a definition of the organism as a psychosomatic totality open to an environment. In this view, behavior is not a mere response to a stimulus, but already a meaningful reaction to a signal that the organism is able to recognize.

3 For in-depth analyses of the relationship between Merleau-Ponty's philosophy and *Gestaltpsychologie* cf. Dillon (1971) or Barbaras (2001).

As mentioned briefly, Goldstein arrives at this conclusion through a deep reformulation of the distinction between normal and pathological. In Goldstein's analysis, disease becomes a heuristic concept that allows us to demonstrate that behavior is a form of significant and irreducible conduct. Symptoms are not a simple deficiency but rather a global response on the part of the individual facing a specific problem (which Goldstein calls a "catastrophic situation"). Disease does not concern the contents of behavior but the structure of the organism; it is not a subtraction from normal conduct but a "qualitative alteration" (Merleau-Ponty 1942: 19), a "new signification of the behavior" (Merleau-Ponty 1942: 65).[4] Observing and describing pathological behavior reminds us that behavior has a structure: *normal* behavior, therefore, is the auto-realization of the organism. As Goldstein states:

> "Pathological phenomena are the expression of the fact that the normal relationships between organism and environment have been changed through a change of the organism and that thereby many things that had been adequate for the normal organism are no longer adequate for the modified organism. Disease is shock and danger for existence. Thus a definition of disease requires a conception of the individual nature as a starting point. (Goldstein 1934: 328–329)"

From this perspective, auto-realization is the self-actualization of the organism, a fundamental tension that moves the organism and makes its conduct dynamic and meaningful. The organism, in fact, lives in constant negotiation with its environment, in a sort of disequilibrium and tension that constantly permit new orientations. The organism's behavior consists of movement and perception: the

4 In *Phenomenology of Perception* too, Merleau-Ponty, starting from Gelb and Goldstein's analysis of the case of Schneider, adopts this methodology: "It cannot be a question of simply transferring to the normal person what is missing in the patient and what he is trying to recover. Illness, like childhood or like the "primitive" state, is a complete form of existence, and the procedures that it employs in order to replace the normal functions that have been destroyed are themselves pathological phenomena. The normal cannot be deduced from the pathological, and deficiencies cannot be deduced from their substitutions, through a mere change of sign" (Merleau-Ponty 1945: 110).

organism moves, that is, it perceives something; the organism perceives, that is, it moves in a certain direction. The movement presupposes perception, and vice versa, but they never exactly coincide. Movement and perception are modalities of the living being, expressions of its organic totality. The organism is a totality that organizes itself, a psychosomatic unity open to a world that is meaningful for it. Goldstein's approach deeply influenced the philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. He writes:

> "Finally, if it were established that the nerve processes in each situation always tend to re-establish certain states of preferred equilibrium, these latter would represent the objective values of the organism and one would have the right to classify behaviour as ordered or disordered, significant or insignificant, with respect to them. These denominations, far from being extrinsic and anthropomorphic, would belong to the living being as such. (Merleau-Ponty 1942: 38)"

In these analyses, there is no longer a classification based on a hierarchy from the simplest to the most complex, but a phenomenological description of behavior: "These facts are essential for us, therefore, because they bring to light *a directed activity between blind mechanism and intelligent behaviour*, which is not accounted for by classical mechanism and intellectualism" (Merleau-Ponty 1942: 40; italics mine).

3. *Being* behavior

In this light, it is possible to define the organism as *subjectivity*. Here, it might be useful to take recourse to the work of Viktor von Weizsäcker. Weizsäcker proposed an interesting approach to the understanding of the organism as subjectivity. The organism is open to the world through the act of creativity, of authentic improvisation. The point of departure here is the definition of movement as an orientation *within-and-towards* the world. The movement of an organism is never pure action, but it is also never a simple reaction caused by environmental factors. On the contrary, the auto-movement bears witness to the subjectivity of the organism: the organism is capable of behaving spontaneously and creatively,

and this constitutes its own unique way of responding to the environment. The organism is not moved; rather, it itself moves. This *spontaneity* is deeply valorized by Merleau-Ponty, who emphasizes a strong interconnection between movement and perception: each movement is auto-movement and each perception is auto-perception. In his *Course Notes from the Collège de France* Merleau-Ponty states that, "[a]n organ of the mobile senses (the eye, the hand) is already a language because it is an interrogation (movement) and a response (perception as *Erfühlung* of a project), speaking and understanding. It is a tacit language" (Merleau-Ponty 1995: 211).

The link between perception and movement allows us to understand the organism's encounter with the environment. According to Weizsäcker, perception is neither inorganic nor organic, but a *historical encounter* between the self and the world. This relationship helps us understand the unity between the organism and its milieu, which is what Weizsäcker calls a "biological act". An organism's life is an improvisation, "creativity without creator", and it does not exist without a certain coherence provided by the environment. Creativity and coherence: these are the two elements that constitute what Weizsäcker calls *Gestaltkreis*, and they signify the circularity and interdependence (between organism and milieu) that characterize the living being.

Based on these reflections, we can take stock of what it means to have a behavior, or perhaps we should say, what it means to *be* a behavior. Again, we can turn to Merleau-Ponty. The organism behaves: what does this mean? It is clear that we cannot explain behavior as a mechanical response to (external) stimuli. Behavior is not a blind mechanism, nor some sort of otherworldly intelligence infused into the body; rather, it is an *oriented activity*. According to Merleau-Ponty,

> "[T]he subject does not live in a world of states of consciousness or representations from which he would believe himself able to act on and know external things by a sort of miracle. He lives in a universe of experience, in a milieu, which is neutral with regard to the substantial distinctions between the organism, thought and extension; he lives in a direct commerce with beings, things and his own body. (Merleau-Ponty 1942: 189)"

The criterion for understanding behavior is *vital equilibrium*, the global activity of the organism living in a certain milieu. Behavior is a meaningful activity that presupposes something more than a merely physical event, but at the same time, does not necessarily encompass an intelligent dimension. In this way, Merleau-Ponty reformulates his definitions of organism, behavior, and, finally, subjectivity:

> "From this moment on behaviour is detached from the order of the in-itself (*en soi*) and becomes the projection outside the organism of a possibility which is internal to it. The world, inasmuch as it harbors living beings, ceases to be a material plenum consisting of juxtaposed parts; it opens up at the place where behaviour appears. (Merleau-Ponty 1942: 167)"

To understand behavior authentically means, first and foremost, recognizing that there is a *being-for-the-animal*, a specific (animal) way of being in the world.

This approach can be useful in reconsidering anthropological difference (and animality in general) in the light of the valorization of the specificity and uniqueness of each living being. In this view, the priority does not consist in looking for human characteristics in animals so as to establish a new hierarchy. Rather, the starting point of the investigation is the organism (a neutral term that includes both animals and human beings) as defined as a significant openness to the world, as a unique way of living and behaving. It starts with Merleau-Ponty's expression *être-au-monde*. The following passage is very helpful in this regard:

> "A consciousness, according to Hegel's expression, is a 'penetration in being' and here we have nothing yet but an opening up. […] But to reject consciousness in animals in the sense of pure consciousness, the *cogitatio*, is not to make them automatons without interiority. *The animal, to an extent which varies according to the integration of its behaviour, is certainly another existence*; this existence is perceived by everybody; we have described it; and it is a phenomenon which is independent of any

> notional theory concerning the soul of brutes. (Merleau-Ponty 1942: 126—127; italics mine)"

Every organism, inasmuch as it is constitutes a significant and dynamic openness, is an *ek-sistence*, because, in living and behaving, it stands *outside* itself. *Être-au-monde* is an avid description of this kind of spatial subjectivity, a situated subject that is no longer a mere mechanical system, but also not yet a full-blown consciousness.

The space – the outside – is in-habited by the organism. The relationship between the organism and the environment is dialectic and expresses the organism's global and qualitative response. In other words, external stimuli are not causes but *occasions* for the organism. In this way, through this mutual correlation between the organism and the environment, the outside becomes a meaningful space, namely its *milieu*. This is not the place to elaborate on this notion. Suffice it to say that the notion of milieu is to be conceived in the sense of the *Umwelt*, as famously used by Jakob von Uexküll (see Uexküll 1909). It is the organism itself that composes its worlds. The organism is always oriented; it is a subject equipped with a form of intentionality. This, to be sure, is a form of bodily intentionality, but one that is already meaningful. The openness of the organism is imbued with meaning – a meaning that transforms the geographical environment, which is detached and objective, into an *environment of behavior* (in line with the distinction elaborated by the Gestaltist Kurt Koffka).[5]

This is very important for our reasoning about animal subjectivity because it deals with the question of the transcendental. According to Merleau-Ponty:

> "[E]ach organism, in the presence of a given milieu, has its optimal conditions of activity and its proper manner of realizing equilibrium; and the internal determinants of this equilibrium are not given by a plurality of vectors, but by *a general attitude toward the world*. This is the reason why inorganic structures can be expressed by a law, while organic structures

5 "Let us therefore distinguish between a *geographical* and a *behavioural* environment. Do we all live in the same town? Yes, when we mean the geographical, no, when we mean the *behavioural* 'in'" (Koffka 1935: 28).

> are understood only by *a norm, by a certain type of transitive action which characterizes the individual.* (Merleau-Ponty 1942: 148; italics mine)"

Every living being – animals included – has a unique way of being in the world, its *unique style*: that is, it possesses a *natural self*. For this reason, there emerges a new classification of living beings, no longer grounded on human traits but on the relationship that living beings build with their environment.

This point needs further clarification. The normativity we are talking about is always a relationship. It is not an inner *telos*, i.e. some goal hidden within the organism. Biological normativity is just a relationship built on the dialectic of dependence on, and independence from, the environment. The norm, here, is about choosing a certain behavior among many possibilities. In this sense, we could say that an animal is an individual subject: it is its postures and gestures. It is already *the subject of a history*:

> "Others, which are called living beings, present the particularity of having behavior, which is to say that their actions are not comprehensible as functions of the physical milieu and that, on the contrary, the parts of the world to which they react are delimited for them by an internal norm. By 'norm' here one does not mean a 'should be' which would make it be; it is the simple observation of a preferred attitude, statistically more frequent, which gives a new kind of unity to behaviour. (Merleau-Ponty 1942: 159)"

Defining behavior as preferred behavior – as found in Goldstein, Weizsäcker, and Merleau-Ponty – means recognizing that each organism has its own way of modifying the physical world, its own way of making its *milieu* appear:

> "Some of these fragments of matter, which we call living beings, proceed to trace in their environment – by their gestures or their behaviors – a view of things which is their alone, and that will appear to us only if we take part in the spectacle of animality, instead of rashly denying it any kind of interiority. (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 75)"

4. *Being* body

Merleau-Ponty reflects on the notion of body in one of his most important works, *Phenomenology of Perception*. Here, his main focus is on perception, movement, and corporeity, taking a distinctly phenomenological stance. As we have seen, in Merleau-Ponty's approach perception and movement are the original ways in which an organism experiences, and lives in, the world. The organism does not simply live; it lives *within* a world that it knows, and thus the relationship between the organism and the environment is a *lived* relationship. By this, Merleau-Ponty means to say that experiencing a world is neither a subjective representation nor an empirical collection of facts. Experience arises from our being-in-the-world (*être-au-monde*):

> "Reflex, insofar as it opens itself to the sense of a situation, and perception, insofar as it does not first of all posit an object of knowledge and insofar as it is an intention of our total being, are modalities of *a pre-objective perspective that we call 'being in the world.'* Prior to stimuli and sensible contents, a sort of inner diaphragm must be recognized that, much more than these other ones, determines what our reflexes and our perceptions will be able to aim at in the world, the zone of our possible operations, and the scope of our life. (Merleau-Ponty 1945: 81; italics mine)"

Être-au-monde is this "primary opening onto things without which there could be no objective knowledge" (Merleau-Ponty 1945: 99). This means that organisms possess a *pre-categorical*, or *bodily*, perception prior to any distinctions, including that between subject and object:

> "The presence and the absence of external objects are only variations within a primordial field of presence, a perceptual domain over which my body has power. […] If objects must never show me more than one of their sides, then this is because I myself am in a certain place from which I see them, but which I cannot see. (Merleau-Ponty 1945: 95)"

Here, a radically new definition of consciousness is taking shape: pre-reflective, embodied, and always situated. This is our primordial openness to the world.

In the first instance, we belong to the "lifeworld" (*Lebenswelt*): "It is not a surveying of the body and of the world by a consciousness, but rather it is my body as interposed between what is in front of me and what is behind me, my body standing in front of the upright things, with the animals, with other bodies" (Merleau-Ponty 1995: 209). This is also important for our reasoning about animality: animals and human beings share a corporeity that is always *postural*. According to Merleau-Ponty, a posture is a spatial localization of the body, the reason why every organism is able to *live* the space. As we have seen, space is never detached but becomes a *living space*. The posture is interpreted as a form in the sense of Gestalt psychology. Bodily spatiality is not the spatiality of fixed and external objects; rather it is a *situational spatiality*: "My body appears to me as a posture toward a certain task, actual or possible. And in fact my body's spatiality is not, like the spatiality of external objects or of 'spatial sensations', a positional spatiality; rather, it is a situational spatiality" (Merleau-Ponty 1945: 102). Corporeality is, in fact, the Husserlian zero point (*Nullpunkt*) of any experience: "When the word 'here' is applied to my body, it does not designate a determinate position in relation to other positions or in relation to external coordinates. It designates the installation of the first coordinates, the anchoring of the active body in an object, and the situation of the body confronted with its tasks" (Merleau-Ponty 1945: 102–103).

In this way, the traditional definition of the subject is now rebuilt: it is no longer the Cartesian *cogito* or the Kantian *I think*, but rather an *embodied subject* or an *I can*:

> "Finally, these clarifications allow us to understand motricity unequivocally as original intentionality. Consciousness is originarily (sic) not an 'I think that,' but rather an 'I can.' […] Vision and movement are specific ways of relating to objects and, if a single function is expressed throughout all of these experiences, *then it is the movement of existence,* which does not suppress the radical diversity of contents, for it does not unite them by placing them all under the domination of an 'I think,' but rather by

> orienting them toward the inter-sensory unity of a 'world.' Movement is not a movement in thought, and bodily space is not a space that is conceived or represented. (Merleau-Ponty 1945: 139; italics mine)"

The materiality of the body defines our being inside time and space. But, according to Merleau-Ponty:

> "[W]e must not say that our body is in space nor for that matter in time. It *inhabits* space and time. […] I am not in space and in time, nor do I think space and time; rather, *I am of space and of time; my body fits itself to them and embraces them*. The scope of this hold measures the scope of my existence; however, it can never in any case be total. The space and time that I inhabit are always surrounded by indeterminate horizons that contain other points of view. The synthesis of time, like that of space, is always to be started over again. The motor experience of our body is not a particular case of knowledge; rather, it offers us a manner of reaching the world and the object, a 'praktognosia,' that must be recognized as original, and perhaps as originary (sic). (Merleau-Ponty 1945: 140–141)"

The body inhabits the world because it grasps the world: corporeity is the *templum* of the behavior, the seat of the style proper to any organism, the twine of any possible behavior, the matrix of every existing space. As I said before, spatiality is not a possession but neither is it a detached substance: in the very moment in which an organism is in the world, space becomes the field of its possible behaviors. On Merleau-Ponty's account, corporeity is what defines an existence (according to

the etymological definition: *ek-sistere*):[6] if 'body' is a correlational structure that puts us in a *relation to the outside*, then 'corporeity' is a dialectic, it is *being-outside*.

The notion of corporeity also becomes central for us to achieve a better understanding of animality. Every living being *is* its own body: "I am not in front of my body, I am in my body, or rather *I am my body*" (Merleau-Ponty 1945: 151; italics mine). According to Merleau-Ponty, a purely material and detached body does not exist. The body, including that of the animal, is a complete experience, the reason why every organism is open to the world:

> "If the subject is in a situation, or even if *the subject is nothing other than a possibility of situations*, this is because he only achieves his ipseity by actually *being a body and by entering into the world through this body*. If I find, while reflecting upon the essence of the body, that it is tied to the essence of the world, this is because *my existence as subjectivity is identical with my existence as a body and with the existence of the world*, and because, ultimately, the subject that I am, understood concretely, is inseparable from this particular body and from this particular world. The ontological world and body that we uncover at the core of the subject are not the world and the body as ideas; rather, they are the world itself condensed into a comprehensive hold and the body itself as a knowing-body. (Merleau-Ponty 1945: 408; italics mine)"

6 In *Phenomenology of Perception*, there is an interesting note about the notion of *existence*: "In the sense we are using here, Husserl's originality lies beyond the notion of intentionality; rather, it is found in the elaboration of this notion and in the discovery, beneath the intentionality of representations, of *a more profound intentionality, which others have called existence*" (Merleau-Ponty 1945: 123; italics mine). See also: "We must restore this dialectic between form and matter, or rather, since "reciprocal action" is nothing more than a compromise with causal thought and a contradictory formulation, we must describe the milieu where this contradiction is conceivable; in other words, existence, or the perpetual taking up of fact and chance by a reason that neither exists in advance of this taking up, nor without it" (Merleau-Ponty 1945: 129).

5. *Being* expression

Reflections on corporeity are a mainstay in Merleau-Ponty's account, even in his latest work on ontology. We have seen why the notion of corporeity is so important and rich: the body 'takes root' in the situation (that is, there is a situation because there is a body); the body opens up to the possible and virtual dimension; the body *expresses something* and it communicates the co-belonging and the intertwining among living beings within nature. The tracking of possibility and virtuality within corporeity is the most important consequence of Merleau-Ponty's analysis of living beings. Thus, Merleau-Ponty can rehabilitate the animal body and animal behavior without choosing between mechanism and vitalism.

We have already seen that "the organism is not defined by its punctual existence; what exists beyond is a theme, a style, all these expressions seeking to express not a participation in a transcendental existence, but in a structure of the whole. The body belongs to a dynamic of behavior. Behaviour is sunk into corporeity" (Merleau-Ponty 1995: 183).[7] In order to conclude this brief examination of human and animal corporeity, it will be useful to address yet another important characteristic of the body: its expressive value. In a course dedicated to the notion of animality and animal behavior, Merleau-Ponty focuses on animal appearance and animal symbolism, drawing on the work of Robert Hardouin, Adolf Portmann, and Konrad Lorenz.

First of all, Merleau-Ponty analyses the phenomenon of *mimicry*. Are animal bodies 'built' so as to hide themselves? Are utility and survival the unique criteria of life? Through Hardouin's studies and examples, Merleau-Ponty tracks a sort of *natural magic* within nature and living beings, a sort of useless visibility that questions 'Darwinian ideology': "Life is not only an organisation for survival; there is in life a prodigious flourishing of forms, the utility of which is only rarely attested to and that sometimes even constitutes a danger for the animal" (Merleau-Ponty 1995: 185–186). There is a visible richness in the natural and living world that does not submit to utility and efficacy: "There are numerous cases of hypertelia, a prodigality

7 "We touch here on a profound understanding of the notion of the living body: the body is a system of motor powers that crisscross in order to produce a behaviour" (Merleau-Ponty 1995: 148).

of forms realized by life: adaptation is not the canon of life, but a particular realization in the tide of natural production" (Merleau-Ponty 1995: 184). Animal bodies have a spectacle-attitude: animal bodies are seen, animal bodies are made to be seen. However, denying the ideology of utility and accepting this form of expressivity within the living world does not abolish physical and biological laws:

> "At the origin, magic is concentrated in the architecture of the body, then is extracted from the original trace of forms. But it always remains a power that in no way pulls the living beings away from the strict conditioning of events. On the one hand there is a frenzied freedom of life, and on the other, an economy of life. (Merleau-Ponty 1995: 186)"

Freedom and economy, exception and law, finalism and determinism: all these elements can co-exist in the living world.

Merleau-Ponty questions the prejudice based on the hegemony of the inner over the external: appearances do not hide truth – there are no misleading appearances. This is an important consequence of Adolf Portmann's work: "The consideration of appearance, of animal form (*gestalt*), is not at all uninteresting. The laws of the interior and exterior are not of the same order: "The interior gives the impression of a machine, the exterior gives the impression of a product of art" (Merleau-Ponty 1995: 186–187). Body's appearance is a language: the animal is its own behavior, its own body, and its own history. The animal is further also an expression, an expressive value that is completely free and aesthetic in nature: "We must grasp the mystery of life in the way that animals *show themselves to each other*" (Merleau-Ponty 1995: 188). The intrinsic visibility of the living being demonstrates that there is an inherent relationality within nature (what Merleau-Ponty – using a Husserl's expression – calls *Ineinander*): "What exists are not separated animals, but an

inter-animality" (Merleau-Ponty 1995: 189).[8]

An animal's conduct – its unique way of being a body – is not inevitably addressed to a purpose; it does not submit to *aut-aut* reasoning. The body is not a 'physiological sack' (Merleau-Ponty 1995: 188) and an organism's life is neither reducible to the pursuit of utility nor to the manifestation of finality: "Rather, its appearance manifests something that resembles our oneiric life" (Merleau-Ponty 1995: 188). Animal behavior certainly has utility, but the fact that every animal is always this-or-that animal opens up a different kind of reflection. Similar reflections can be found in relation to the category of species. According to Merleau-Ponty, the notion of species has ontological value: "The species is what the animal has to be, not in the sense of a power of being, but in the sense of a slope on which all the animals of the same species are placed" (Merleau-Ponty 1995: 189). It is necessary to clarify this point: How is it possible to reconcile the fact that, on the one hand, there is a sort of bodily freedom of the living being; and on the other hand, there is a kind of natural and physical legacy (such as the directives imposed by the species)?[9]

Let us briefly turn to the work of Konrad Lorenz. A student of Jakob von Uexküll, Lorenz developed an interesting interpretation of animal behavior, especially in relation to the notion of instinct. According to Merleau-Ponty,

> "[T]he 'instinctive tendencies' are not actions directed toward a goal, not even toward a distant goal of which the animal is aware. Instinct is primordial activity 'without object', objektlos, which is not primitively the position of an end. […] The instinct is an activity established from within but that possesses a blindness and does not know its object. (Merleau-Ponty 1995: 191–192)"

8 See also: "There is a *natural* rooting of the for-other. We saw in Portmann that the animal body is understood as an organ for the for-other, that mimicry is understood as identification, and that the species is already inscribed in generativity and is also inscribed in this intercorporeity" (Merleau-Ponty 1995: 210).

9 Merleau-Ponty valorises the notion of species. Commenting on Lorenz, for example, he asserts: "The animal species have patterns of specific behaviour 'exactly as they have teeth'" (Merleau-Ponty 1995: 191).

The object is put on the back-burner: it becomes evocative of an innate complex, of a *theme*, in the words of Raymond Ruyer. Merleau-Ponty here – as in his thought in general – tries to find an original way to conceive vital acts: behavior is neither finalistic nor mechanical. The external object – external excitant – is the trigger for a sort of reminiscence:

> "This tension meets the object not so much because it is directed toward it as because it is a means capable of resolving the tension, as if the object intervened like a point of contact that is in the animal, as if it brought to the animal the fragment of a melody that the animal carried within itself, or came to awaken an a priori that provoked a reminiscence. (Merleau-Ponty 1995: 191–192)"

There is an *a priori* – the theme of the animal, the species (what von Uexküll and Merleau-Ponty call the 'melody') – and there is a sort of empty activity:

> "There is an oneiric, sacred, and absolute character of instinct. It seems that the animal both wants and does not want the object. The instinct is both in itself and turned toward the object, it is both an inertia and a hallucinatory, oneiric behaviour, capable of making a world and of picking up any object of the world. […] Instinct is oriented toward the image or the typical. There is a narcissism of instinct. If it tends to find its identity in fixing an object, it does not know what it is nor what it wants. (Merleau-Ponty 1995: 193)"

Tracing narcissistic modalities in animal behavior leads us to an interesting view of animality. In animal behavior – understood as significant and irreducible –, in the animal body – understood as situated and expressive –, and finally in animal instinctual activity – understood as orientation and ritualization –, there is an 'empty production', a primordial symbolism and pre-culture that are immanent in the body itself. There is an enigma of the body; there is a *symbolism* in the body. But what does this mean? Here, Merleau-Ponty provides a precise definition of the symbolism of the body. In a work note, he writes:

> "Symbolism: a term taken as representative of another *Auffassung als* -> We refer then to the mind, carrier of the *als*, to intentionality, to meaning – but then: symbolism is surveyed; there is no longer a body. By saying that the body is symbolism, we mean that without a preliminary *Auffassung* of the signifier and the signified supposed as separated, the body would pass in the world and the world in the body. Feeling or pleasure, because the body is mobile, that is, the power to elsewhere, are the [means of the] unveiling of *something.* (Merleau-Ponty 1995: 211)"

> " There is a primordial communication between the body and the world, a communication in the terms of a *tacit language*. Equally, different bodies can communicate and understand each other through this primordial symbolism. It is here – in this *inter-corporeality*, in this *inter-worldliness* – that we find the "strange kinship between the human and the animal" (Merleau-Ponty 1995: 214). It is the investigation into corporeity that leads us to authentically comprehend animal and human beings: no longer separated by an ontological abyss, no longer assimilated by anthropomorphic characteristics.A new kind of *difference* appears here: human being is not an *exception* but rather *emerges* from *ontological continuity*. The investigations into corporeity lead us back to the primordial relationship between animals and humans: to begin with, we are all living bodies, situated in, and open to, the world; but on the other hand, there are also important differences: "the human body (one of them-and different)" (Merleau-Ponty 1995: 221). The animal, in its *being-body*, is an individual existence equipped with a uniqueness that is expressed in its behavior, in its activity. From this perspective, human being is no longer the result of a mere addition, but *another way of being a body*: "We study the human through its body in order to see it emerge as different from the animal, not by the addition of reason, but rather, in short, in the *Ineinander* with the animal (strange anticipations or caricatures of the human in the animal), by escape and not by superposition. (Merleau-Ponty 1995: 214)"

The ontology traced by Merleau-Ponty is genuinely relational: human and animal beings, through their specific bodies, live the same world and share a primordial openness towards it. The relation between animals and humans is

a *lateral* one (Merleau-Ponty 1995: 211, 268, 273). It is in the context of this kind of ontology that we can find an original way to rethink our relationship to animals, without denying our human specificity and/or the uniqueness of "the grand territory of the beasts" (Derrida 1999).

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