

## Merleau-Ponty's Transcendental Project

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### Abstract

In this paper, I argue that Merleau-Ponty reformulates traditional transcendental philosophy in the sense of showing that the a priori conditions of experience cannot be separated from the concrete experiences. In the first section, I revisit Kant and Husserl, to show how these authors delimit the transcendental conditions as a formal domain independent from any concrete experience. Then I reconstruct the argumentative move through which Merleau-Ponty rejects this formal delimitation of the transcendental sphere and reintroduces it as inseparable from empirical domain, initially in *The Structure of Behavior* (section 2) and later in *Phenomenology of Perception* (section 3).

**Keywords:** phenomenology, transcendental philosophy, Merleau-Ponty, body, real world

### Introduction

This paper contributes to the debate on Merleau-Ponty's affiliation with transcendental philosophy. It is a subject on which there is much divergence among the commentators. There are those who reject that Merleau-Ponty was affiliated with transcendental philosophy because of his inability to offer a complete transcendental reflection since he focused excessively on the concrete perceptual experience of the world.<sup>1</sup> Other authors argued that Merleau-Ponty explicitly did not want to affiliate himself with the transcendental tradition, and they attempt to show how his descriptions of perception and bodily intentionality are convergent with some contemporary scientific researches.<sup>2</sup> A third group of authors considers that at least in certain passages about perception and bodily

intentionality Merleau-Ponty does succeed in offering transcendental arguments, which are constructed *in the same way* that Husserl or Kant did.<sup>3</sup> Finally, some authors, among whom I include myself, consider that Merleau-Ponty develops a transcendental approach to perception and bodily intentionality, which is, however, substantially modified compared to that of his great predecessors.<sup>4</sup> The supporters of the latter position have an additional difficulty, namely, to elucidate what the structure of this new transcendental approach is. This is exactly the general problem that I am going to address in this text. Hence, I shall not only clarify why it is correct to ascribe a transcendental project to Merleau-Ponty, but also reconstruct its main theses.

### 1.

Any attempt at qualifying a philosophical project as “transcendental” must present some basic features that establish what is understood by this term. Merleau-Ponty himself offers a critical presentation of what he calls classic transcendental philosophies in his *Phenomenology of Perception* (published in 1945, hereafter PP; cf. Merleau-Ponty 2002, 70-1), namely, some of Kant (and the Neo-Kantians’) and Husserl’s positions. One will see at the end of this section what Merleau-Ponty’s main criticisms of these authors are. Before this, I would like to present with greater detail some of the main thesis of these authors interpreted by him.

Initially, let me consider some of the main aspects which constitute the very idea of transcendental philosophy, such as established by Kant. In this respect, I shall make use of a tripartite characterization of the Kantian transcendental set forth by Derk Pereboom (1990), which in my opinion is very useful. As suggested by Pereboom, three notions compound the sense of “transcendental” for Kant:

a) Kant associates the transcendental to the *subjective modes* through which one can obtain *a priori* knowledge (Kant 1998, B, 25). Thus, the transcendental investigation is not interested in the objects of knowledge, but in the subjective structures through which objects can be known *a priori* (and *a*

*priori* is a mark of that which is independent from and precedes particular factual experiences).

b) Kant maintains that these *a priori* modes are *conditions* of possibility that every knowledge of experience must satisfy in order to be established (Kant 2004, 125, note).

c) Kant associates the transcendental to a kind of reflection capable of tracing all representations to their *origins* in their corresponding cognitive faculties (Kant 1998, A 261 / B 317). The transcendental is, in this sense, associated with the capacity of referring the contents of representations to their *a priori* subjective sources.

Pereboom suggests that the transcendental, as a synthesis of these three aspects associated by Kant, constitutes a *special point of view* that allows for exploring the subjective cognitive faculties in their pure aspects (independent of their empirical use), so as to reveal the conditions through which all knowledge can be achieved, conditions that are also the *source* of cognitive representations. I agree with this conclusion, and I would like to extract from it a consequence related to the empirical sphere. This sphere can be defined by contrast with the transcendental: the empirical is related to the *exercise* of cognitive faculties, that is, to their presumption (successful or not) to know worldly objects, a presumption which is always subject not only to *a priori* conditions but to the factual conditions of the use of the cognitive apparatus in real situations. The empirical domain is thus marked by *contingent* aspects whose influence on cognitive situations implies neither necessity nor universality. Besides contingency, what also marks the empirical domain is the *incapacity* to reveal the very origin of cognitive activity. In the empirical use, cognitive faculties are turned toward worldly objects and do not reflect on their own functioning as a condition and source of knowledge. Here, it is obviously supposed that all relevant conditions of knowledge have been met, since empirical knowledge is many times established, but it is not clear, at this level, *how* it was possible that such knowledge came to be.

One arrives here at a quite significant dichotomy between the transcendental and the empirical: the transcendental designates a point of view from which the

cognitive subject is not limited to the common functioning of her faculties, a point of view that would enable her to know the very *a priori* origins of all knowledge, independently from the insertion of the cognitive capacities in concrete situations. The empirical, in turn, designates an activity that ignores its own origin and its general conditions; it is an unreflective involvement with particular things and situations, an involvement incapable of clarifying the conditions of its own objectivity when the latter is obtained.<sup>5</sup>

Let me now turn to the sense of the transcendental at least in the first phase of Husserl's philosophy, where there will be a contrast between the transcendental and the empirical even more radical than that inferred in the last paragraph from Kant's position. This phase is precisely that which Merleau-Ponty associates with traditional transcendental philosophy.<sup>6</sup>

Between 1906 and 1907, Husserl makes public his first version of the transcendental phenomenology in two courses, *Introduction to Logic and Theory of Knowledge* (1906-1907) and *The Idea of Phenomenology* (1907). It is impossible to reconstruct the main theses of these works here. I just want to underscore the most striking procedure of transcendental phenomenology herein developed, namely, the *phenomenological reduction* (Husserl 2008, §36), the method through which the validity of spontaneous beliefs in the *empirical existence* of the objects is suspended. Commonly, in what Husserl calls the natural orientation of thought, one believes that things and the world exist independently of subjectivity. When suspending this belief, one purifies empirical experience in order to reduce it to its intuitive core that is directly given to subjectivity. Based on this purified domain of consciousness, Husserl intends to show how the empirical objectivity is constituted through a stratified system of subjective acts. Thus, the phenomenological reduction opens the path to reveal the active role of the pure consciousness in the constitution of the meaning of any experience.

Indeed, not only are spontaneous beliefs suspended by the phenomenological reduction, but also the objective validity of all scientific knowledge in general. This is done so that it can be clarified *how* this knowledge is established on the basis of

the structures of purified consciousness. Transcendental phenomenology is thus a discipline that seeks to elucidate the *possibility* of knowledge and experience in general, and, in order to accomplish this task, the *validity* of all contact with the empirical domain is suspended, since what is at stake is exactly the way through which this domain can be known or at least experienced. This extremely succinct presentation of the transcendental phenomenology is enough to suggest that Husserl, in general, preserves those three aspects that, as Pereboom held in relation to Kant, would constitute the transcendental point of view: phenomenology entails a *suspension* of the empirical use of cognitive faculties (use in which one unreflectively judges that one has contact with worldly objects) in order to reveal, in their *a priori* purity, the subjective capacities through which the meaning of any experience is constituted. Moreover, Husserl argues that these subjective capacities are *a priori* conditions for the experience and knowledge of the world, in the sense that it is only when one investigates them that one understands how subjectivity can establish contact with what transcends it.<sup>7</sup> In addition to this, Husserl asserts that it is through the disclosure of pure consciousness as the domain of apodictic evidence that one can shed light on the question of the genesis of the meaning of knowledge and experience in general (Husserl 2008, § 39, 231).

Husserl not only preserves the contrast between the transcendental and the empirical, but, in fact, he takes this contrast to the extreme. For Kant, the transcendental point of view allowed for clarifying the *a priori* conditions that delimit every possible *human* knowledge. In this case, it is a matter of investigating the epistemic conditions to which the whole human genre is subject. In turn, what phenomenology describes are the essences of acts of consciousness and the essences of possible phenomena. To describe an act of consciousness in its eidetic level means to describe the general and necessary features of such an act which are independent of any factual particularities, even of those aspects that refer to the totality of the humankind. In *Ideas I*, for instance, Husserl maintains that every physical being can only be grasped by a perceptual consciousness, by means of partial and mutable perspectives.

This thesis, Husserl adds, is valid “not just for human beings, but also for God – as the ideal representative of absolute cognition” (Husserl 1983, §150, 362). Hence, the transcendental domain revealed by phenomenology is not limited to the *a priori* modes of human knowledge, but is extended to the *a priori* modes of *knowledge in general*, whether it is exercised by humans, gods or extra-terrestrials.

Transcendental phenomenology describes *ideal possibilities* of acts of consciousness in correlation with pure phenomena. Not all of these possibilities appear in actual human experience; those that become concrete constitute the *empirical domain*. And the fact that one eidetic possibility is instantiated in human experience, and others are not, does not change anything within the transcendental sphere, which is precisely compounded by *pure* essences. In turn, empirical experiences are the contingent actualization of some ideal possibilities delimited by such essences, and, in order to know this eidetic level, *i.e.*, to make explicit the *a priori* universal structures that regulate concrete experience, it is necessary to move to a point of view independent of all factual particularities. In his famous inaugural lecture at Freiburg in 1917, Husserl clearly states this consequence: “pure phenomenology proposes to investigate the realm of pure consciousness and its phenomena not as it *de facto* exists but as pure possibilities with their pure laws” (Husserl 1986, 79). In other words, transcendental phenomenology does not study empirical facts, but only the pure essences of which facts are instances.

As one sees, the transcendental is presented as a domain completely separate from empirical experience, at least in one phase of the Husserlian phenomenology. And this is probably the most striking feature of classic transcendental philosophies, as presented by Merleau-Ponty:

This move from *naturata* to *naturans*, from constituted to constituting, (...) would leave nothing implicit or tacitly accepted in my knowledge. It would enable me to take complete possession of my experience, thus equating thinking and thought. Such is the ordinary perspective of a transcendental philosophy, and also, to all appearances at least, the programme of a transcendental phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 70).

The passage from empirical experience to a pure point of view, from which it would be possible to disclose the constitution of the meaning of this experience on the basis of ideal or formal possibilities, is the procedure that unites Kant and Husserl as protagonists of traditional transcendental philosophy. I tried to reconstruct in the first part of this section the main features of such philosophy; let me present Merleau-Ponty's assessment:

it is striking how transcendental philosophies of the classical type never question the possibility of effecting the complete disclosure which they always assume *done somewhere*. It is enough for them that it should be necessary, and in this way they judge what is by what ought to be, by what the idea of knowledge requires (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 71).

According to Merleau-Ponty, classic transcendental philosophies are content with the formulation of the necessary and universal conditions that would make possible any particular concrete experiences. The necessary and universal character of these conditions would entail its antecedence in relation to particular experiences, since each one of these experiences *must* precisely have satisfied such conditions to exist as such. But for Merleau-Ponty the appeal to this universal character is insufficient to answer two criticisms. The first one is already sketched in the quotation above: one should ask whether it is really possible to adopt a point of view that would have access to the pure essences or formal schemes responsible for the meaning of all experience. The passage to such a point of view presupposes purification from every tie with the empirical world in order to display the presumably formal or ideal components of any experience. Merleau-Ponty thinks that there is no way to achieve such a passage:

In fact, the thinking Ego can never abolish its inherence in an individual subject, which knows all things in a particular perspective. Reflection can never make me stop seeing the sun two hundred yards away on a misty day, or seeing it 'rise' and 'set', or thinking with the cultural apparatus with which my education, my previous efforts, my personal history, have provided me. I never actually collect together, or call up simultaneously, all the primary thoughts which contribute to my perception or to my present conviction (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 71).

Merleau-Ponty holds here that it is not possible for the reflexive subject to abandon completely its inherence to a body and its determined space-time situation. Human subjects are irremediably melded with factual situations, they are continuously thrown into empirical events by their bodies and this primordial insertion in the world entails that “the possibility of absence, the dimension of escape and freedom which reflection opens in the depths of our being, and which is called the transcendental Ego, are not initially given and are never absolutely acquired” (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 242). Thus, it is not possible to move to a subjective point of view purified from all empirical bonds because “every act of reflection, every voluntary taking up of a position is based on the ground (...) of a life of pre-personal consciousness” (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 242). For Merleau-Ponty, philosophical reflection never constitutes an *autonomous* transcendental domain, for it is continuously dependent upon the pre-reflexive life of the body. To defend that it is possible to adopt a point of view purified and independent of every factual or empirical feature is simply to be a victim of an intellectualist illusion.<sup>8</sup>

The second criticism is that the idea of a pure point of view obtained by reflection eludes the problem of the insertion of consciousness in sensible experience. This means that, even if one arrived at such a point of view, this would not help in explicating the concrete insertion of the real subject in empirical circumstances. Classic transcendental philosophies suggest that access to the pure transcendental sphere implies removing every tie with empirical experience, so that “we never have to wonder how the same subject comes to be a part of the world and at the same time its principle” (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 48). In this way, one ignores that the subject *is* inserted in the empirical events and that this pre-reflexive insertion *is the basis* for reflexive activity. According to Merleau-Ponty, the strategy of classic transcendental philosophies, particularly of Kantianism, is to duplicate the empirical operations of the subject by postulating a pure transcendental domain in which the formal principles and syntheses responsible for experience would be guaranteed. Nonetheless, “when I think something at the present moment, the guarantee of a non-temporal synthesis



is insufficient and even unnecessary as a basis of my thought” (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 149). An act of thought is completed by a subject who is currently engaged, through her perceptual-motor skills, in a concrete situation. It would be necessary, therefore, to investigate the *current experiences* of embodied subjectivity, and not simply to postulate transcendental principles that are mere *later duplications* of these operations. And it is precisely as an attempt to ascribe *transcendental value* to this current insertion of subjectivity in the world that Merleau-Ponty will establish his own philosophical project. I shall show next how this project is already sketched in *The structure of behavior* (hereafter, SB), his first book, published in 1942 (Merleau-Ponty 1983).

## 2.

The major task of SB is “to understand the relations of consciousness and nature” (Merleau-Ponty 1983, 3) outside the parameters established by two classic schools, namely, the linear causal thought and Neo-Kantianism. Generally speaking, according to the linear causal thought, consciousness is determined by a stimulus that came from the environment where it is inserted. In turn, according to Neo-Kantianism, nature is a set of phenomena constituted by *a priori* categories of consciousness. In order to avoid these two antagonistic solutions, Merleau-Ponty extracts some important philosophical consequences from *Gestalttheorie*, the psychological school whose main notion is that of *Gestalt* or form. A *Gestalt* is a global phenomenon the properties of which are not reducible to those of its isolated elements. A melody is a typical example of a *Gestalt*: even when a known tune is played in a different key, i.e., when its sequence of isolated notes is very or completely different from the original one, its *general form* can still be recognized. There is, in this case, a structure that endures even when its elementary components are changed (in an ordered way); in other words, there is a form that is not inexorably linked to discrete components.

This notion of *Gestalt* gives rise to an explanation of behavior that rejects the causal linearity between stimulus and

response. Many experiments done by the Gestaltists aim to prove that animals do not react automatically to isolated stimuli, since any stimuli receive their meaning in relation with a general form through which organisms grasp the lived situation, just as each note fulfills its function in relation to a melody as a whole (Merleau-Ponty 1983, 58). As Bimbenet observes, these *forms* or distribution patterns of perceptual stimuli express the biological *structures* through which the organisms delimit a meaningful environment for their survival (Bimbenet 2004, 53-5). For example, given that certain organisms have a preponderant auditory structure (e.g. rabbits, bats), certain stable auditory forms are privileged in their behavior. It is important to note that this delimitation of a meaningful environment according to organic structures is *prior* to the linear causal determination of behavior by objective stimuli: it is because the organisms exist by means of certain bodily structures (which define the amplitude of a phenomenal field) that some stimuli can be meaningfully grasped. So it is true that organisms *react* to environmental stimuli; however, such stimuli, in order to motivate some behavioral reaction, must be compatible with the structures through which the organisms are inserted in the world. Each actual reaction supposes a general delimitation of the range of meaningful situations. The relation between stimulation and general delimitation of meaning is, accordingly, not linear, but circular (Merleau-Ponty 1983, 130): on the one hand, stimulation activates the organism and, on the other hand, the structures that delimit any meaningful experience render the efficacy of such a specific stimulation possible.

Merleau-Ponty maintains that the linear causal thought and Neo-Kantianism ignore this circularity and, because of this, they offer insufficient explanations of behavior. It is important to give attention here to his criticism to Neo-Kantianism, since it was based in a contrast to this school that Merleau-Ponty assumes a new transcendental posture.

The general framework that Neo-Kantianism uses to understand the relation of the subject with nature is the constitution of the experience through cognitive syntheses of consciousness. However, this framework does not capture the

specificity of animal and human behavior. As Merleau-Ponty argues,

“[it] would anything be served by saying that behavior ‘is conscious’ and that it reveals to us, as its other side, a being for-itself hidden behind the visible body. The gestures of behavior (...) do not allow the showing through of a consciousness (...), but rather a certain manner of treating the world, of ‘being-in-the-world’” (Merleau-Ponty 1983, 125-6).

Behavior is not an expression of *a priori* subjective powers by means of which the meaning of lived particular experiences would be constituted, but it institutes a kind of “existential” relation to the world. Let me extract some consequences of this thesis.

According to Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of *Gestalttheorie*, behavior establishes a domain of perceived forms through which worldly events and things are grasped. The philosophical consideration of this domain suggests a new understanding of the relations between nature and consciousness. On the one hand, nature cannot be reduced to phenomena constituted by *a priori* cognitive powers, since it presents itself as *concrete stimuli* grasped by organisms in an *existential* and not cognitive general attitude. But, on the other hand, stimuli are united in meaningful forms that are rooted, in the end, in the structural potentialities of organisms, as long as nature should not be considered as completely independent of organisms. In truth, nature itself, and not some construction based on *a priori* capacities, is directly presented to organisms, but this presentation occurs by means of privileged perceptive shapes.<sup>9</sup> There is here an original connection between organisms (which includes the human consciousness) and nature, a connection ignored by the linear causal thought and Neo-Kantianism, and which is explored in the third chapter of SB.

In this text, Merleau-Ponty proposes that the known universe is nothing but the integration of three orders of phenomena: physical, vital, and human. In turn, these orders can be understood as different *forms*, that is, as concrete structures ordered according to the way they appear to human consciousness.<sup>10</sup> It is here that Merleau-Ponty explicitly adopts the “transcendental attitude”, that is, “a philosophy that deals

with any conceivable reality as an object of consciousness” (Merleau-Ponty 1983, 201). By treating the physical, vital and even human events as forms, Merleau-Ponty considers them, at least in what refers to its manifestation to humans, as phenomenal arrangements in correlation with consciousness. In this sense, “the idea of a transcendental philosophy, that is, the idea of consciousness as constituting the universe before it and grasping the objects themselves in an indubitable external experience, seems to us to be a definitive acquisition as the first phase of reflection” (Merleau-Ponty 1983, 215). Let us understand the scope of this acquisition.

If the universe is organized in terms of *Gestalt*, and if *Gestalt* always manifests itself to consciousness, then consciousness should be understood “as universal milieu” (Merleau-Ponty 1983, 184), that is, as the domain that structures the manifestation of any event. Merleau-Ponty seems here to affiliate himself with neo-Kantian transcendental philosophy, a position that presents the world as an “ensemble of objective relations borne by consciousness” (Merleau-Ponty 1983, 3). However, as he himself already anticipated, this theoretical move is only valid as a *first* phase of his reflection. As a general result, “our conclusion is not that of critical thought” (Merleau-Ponty 1983, vii), he says right away in the table of contents of SB. Thus, it is true that he adopts a transcendental attitude, but precisely an attitude that “stands in a relation of simple homonymy with a philosophy in the critical tradition” (Merleau-Ponty 1983, 206). This means that although his philosophical position and that of Neo-Kantians are called “transcendental”, the meaning of this term is considerably distinct in each case.

Merleau-Ponty completes this first phase of his reflection with the thesis that “the consciousness *for* which the Gestalt exists was not intellectual consciousness but perceptual experience” (Merleau-Ponty 1983, 210). It is perceptual consciousness that plays the role of universal milieu, but not as an *a priori* power of ordering contingent data. Merleau-Ponty considers that the meaning of perceptually grasped phenomena *is adherent* to the material events presented, and does not come from an *a priori* structure.<sup>11</sup> Thus, the perceived *Gestalten* are not only subjectively constituted units of meaning, but phenomenal

manifestations *that directly disclose worldly events*. In this sense, the notion of *Gestalt* unifies signification and existence: by means of the phenomenal arrangement, some meaning is manifested, meaning that cannot be reduced to a subjective construction since it is *intrinsic* to the perceived environment.<sup>12</sup> For Merleau-Ponty, Neo-Kantianism rejects this unification since this school conceives perceptual consciousness as a case of intellectual consciousness and denies that the latter has direct contact with concrete reality. Perceptual consciousness is, in this case, diluted in cognitive processes, so that “every form of consciousness presupposes its completed form: the dialectic of the epistemological subject and the scientific object” (Merleau-Ponty 1983, 201). It is, then, intellectual consciousness that plays the role of the universal milieu in Neo-Kantianism, and this consciousness is related only to subjective representations submitted to the *a priori* rules of thought, without directly being in contact with natural events as autonomously ordered in *Gestalten*.<sup>13</sup> In turn, the specificity of perceptual consciousness consists, for Merleau-Ponty, in its direct contact with the physical, biological and human *Gestalten*, or, in other words, in its insertion in a spontaneously meaningful natural domain. The organization of experience in *Gestalten* is not an exercise of *a priori* intellectual capacities, but a manifestation of the sensible world. The phenomenal meaning presented by perception is, in this sense, a meaning included in the empirical arrangements with which organisms are in direct contact, and not only *a priori* forms of *possible* experiences.

Let me now try to delineate more precisely the general features of the transcendental philosophy extracted by Merleau-Ponty from the consideration of *Gestalten* as intertwinement between meaning and existence. I have said that taking the events of the universe as *Gestalten* entails considering them as phenomena *for* a consciousness that, by means of its structures, delimits the possibilities of manifestation of these events. Consciousness is then recognized as a universal milieu responsible for ordering the meaning of these events, and this argumentative move implies adopting the transcendental attitude. However, this attitude is adopted not with reference to an intellectual power purified from all contact with the empirical, but with reference to perceptual consciousness, which is in direct contact with the

material arrangements of the world.<sup>14</sup> That is clearly a major transformation of transcendental philosophy. In the last section, I have said that classic transcendental philosophies seek to attain a point of view purified from all empirical interference, a point of view from which it would be possible to disclose the conditions of meaning of any concrete experience. In turn, Merleau-Ponty argues that the understanding of such conditions does not require any transition to a pure point of view, since they are constituted as perceptual activity directly linked to empirical situations. From this new perspective, the analysis of transcendental structures (or, in other words, of the gestaltic structures through which every event in the universe manifests itself to us) leads to a description of the actual patterns by which worldly events do exist for us, and this means that transcendental philosophy should not be limited to presenting formal constraints which are independent of any particular situation. And as a consequence of this argumentation, Merleau-Ponty suggests an entire reformulation of transcendental reflection: “it would be necessary to define transcendental philosophy anew in such a way as to integrate with it the very phenomenon of the real” (Merleau-Ponty 1983, 224).

Let me return to the example of the melody to try to elucidate this new formulation of the transcendental problem. The alleged point here is the *inseparability* between the transcendental character of the forms of phenomenal manifestation and the empirical material upon which this character acts. A melody is a form whose meaning cannot be reduced to the sum of the particular notes that compose it, given that such form can be maintained in different keys. A melody can be conceived as a *unit of signification* that assigns functions to the partial acoustical data that compose it, and, in this sense, it plays a “transcendental role” in the organization of a musical experience. But a melody does not consist of an abstract form that subsists independently from any real notes. Although a melody has properties that exceed those of particular notes, its general form presupposes that *there are notes* in a certain relation. Similarly, human perceptual-motor structures are not pure powers, but capacities *polarized by* worldly situations, so that the study of the transcendental capacities of the perceptual subject implies considering the *current insertion* of the latter in a tissue of

concrete phenomena. The subjective structures which are the condition and origin of the meaning of any possible experience are not pure categories or pure essences of acts of consciousness, but the perceptual activity itself as it grasps a gestaltic meaning inherent to worldly events.

Obviously, it is possible to abstract subjective capacities of their concrete exercise in different situations and treat them as general principles determinant of any possible experience. But this abstractive experience, which, according to Merleau-Ponty, characterizes classical transcendental philosophies, wrongly takes this late theorization about the origin of the experience as the true transcendental. However, if one considers subjective capacities in action (in particular situations), then it has to be admitted that the meaning of concrete experiences does not derive from the application of schemes that are absolutely independent from the situation in question, but stems continuously from the circularity between perceptual capacities (which delimit a domain of significant phenomena) and material arrangements with an indecomposable meaning that mobilize such capacities. It follows therefrom that the transcendental analysis sketched in SB does not shift to pure conditions of experience, but explores the particular experiences in which the parameters of perceptual data organization are exercised by a subject engaged in worldly situations. In the next section, I shall consider how this new transcendental analysis takes place in PP.

### 3.

Here is the way Merleau-Ponty presents his general goal in PP: “our constant aim is to elucidate the primary function whereby we bring into existence, for ourselves, or take hold upon, the space, the object or the instrument, and to describe the body as the place where this appropriation occurs” (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 178). It seems highly plausible to understand this goal as a transcendental one, according to those aspects enumerated by Pereboom. After all, Merleau-Ponty is proposing an investigation of the *subjective functions* that act as *condition* and *origin* of every relation with objects, instruments, etc. Nevertheless, I

wish to underscore here the considerable change in the range of what is taken as “subjective”. The transcendental agent is not a set of formal schemes or a pure consciousness, but the *concrete human body*. To be more exact, according to Merleau-Ponty the body is a pre-personal agent, its main functions and capacities act *anonymously*.<sup>15</sup> Even so, I think it is correct to understand such functions as subjective, in a broader sense, since it is through them that one investigates the conditions that make possible the human contact with any objective entity. Just as Kant’s and Husserl’s philosophical investigation, Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological descriptions are not turned toward objects, but toward the modes of knowing them, modes which, in this sense, are subjective, even though they are part of the anonymous bodily apparatus.

It is important to note that when prioritizing the body as a transcendental agent, there is a noticeable change of emphasis in relation to SB. I tried to show that in this book perceptual consciousness assumed the role of “universal milieu”. But obviously, perceptual consciousness is an embodied consciousness, and Merleau-Ponty, in SB, already mentioned the experience of the body as *constituent of conscious activity* and not only as its possible object (Merleau-Ponty 1983, 208). However, there the transcendental emphasis was put on perceptual consciousness as a universal milieu. In turn, Merleau-Ponty explores in detail, in PP, the fact that perceptual consciousness *is always embodied* (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 61), which leads to privileging the body as transcendental agent: “our own body is in the world as the heart is in the organism: it keeps the visible spectacle constantly alive, it breathes life into it and sustains it inwardly, and with it forms a system” (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 235). Here Merleau-Ponty clearly suggests that the body, and not the perceptual consciousness considered *per se*, is responsible for sustaining the field of sensible experiences through which one has contact with the world.

And just as Merleau-Ponty established in SB that perceptual consciousness is inserted in the natural world (since it has direct contact with the material arrangements of which worldly events are constituted), he also presents the bodily



shaping of experience as enveloped by sensible data which are delimited by this shaping itself. It is true that stimuli can only appear to us if they make sense to the perceptual-motor forms with which the body grasps a given segment of the world. However, it is only through sensible stimulation that this apprehension can occur, as Merleau-Ponty exemplifies: “my attitude is never sufficient to make me really see blue or really touch a hard surface” (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 249). Without sensible data, the bodily activity works in the void, and what can happen is at most a hallucination. Hence, the body is the agent that delimits the meaningful amplitude of experience, but its capacities can only be considered to be healthily active when involved in factual situations. As Merleau-Ponty affirms,

we grasp the unity of our body only in that of the thing, and it is based on things that our hands, eyes and all our sense-organs appear to us as so many interchangeable instruments. The body by itself, the body at rest is merely an obscure mass, and we perceive it as a precise and identifiable being when it moves towards a thing, and in so far as it is intentionally projected outwards (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 375, transl. modified).

Accordingly, even in order to know which the bodily capacities that give shape to material stimuli are, one must consider the body as always tied to factual situations in which such capacities operate. This claim has deep implications for transcendental investigation. The subjective capacities that are taken as the condition and origin of experience must be recognized, in their original manifestation, as tied to the concrete situations in which they act. Merleau-Ponty expresses this consequence in a lapidary passage:

the true transcendental [...] is not the totality of constituting operations whereby a transparent world, free from obscurity and impenetrable solidity, is spread out before an impartial spectator, but that ambiguous life in which the forms of transcendence have their *Ursprung*, and which, through a fundamental contradiction, puts me in communication with them, and on this basis makes knowledge possible (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 425, transl. modified).

Here the philosopher makes clear that it is not the capacities of the body considered as general and abstract powers that must be considered as the true transcendental, but *their insertion in concrete situations*. It is only by means of this

insertion that it is possible to know what the subjective capacities and its range are, even if later it is possible to refer to them in a general and abstract mode. It is important to note that this insertion is ambiguous (or “contradictory”, in Merleau-Ponty’s words), for there is a circularity between the *delimitation* of the phenomenal domain by bodily capacities and the *activation* of these capacities by concrete situations. Given this circularity, the transcendental domain must not be considered as a purified realm separated from every empirical feature, but precisely as the very origin of empirical experiences through bodily contact with the world.<sup>16</sup> In other words, as Kant and Husserl, Merleau-Ponty also intends to develop an investigation that unveils subjective capacities as conditions of any objective presentation of the world. However, this investigation no longer implies a passage to a point of view purified from the empirical; instead, it *denounces* this passage as a distortion of the truly transcendental sphere.<sup>17</sup>

The idea of a purified point of view overlooks human original insertion in the world. Kant and Husserl considered that transcendental conditions were restrictions not only to our current course of our experience, but to any possible experience. In this sense, our current world is taken as an instantiation of formal principles valid to all possible worlds. However, for Merleau-Ponty this conception that real experience is an instance of ideal possibilities is an illusion. According to him, the classic transcendental reflection “does not penetrate as far as this living nucleus of perception because it is looking for the conditions which make it *possible* or without which it would not exist, instead of uncovering the operation which brings it *into reality*, or whereby it is constituted” (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 44). Merleau-Ponty suggests here that establishing formal conditions of possibility is secondary compared to the analysis of the actual perceptual experience, since this latter is the source of meaningful events, here included the formulation of formal possibilities. Accordingly, such formal possibilities are not prior to reality, but obtained on the basis of the concrete experience. And, if, in transcendental reflection, it is a matter of investigating the ultimate conditions that make experience possible, then it is not enough to content oneself with formal

principles. As Merleau-Ponty affirms, “we are not *a priori* obliged to endow the world with the conditions in the absence of which it could not be thought of, for, in order to be thought of, it must, in the first place, not be ignored, it must exist for me, that is, be given” (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 255, transl. modified). Here the suggestion is that philosophical investigation must not limit itself to the search of formal conditions, but disclose the *primordial giving* of the world to the body, and this giving should be presented as the true transcendental. If one seeks the ultimate origin of the meaning of experience, then the main theme of transcendental philosophy *must be* the ambiguous life through which the body both delimits the cognizable domain of meaningfulness and is involved by concrete events.

Here Merleau-Ponty explicitly suggests that he is completing (and not only repeating<sup>18</sup>) something that Kant did not achieve. According to the French philosopher, Kant “has not followed out his programme, which was to define our cognitive powers in terms of our factual condition, and which necessarily compelled him to set every conceivable being against the background of this world” (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 256). Here it becomes clear that the transcendental analysis should not aim at presenting formal restrictions valid for every possible world, but to disclose the very origin of meaningfulness in the concrete insertion of the body in the world. The investigation of this insertion is the correct achievement of the kind of analysis initiated by Kant, but developed by him in a too abstract way. In this way, Merleau-Ponty intends not only to have renewed the very understanding of what transcendental philosophy is, but to accomplish its promise of taking subjective capacities as norms to understand any conceivable objectivity. For that, it was necessary, instead of insisting in a purified realm, to take concrete subjectivity as the true transcendental.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Gurwitsch (1957, 142) emphasizes that Merleau-Ponty “does not ask transcendental questions about the constitution [of the] pre-objective world”, which would be unjustifiedly accepted in its “ultimate facticity”. For Gurwitsch, a “radical” phenomenological reduction should search for the *transcendental conditions* of the perceived world, *i.e.*, should refer the concrete

experience of the world to the *pure noetic* system that orders it, and Merleau-Ponty does not do this.

<sup>2</sup> Dreyfus (1996, note 5) argues that Merleau-Ponty rejects that every intentional content is mental, and this rejection “underlies his rejection of Husserl’s transcendental reduction”. The author does not discuss more carefully whether Merleau-Ponty adopted a transcendental posture of his own. In other text (Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 1999, 120), Dreyfus accentuates the convergence between Merleau-Ponty’s descriptions of perception and some researches in cognitive sciences, without mentioning the transcendental problem, or, rather, only repeating the same note from the paper quoted above.

<sup>3</sup> Stern (1999, 3) affirms that “Merleau-Ponty’s discussions of the body-sense in his *Phenomenology of Perception*” provide examples of *transcendental arguments*, that is, arguments wherein “one thing (X) is a necessary condition for the possibility of something else (Y), so that (it is said) the latter cannot obtain without the former”. For Stern, “in suggesting that X is a condition for Y (...), this claim is supposed to be metaphysical and *a priori*, and not merely natural and *a posteriori*”. This means that transcendental arguments would present “metaphysical constraints” valid to “every *possible* world”, and by using this kind of argument Merleau-Ponty would also present such metaphysical constraints. In a similar way, Taylor (1995) holds that “the conception of the subject as embodied agency, which has developed out of modern phenomenology, as in the works of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, has been deployed and argued for in a way which is ultimately derived from the paradigm arguments of the first *Critique*” (Taylor 1995, 21-2). For Taylor, Merleau-Ponty would have shown that “our perception of the world as that of an embodied agent is not a contingent fact we might discover empirically” (Taylor 1995, 25), but a “claim about the *nature* of our experience and thought” (Taylor 1995, 22). Accordingly, for both authors, transcendental claims do not mix with empirical facts.

<sup>4</sup> Here is a non-exhaustive list of well-argued interpretations about the subject: Geraets (1971), Baldwin (2004, 5-6, 18), Pietersma (2000, 178), Dillon (1997, xii-xiii), Priest (2003, 99). I will discuss some topics of these interpretations throughout the paper.

<sup>5</sup> This consequence is implied, for instance, in the following passage from the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*: “the possibility of an experience in general and cognition of its objects rest on three subjective sources of cognition: *sense, imagination, and apperception*; each of these can be considered empirically, namely in application to given appearances, but they are also elements or foundations *a priori* that make this empirical use itself possible” (A 115). In the second edition, Kant still conceives the empirical activity as *founded by* pure principles: “the syntheses of apprehension, which are empirical, must necessarily be in agreement with the synthesis of apperception, which is intellectual and contained in the category entirely *a priori*” (Kant 1998, B, 162, note).

<sup>6</sup> In PP, Merleau-Ponty presents a tripartite division of Husserl’s work. There is a first period marked by the “logicism” (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 320, note) of *Logical Investigations*, in which Merleau-Ponty is not much interested. The

last period is a kind of “existentialism” (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 320, note) and would have anticipated many of the theses defended by the French philosopher. Between these extremes, there is a period of idealist transcendental philosophy – “the period of the *Ideen*” (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 283, note) – which is severely criticized by Merleau-Ponty.

<sup>7</sup> “Instead of judging about the being and not-being of the transcendent thing of the moment, we consider its content as it is immanently ‘intuitively’ given to us and supposed in the phenomenon in question. We can in this way obtain insight into the *essence of what is transcendent in general* or of a transcendent thing with this or that characteristic feature” (Husserl 2008, §38, 226).

<sup>8</sup> With this argumentation Merleau-Ponty anticipated the answer to the authors who thought that he had not developed a full transcendental philosophy (Gurwitsch, for example). In fact, these authors obstinately insist on the assumption of a point of view that is precisely disqualified by Merleau-Ponty's argumentation. In this sense, not having affiliated himself to classic transcendental philosophy was clearly a positive result obtained by Merleau-Ponty and not a deficiency of his analysis.

<sup>9</sup> This conception of nature will be preserved in the *Phenomenology of Perception*: “there is a nature, which is not that of the sciences, but the one which perception presents to me” (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 502).

<sup>10</sup> That is why Merleau-Ponty affirms: “what we call nature is already consciousness of nature, what we call life is already consciousness of life and what we call mental is still an object vis-à-vis consciousness” (Merleau-Ponty 1983, 199).

<sup>11</sup> After considering the psychological thesis that language is perceived in a privileged way by babies (as compared to other noises), Merleau-Ponty concludes: “as soon as nascent consciousness is taken as the object of analysis one realizes that it is impossible to apply to it the celebrated distinction between *a priori* form and empirical content” (Merleau-Ponty 1983, 171). And, in a general way, Merleau-Ponty argues that at least in a certain level (prior to the projections of scientific knowledge on experience) perception offers “indecomposable structures” (Merleau-Ponty 1983, 171), that is, phenomenal sets with an adherent meaning, which is not attributed by formal principles external to sensible data.

<sup>12</sup> “What is profound in the notion of *Gestalt* from which we started is not the idea of signification but that of *structure*, the joining of an idea and an existence which are indiscernible, the contingent arrangement by which materials begin to have meaning in our presence, intelligibility in the nascent state” (Merleau-Ponty 1983, 206-7).

<sup>13</sup> “Critical philosophy, having step by step repressed quality and existence – residues of its ideal analysis – to place them finally in a matter about which nothing can be thought and which is for us therefore as if it were not, deploys a homogeneous activity of the understanding from one end of knowledge to another” (Merleau-Ponty 1983, 208).

<sup>14</sup> If our reconstruction of Merleau-Ponty's argument is correct, then it seems undeniable that his theory of perception was developed from a transcendental point of view (although reformulated). Hence, the approach of the authors (e.g. Dreyfus) who select some aspects of this theory that are more compatible

with cognitive sciences and minimize or not even mention its transcendental intention seems at least limited.

<sup>15</sup> “Perception is always in the mode of the impersonal ‘One’. It is not a personal act enabling me to give a fresh significance to my life. The person who, in sensory exploration, gives a past to the present and directs it towards a future, is not myself as an autonomous subject, but myself in so far as I have a body and am able to ‘look’” (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 279).

<sup>16</sup> Priest (2003, 34) and Baldwin (2004, 18) recognize that the bodily capacities assume the role of the transcendental subject in Merleau-Ponty’s works, but do not highlight the circular relation between them and concrete situations, a relation that marks the difference between the body and the transcendental subject of classic philosophies.

<sup>17</sup> As Priest suggests, so there would be a minimal meaning of the transcendental that would unite Kant, Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, independently from the idea of a point of view purified from all sensible data (Priest 2003, 99).

<sup>18</sup> As Stern and Taylor suggest.

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