

Beyond the Human: The Pre-Subjective Existence in Bimbenet's Reading of Merleau-Ponty's Anthropology

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Abstract

Étienne Bimbenet's view on anthropology in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy acknowledges the difficulties such a project has due to the openness of the late Merleau-Ponty's notions of expression and existence. In this research, I aim to contribute to this problematization by proposing that the late Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology drafts a pre-subjective existence in his writings on language and perception. I claim that the notion of human in Merleau-Ponty is impossible due to its ontological dependence on subjectivity, which is problematized in his last works. To achieve this objective, my argumentation follows three parts. Firstly, I present Bimbenet's study on anthropology in Merleau-Ponty, in order to raise questions on the exclusiveness of human symbolic behavior. Secondly, I will address Merleau-Ponty's proposal of expression, which I affirm implies an ambiguity between an active and a passive dynamism, to address its existential nature, tearing down an anthropological thesis. And, finally, I will take the previous ambiguity to argue a pre-subjective existence in late Merleau-Ponty, further problematizing the anthropological objective of his first work.

Keywords: human, anthropology, subjectivity, existence, expression, language

In the introduction to *Après Merleau-Ponty* (2011), Étienne Bimbenet cared to highlight the openness that characterizes Merleau-Ponty's work, with the aim to "show that there's a life after Merleau-Ponty"¹ (Bimbenet 2011, 9) since his

philosophy “would appear wide open and available to all further contributions” (11). Sharing this perspective, and in addition to the fact that Merleau-Ponty’s last writings are unfinished while drafting a promising ontology of perception, I will try to establish a projection of his late philosophy in order to track there a subtle switch from his early notions and interests on the topic that characterizes Bimbenet’s work: anthropology.

Bimbenet’s work has highlighted the anthropological dimension of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, centered on a human being that, as he observes, is never thought of as such, but rather criticizing the objective of totalizing the human phenomenon (cf. Bimbenet 2004, 13, 15), and positioning himself against the idealist conception of human as the one with the privilege of spirit or reason (cf. 10). This critique situates Merleau-Ponty as a thinker that doesn’t present *humanness* as a defined and recognized essence some beings can participate in and some others don’t, but instead as an experience that has blurred lines. This indetermination, not only contributes to a richer proposal of the human but, at the same time, it makes the very notion questionable, since if we are human, we are so in contrast to what? What is ‘human’ distinguishing itself from? This presentation aims to problematize the presence of an anthropology in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, especially in his later works, to highlight a gesture of going beyond the human experience towards a broader sense of existence. To this end, firstly it will be necessary to acknowledge the main premise of Bimbenet’s work, namely, that Merleau-Ponty’s notion of experience is always a *human* one. Secondly, I will further develop the vices that an *anthropology* as such in Merleau-Ponty’s late work would bring to the cohesion of his thought as a whole, to highlight an ambiguity introduced in the notion of *institution*. Then, finally, I will propose the late Merleau-Pontian point of view as an existential one, an existence that is not tied to any form of human shape, but rather in a broader sense. This will be done by tracing a path throughout his thought from the ontological notions of ‘activity’ and ‘passivity’.

1. The Human in Merleau-Ponty's Early Phenomenology

In his commentary on the third section 'L'ordre humain' of Merleau-Ponty's *The Structure of Behavior*, Bimbenet observes that Merleau-Ponty's project in this work is to unite the nature-spirit split, understood as a scenario in which, on the one hand, there's the real empiric nature and, on the other, there's the spirit, the consciousness, what's beyond empiric reality and disposes itself in a sort of ideal world. This split is what brings in the discussion over mechanism and idealism, where mechanism argues that the world is a *partes extra partes* that moves automatically, as an unintended chain reaction; and, on the other side of the debate, idealism proposes that all existent is due to the position of meaning from a consciousness. Merleau-Ponty develops a whole argumentation on what position the human being would fill in this schema, and the goal is to show the inevitable jointure of both these dimensions, particularly in the human experience. Then, the union of nature and spirit is done so by bringing in the idea of a 'spirit of nature' that's co-constituted by the organism that experiences it. This experience of nature is witnessed, in this text, through *behavior*.

The big achievement of this text is to propose a perspective on behavior as an active principle in contrast with the classical mechanistic approach: Merleau-Ponty seeks to overcome the conception of human consciousness as a closed entity and merely synchronized with the movement of its surroundings. That is, reducing behavior to the mere behavioral response to a stimulus, which would assume that, first, the surroundings that produce the stimulus have the element that causes a certain behavior and that, second, the consciousness that perceives the stimulus is limited to passively 'obey' the activity of their surroundings, a foreign activity. Instead, Merleau-Ponty's proposal walks towards the acknowledgment of the activity that's implied in human behavior: "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

1967, 13). Here, the author recognizes that the organism plays an effective role in the construction of a new form, 'form' being the alternative notion Merleau-Ponty uses throughout the text to refer to 'structure' (cf. Alloa 2017, 20), then, understood as an element of the world with a meaning attached to it, as behavior is, all by an external factor. Bimbenet explains to us that the form is a sense unit, instead of a substantial entity, taking the shape of a meaning to the consciousness, rather than a *fact* that functions in the world (cf. Bimbenet 2000, 31).

Bimbenet observes that behavior understood as what I have proposed here as an active motion from the organism, has an impact on the notion of spirit (mind, consciousness): is not strictly a human transcendental ego, but a broader kind of existence that characterizes itself by its activeness – and, for this reason, Merleau-Ponty speaks throughout most of *The Structure of Behavior* of 'an organism'. Now, what is the distinctive aspect of the human in this active behavior? Bimbenet shows us that the form as a sign of inner action (life) poses at the same time an individualization by demonstrating gradual ways of autonomy with regard to the surroundings (cf. 2000, 32). In this frame, Merleau-Ponty references Hegel's *Jena's Lectures* as follows: "The spirit of nature is a hidden spirit. It does not occur in the form of the spirit itself; it is only spirit for the spirit that knows it." (Hegel *Jenenser Logik* in Bimbenet 2000, 5), to which Bimbenet points out that the author hypothesizes that the human is a part of this natural continuum whose *telos* is the perpetual individualization, of which *humankind* reaches a "third-grade autonomy" (ibid) in the *creation* of a world of meaning outside themselves (cf. Bimbenet 2000, 32).

To account for a life of consciousness, Merleau-Ponty realized the need to also consider the structures of action and behavior in which this life is engaged (cf. Bimbenet 2000, 35). Thus, this idea of individualization comes, paradoxically, from the necessary insertion that every organism has in a certain surrounding: no organism is just an independent *part* of a greater autonomous movement, but is bonded with the medium, bonding that makes possible the behavior as an original movement of *putting in* the world something that wasn't there,

a “production of new structures” (Bimbenet 2000, 5). Then behavior marks a distance with the medium that is tributary to its possibility through the emergence of a new element in the state of affairs that wasn’t part of the surrounding but not for the intrusion of the organism’s behavior. So, similarly, as Hegel puts it, the spirit of nature is only such through the approach to it from the human spirit, the one that can take it as their medium, intertwined with it, and produce a new set of meaningful actions due to the intertwining. It’s only this exchange from a constituting consciousness to the surroundings that makes nature such: because it makes sense to *us*. Now, this same scheme can reach further ways of distancing between the organism and the surroundings, contributing to greater levels of individualization, the production of culture the one that characterizes human beings the most. Bimbenet comments on this hypothesis by characterizing human consciousness as one that is not only natural but also naturating (*conscience naturante*) (Bimbenet 2000, 46), which “inscribes us beyond all given nature” (ibid); this would ultimately define the human being as “a new cycle of behavior” (Bimbenet 2000, 32).

To describe the cultural level of individualization, which is called a “second nature” (Merleau-Ponty 1963, 175), Merleau-Ponty points out the particular fixation that infants have with other human’s behavior, concerning every other event in nature, through visual perception (cf. Merleau-Ponty 1963, 169). Of course, Merleau-Ponty is not reaching for some kind of essentialism operating in the children’s minds when recognizing and fixating more on human gestures. Instead, what could be at stake is the recognition of the familiar. This special fixation is read by Bimbenet as behaviors that have a much better legibility between humans: “The human body has a natural expressiveness that makes him immediately legible by other human bodies: its physiognomy, its gestures, the voice intonation or even the different facial expressions talk about the life of the person that inhabits this body, of their intentions and desires” (Bimbenet 2000, 38). This legibility, which is a categorial attitude (Merleau-Ponty 1963, 64 ff.), works as such only due to certain semantics that are held beforehand, which cannot be incorporated but through the experience of culture –

the experience of a shared medium. So, the argumentation sustains that this legibility exists because there are “known facts” (Bimbenet 2000, 44) in human behavior to other fellow humans, which allows us to develop a constituting consciousness of the surroundings in a different level: the symbolic one. So, humans, not only constitute sense through behavior in relation with objects surrounding us but also produce new meaning through the constitution of symbols that can be exchanged only with other humans. This is later called by Merleau-Ponty the “symbolic behavior” (Merleau-Ponty 1963, 118), which is straightforwardly described as a “superior mode of structuration” (116) and lacking in animals (118). Hence, symbolic behavior is what makes it possible that something that is seen by one individual can be also seen under a plurality of aspects (cf. Bimbenet 2000, 47), thus constituting a true symbol with a shared meaning, one only humans could access.

So, paradoxically, the further individualization of the human being is also what brings up the need and ability for connection and exchange with others: only by being able to identify oneself with regard to the surroundings is that one can *propose* a new meaning to what’s appearing as other, an object; and this ‘proposal’ seems to become even more human as long as one can codify the new symbolic production into a sharable dimension, such as through language. Language appears in Bimbenet commentary on *The Structure of Behavior* not only as a tool to connect with other humans but mostly as “the prolongation of the use-objects and socialization instrument” (Bimbenet 2000, 49) since the symbolic behavior is also inscribed through its projection, namely, in the ability to have a non-actual use (cf. Bimbenet 2000, 48), establishing here a first attempt of virtuality. Hence, connection with other individuals is some sort of consequence of the symbolic behavior whose main aim is to project the self into new structures, further constituting their individuality and, therefore, their distinction and distance from others, may those be the surroundings or the other human beings. Consequently, in *Après Merleau-Ponty* Bimbenet will characterize the properly human (more precisely, “the human world”) as “the transformation of life” through culture, which is “a new way of living, new uses of the body,

new perceptive schemas, and not like a separate sphere” (Bimbenet 2011, 64) – while dialoguing with Levi-Strauss on the conception of culture.

2. The Problem of the Anthropological Approach in the Late Merleau-Ponty

If phenomenology seeks an approach to phenomena avoiding any pre-conception that’s not founded on experience, then the question that arises from the previous argumentation is: In comparison to what is Merleau-Ponty affirming this human being? Straightforwardly, Merleau-Ponty introduces the categorical attitude while comparing a child’s perception and behavior in relation to the surroundings with those of a chimpanzee (cf. Merleau-Ponty 1963, 98 ff.). But such a distinction between the human realm and the animal one is really based on phenomena? Which elements of appearing allow Merleau-Ponty to argue that symbolic behavior is *strictly human*? This assumption is the product of a certain way of understanding symbolism and the cultural dimension, which, as Bimbenet shows in the third chapter of *Nature et humanité*, suffers an important switch when Merleau-Ponty drops the idea of symbolism and instead starts developing the phenomenon of expression in his studies of the word in the Collège de France, from 1952, and *The Prose of the World* (cf. Bimbenet 2004, 205).

Through symbolic behavior, Merleau-Ponty recognizes a whole aesthetical sphere, an ontological level where the previous scheme of objective constitution doesn’t work quite as well, since it goes beyond a mere recognition of what there is in the world, by re-signifying it in the fashion of a new structure in the world. This aesthetical level goes hand in hand with a new dimension that Bimbenet points out about phenomenology in the introduction of *Nature et humanité*, namely, that his calling was to “bring the metaphysical mystery of our existence into language, which means at the same time recognizing this mystery as mystery, and at the same time producing a kind of philosophical problematization that can give reason to this mystery” (Bimbenet 2004, 25). Here a contradiction is proposed, so far as, on one side, he tells us that we must *go back* to a mute experience that is beyond language and reason, but at the same

time to rescue any communicable meaning out of this experience. This duality between what cannot be said and what we can *say* about that is what will characterize Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of language.

In *Nature et Humanité* Bimbenet acknowledges that from Merleau-Ponty's studies from 1952 on, expression will be understood as a *praxis*, rather than a function, which implies that the phenomenon of expression – and, through it, the whole phenomenon of culture and symbolic behavior – will have its own dynamism, therefore, nor depending anymore on a form of subjectivity or life to be the strict *origin* of it. In the lecture of 1953 to 1954, on the problem of the word, by referring to Paulhan, Merleau-Ponty writes “idea of a language *of the things in the things*: the constitutive myth of language as we speak to them” (Merleau-Ponty 2020, 42). The first intuition is to put the figure of the *speaker* aside: language is no longer something we will associate with the subject that ‘produces’ wording. And this notion is further explored: “My word is ‘white’ for me, it shows being not in the sense that it is totally understood by me or constituted, but in the sense that we make the body with it [the word], that we are it in the blindness of the act of speaking” (43. My insertion. All underlined by Merleau-Ponty himself). This very vague but eloquent fragment follows an entry on the transparency and opacity of the word in the experience of speaking to another one. Without a proper definition, and in contrast with the ideas of ‘transparency’ and ‘opaqueness’, he states that the word appears ‘white’ to the speaker, to then try to explain it further: what’s said shows being, first, not totalized and, second, not *understood*, since we are not anymore in this ontological level, but rather walking towards trying of wording the ineffable. He also affirms that the word shows being in the sense that we “make body with it”, which is another way to propose what was before sketched about Paulhan: to have a *praxis* of the word, to inhabit the word. In this moment Merleau-Ponty seeks to critique the idea of ‘uttering’ the word. Then, he’s not talking anymore about a consciousness that *builds* a subproduct of itself that merely signals to a corner of being, but about a body that *becomes* meaning in the very praxis of wording.

Thus, expression is proposed as an autonomous phenomenon, with which also comes its own dynamism. This general conception of language is taken from the Saussurian proposal of meaning in language, which is better exposed in “The Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence” (1964). Here Merleau-Ponty points out that the sense of what is said (or, on a broader scale, expressed) doesn’t lay in a meaning attached to the sum of the signs, but instead comes up through the sides of each one of them, catching with them everything else surrounding expression (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 39). This is what we will know as the ‘diacritical sense’ in language. Therefore, sense in expression is not something pre-conceived and brought by the emitter, like a sort of messenger, but instead is built *in* the expression itself, where the subject, the empirical origin of it (the creator, the speaker, the painter, among others) is merely another sign that collaborates in the emergence of the sense.

This experience in literary expression is further developed in *The Prose of the World* in a particular argument that I will expose here in four parts. Firstly, while exemplifying with reading Stendhal, Merleau-Ponty affirms that “once I have read *the book*, it acquires a unique and palpable existence quite apart from the words on the pages” (Merleau-Ponty 1973, 11). Here the author diagnoses in the experience of reading something special, namely, that the book seems to obtain a sort of independence concerning what’s written, where ‘*the book*’ is no other thing than the general sense that the reading left in the reader. So, Merleau-Ponty is talking about the autonomy of what’s expressed. But how is the process of the *split* with the written words and, through it, from the author in the experience of reading? Later, he explores how he, as a reader, approaches more and more what is written, witnessing a sort of intimacy with the text: “I get closer and closer to him [the author], until in the end I read his words with the very same intention that he gave to them” (Merleau-Ponty 1973, 12. My insertion). Here’s a tricky assumption that’s temporary, namely, that we are experiencing the numerically exact meaning Stendhal (in this case) had for his writing. But that’s not what’s being said: Merleau-Ponty is trying to show us that

we experience it as such. We start a process of intertwining with the text, particularly with the words, since they don't feel like *his* words but, at some point, like *ours*: "common words and familiar events, like jealousy or a duel, which at first immerse us in everyone's world suddenly function as emissaries from Stendhal's world" (Merleau-Ponty 1973, 12). Then, to some extent words put the reader and the author together, sharing experiences, and even it feels like becoming one. Immediately, the argument reaches its peak, when Merleau-Ponty describes this bonding as follows: "I create Stendhal, I am Stendhal while reading him" (Merleau-Ponty 1973, 12). Before this description, Merleau-Ponty established a methodological distinction, previously introduced in *Phenomenology of Perception*, between *langage parlé* and *langage parlant*² (speaking language/word) (cf. Merleau-Ponty 1973, 10), which is retaken after the previous description, in order to define the idea of *parole parlant*: "is the operation through which a certain arrangement of already available signs and significations alters and then transfigures each of them, so that in the end a new signification is secreted" (Merleau-Ponty 1973, 13). Then, the experience of *creating Stendhal* or becoming him through reading, to then splitting the sense of 'the book' from the words written by the author is the consequence of a word that isn't a substance but rather a never ceased movement. Hence, it's like the reader 'masters' Stendhal's language, which makes them feel like "we transcend Stendhal. But that will be because he has ceased to speak to us" (Merleau-Ponty 1973, 13), and the emitter fades away.

Since this emergence is not dependent on fixed elements, but rather always transforming according to the different signs and elements of the surroundings that will add a new dimension to the expression, Merleau-Ponty is also very clear when stating that the sense is never something totalized and fixed: sense is always emerging and always in a different way. This *continuum* characteristic of sense in expression was firstly exemplified in *Phenomenology of Perception* as the '*langage/parole parlant*'—differentiated from the 'spoken' one, whose meaning is already determined (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 229) — and then brought back again in *The Prose of the World*, as quoted above, and "The Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence".

With this, expression becomes an autonomous phenomenon, to the point that Merleau-Ponty even writes that “the work deceives by making us believe in an author” (Merleau-Ponty 2013, 112).

Now, considering the indetermination, not only of the sense in expression, but also in its origin, lacking general importance when it comes to what expression implies in terms of meaning, how can we assure that expression and, through it, culture, are exclusively human phenomena? When Merleau-Ponty talks about expression and a speaking or spoken word, he opens these notions to an even broader kind of manifestations, making himself different analysis of painting in various works, making evident that even the distinction *within* the world of expression is impossible – since it would bring in determinations where there’s none. Therefore, if the criteria were the usage of *words*, this philosophy of expression tears down any kind of humanism. If it was the possibility of communication, such as the fixation that infants have with other fellow humans, described in *The Structure of Behavior*, this vocabulary that we acquire of human gestures, can also be thought of in communication with animals through another kind of symbolic manifestations – let’s think of a puppy wagging their tale when we perceive happiness or playing with other dogs, establishing there a form of communion based on, what we can perceive, as an *own language* among them. Expression is shown to be such a broad and open phenomenon that seems to be recognizable in various kinds of ‘living beings’ – a taxonomy that’s also only valid if we are out of the expressive level.

Bimbenet observes this issue in *Nature et Humanité* when bringing up the difference between constitution and institution, the latter being a concept later developed by Merleau-Ponty in his lecture at the Collège de France in 1954. This development takes shape out of the own critique Merleau-Ponty has towards the primacy of consciousness as the center of perceptive existence (cf. Barbaras 2004, 63), since ‘constitution’, in its Husserlian heritage, refers to the capacity of consciousness to give unity to the things and, through it, to make them appear with meaning. To constitute depends on the existence of a

transcendental ego, which in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, at this point, is not the key element to the appearing of phenomena, but that of *flesh*. In this context, Merleau-Ponty translates Husserl's *Stiftung* for 'institution', to propose the emergence of *sense* regardless of the dependence on a subjective pole, such as the ego. Institution, then, is the very process of *emergence of sense*, one that is never enclosed or completed, whose openness allows a chain reaction into new events to take place (cf. Merleau-Ponty 2015, 77; Larison 2016, 381).

Bimbenet introduces institution as "when it opens up a new dimension of our experience, the present is neither an absolute creation, nor a mere repetition of the past: it responds to the past, but by 'forgetting' it, i.e. by understanding it in terms of itself and the new dimension it opens up" (Bimbenet 2004, 210). Here he describes a kind of 'becoming' that is not fully rooted in something else that already exists, therefore, having a novelty component, but, at the same time, that is not fully new either, and, as such, remains somehow bonded with a certain *milieu* that is tributary of its appearing. Due to this bond, what emerges in institution 'responds' to the past as a sort of *continuum* to what was before, simultaneously by developing a certain autonomy that allows it to be instituted something new.

Now, what implication does institution have over the anthropological proposal? The notion of institution is key to understanding language as expression, since expression, not only as linguistic but as any symbolic gesture, implies sedimentation, an emergence of sense and, at the same time, through its openness, "a reactivation of the already instituted sense in pursuit of a new institution (Buceta 2019, 56, 57); again, chain reaction. Therefore, first, it implies that institution isn't a structure in which only culture is built, but an entire ontology of becoming: not only what before was understood as a symbolic behavior works actually in the ways of institution but the very *being* becomes such through institution. Therefore, all we perceive and, thus, make sense of, has a meaning to us because of an instituting process: all sense is always subject to new emergences of meaning, or ever transforming itself and never being fully determined. And the very notion of *the human*

is no exception. Bimbenet affirms it so: “The man ‘institutes himself’, which means that there is no ‘human condition’, but that humanity remains to be made in each singular word” (Bimbenet 2004, 211), and through institution, ‘the human’ is always open to not be such anymore and to become something else. Humanness at a phenomenal level is never *something as such* but instead could be an experience that emerges due to certain conditions and, as easily as it emerges it will fade away. Bimbenet affirms that “there is simply no human given, but rather a suspension of the human in favor of the expressive movement that presides over its emergence” (Bimbenet 2004, 214), which leads him to propose the idea of a pre-human being built by Merleau-Ponty.

3. The Ambiguity of the Pre-Human

Now, does all of the above mean that the early Merleau-Pontian philosophy of human and symbolic behavior is wrong or misleading? I propose here that that’s not the case, and we can rather observe from *The Structure of Behavior* to his latest works a gradual movement towards the priority of an existence that is neither exclusively human nor strictly subjective – understood as an enclosed totality that distinguishes itself from determined *others*. This path is marked by the element of ambiguity that crosses all Merleau-Pontian descriptions of the human, which is also highlighted by Bimbenet (2000; 2004).

The first presence of ambiguity is quite evident since the aim of his first work is precisely to conciliate nature and spirit under the figure of the human. A big part of the argument was that through the categorial attitude the human “composes nature and consciousness in an unprecedented way” (Bimbenet 2004, 62), where, on the one hand, there’s this organic consciousness that is inevitably bonded with the surroundings as a *natural* fact; but on the other hand, there’s also a consciousness that’s capable of variate its behavior and propose new things to the natural world. The main issue here is that both ‘sides’ of the human consciousness are indeed the same, which is clearer in *Phenomenology of Perception*, since “human’s inscription in nature is precisely what enables him or her to

escape this belonging” (Bimbenet 2004, 62). Then, humanness so far is a dual reality: a bonded existence that enables it to become beyond the given. Here I propose to read these two ‘sides’ of human reality as two ontological movements. On the one hand, we have an existence whose actions are somehow coerced by a foreign one, that of natural reality; there’s a foreign action being addressed toward human existence, that is directly impacting our own range of actions. In this way, the natural consciousness could be understood as a passive side of human beings, since there’s no control over a certain state of affairs. About this bonding, Bimbenet says that the human order seeks to show that “our nature is what engages us in being, not what separates us from it, every one of our acts is, in the most substantial sense of the word, ‘motivated’: dedicated to the cause of being” (Bimbenet 2004, 115). But the whole point of *The Structure of Behavior* is to show that natural reality isn’t reducible to a mere passivity, since on the other hand there’s the active side of human existence, which is characterized in this text as what characterizes life at all, which is an action that comes from within – in the human case, produced by the consciousness, the spirit that objectifies the world.

Then, the categorial attitude is defined by this ambiguity, since, as Bimbenet explains it: “that our perception is based on the natural, sedimented knowledge that our body possesses of its world, but that at the same time, this acquired knowledge is constantly measured by the spontaneity of our present consciousness, clearly proves that it is now up to existence” (Bimbenet 2004, 134). This characterization of symbolic behavior resembles importantly to the later understanding of institution since is “based on the possibility of perceiving an unchanging thing from its changing perspectives”, where the ‘unchanged thing’ is the picturing of what would emerge from this power of expression (cf. Bimbenet 2004, 137).

Then, the ambiguity that Bimbenet observes in the categorial attitude can be read under activity and passivity: on one side, an inner movement, the action from within towards the outside; and on the other, a movement that affects existence from the outside, partially determining the first. This duality goes on to reach the proposal of institution and being established

as a topic in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy in the lectures at the Collège de France in the years 1954 and 1955. Institution is defined by Merleau-Ponty as "those events (*événements*) in an experience which endow the experience with durable dimensions, in relation to which a whole series of other experiences will make sense, will form a thinkable sequel or a history" (Merleau-Ponty 2015, 77). However, these events don't occur *ex-nihilo*, but there's always a ground that is holding the emergence, in a *laissez-faire*, in the non-action, in sum, in the passivity of the same existence. The undetermined character of institution lies in the ontological fact that it is not pure action, nor pure doing, but also the permission of intruding. Merleau-Ponty himself describes its action as occurring in a "subterranean logic (*logique souterraine*)" (Merleau-Ponty 2015, 77).

Passivity *in* activity is much better illustrated in cases of artistic expression, which is the approach Stéphanie Ménasé explains in *Passivité et création* (2003). Passivity in expression is a sort of action from the object that intrudes into an undetermined self: "The object calls to my gaze because it is nameless, without identity. There is 'something' (*quelque chose*). It is not I as consciousness who constitutes 'this', since these 'somethings' are there without me, before any naming" (Ménasé 2003, 80). Expression is inscribed, then, before the constitution of fixed identities, such as 'I' and 'other', indeterminacy that makes expression come from an open space, open to the intrusion of a foreign activity – which, is the only way to constate passivity, without falling back into the mechanism Merleau-Ponty tried to fight against from *The Structure of Behavior* on.

The new ontology that institution brings in for existence modifies how we understand, not only expression, but also, and most importantly to our objectives, the way the expressed is shared and allows us to communicate with others, thus, marking a new path in the world – alluding by this to the first concern on Merleau-Ponty's *The Structure of Behavior*, to marking *humanness* through the ability to create something open to a plurality of perspectives. About this issue, Bimbenet states:

In this way, meaning is shared and communicated not by standing outside time, but by composing with a temporality of encroachment [...]. The eternity of meaning is an 'existential eternity', based on nothing other than the spontaneity of expressive acts; no god, and no humanity by divine right, guarantees in advance the perpetuity of an institution (Bimbenet 2004, 211).

Through this spontaneity, expression not only becomes constant emergence but also becomes autonomous from any sort of emitter. At the same time, this spontaneity is always caught from a background: passivity in expression implies that there's no absolute spontaneity or absolute novelty; we are always bonded with what is characterized as 'the past', and what in *The Structure of Behavior* took the shape of 'nature', in sum, what is not created, what is not new. Bimbenet exemplifies this ambiguity with an analogy to music: "No longer, as *The Structure of Behavior* would have it, a melodic configuration inseparable from the notes it unifies; but more radically a melody improvised to measure, inseparable not so much from the notes as from the chance that constitutes it" (Bimbenet 2004, 255). Here the inseparability from the notes is passivity, which is a kind of ontological coercion, in the sense that is logically impossible for there to be a new melody without the dependence on the notes. What is tying the melody up is the same element that's freeing it. So it is with our existence: what's tying us up in the world is what allows us to exist in a perceptive way at all – which in Merleau-Ponty famously takes the shape of the body.

Through institution, Merleau-Ponty is not *only* telling us that what we express is not pre-determined and always open to re-signification, but also that our very existences aren't pre-determined either, which allows existence to also be open to taking new shapes and meanings. To explain this, in *The Visible and the Invisible* Merleau-Ponty refers to experiences of de-centering of the self: "Through the center of myself I remain absolutely foreign to the being of the things" (1964, 52). Here perception is not what puts us in the center of the experience, therefore working as what also locates us in the world, but as what can also appear as alien, foreign. Thus, being at the center is his way to understand the isolating position of a subjectivity that is unconnected with its surroundings. On the contrary, the

decentering means movement and, through it, relations. There's no center *versus* alienness, but a decentering that is itself alien. Hence, in the same fashion as activity and passivity before, here alienness and the present self are not two opposite and irreconcilable poles, but co-dependent and part of the same existence: then again, ambiguity. This ambiguity is what institutes existence as open and in perpetual movement, which is described by Merleau-Ponty as a "new type of being, a being by porosity, pregnancy, or generality, and he before whom the horizon opens is caught up" (1964, 149). This new being is one of porosity, distinguishing it from the fixed and enclosed idea of being, that is traditionally thought of; is the being that allows for institution to take place.

This openness in existence is what makes it difficult to assign a category to it: 'human', 'animal', or even 'subject' or 'object'. What I have here characterized as the 'passive' bonding with the world contributes to an alienation of the self in perception, which is described in various passages of *The Visible and the Invisible*, since passivity is, in a logical simplification, the action of the alien upon us. It puts our existence in a situation of reception, of vulnerability even, which drives to a temporary de-centering of the self (cf. Merleau-Ponty 1964, 193), as Merleau-Ponty describes: "is not entirely my body that perceives: I know only that it can prevent me from perceiving" (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 9). Thus, through passivity, the body ceases to be *own body*, but due to the activity in existence, it's not fully *foreign* either. Bimbenet notes this, by stating that: "I inhabit my body, not as 'my body', but as 'a body', visible to any other; I am not 'myself', but 'myself saw from the outside, as another would see me, installed in the midst of the visible, viewing it from a certain place'" (Bimbenet 2004, 270), therefore, I exist delivered, at the same that instituting.

4. Conclusions

One of the ideas I've established in this study is that of a continuous unity throughout Merleau-Ponty's work, which suffers from a subtle breaking point in his lectures at the Collège de France. This takes place as an interval from his

further exploring of the phenomenon of expression, once opened with the categorial attitude in the attempt to define the human in *The Structure of Behavior*, until his divorce from the embodied consciousness in the coining of institution over constitution. One of the many elements that work across his philosophy, and the main one explored here is the idea of an ambiguity in existence. The ambiguity that characterizes human existence from the early texts shows us that part of existing and expressing means to be partially delivered to what's not *own*, to what's not an *I*. Part of being in the world is to *not being totalized*, not only as a human – we can never fully constitute ourselves as humans – but we can't even fully constitute ourselves as subjects, as existences that differ radically from a suppose objective world.

So, how to speak about an anthropology in Merleau-Ponty? Is still possible? For sure, there's no such thing as 'the human' from Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology as such. In this research, I tried not just to show how complex it is to affirm that there *is* (still) an anthropology in Merleau-Ponty (since there *was* one in his first work), but also to point out that what thematically supported any formulation of an anthropological approach was the conception of subjectivity. As it was argued, the idea of the human rests overall in the possibility of a 'further' individualization, regarding the world. Thus, with the rising of passivity in Merleau-Ponty's ontology, understood as an engagement and intromission of the world in expression and existential activity, we are witnessing two things. Firstly, that expression implies no individualization at all, but, on the contrary, is the event of an inevitable intertwining with the world, and therefore, *humanness* cannot rest on expression or on the cultural dimension of existence. And, secondly, the very process of 'further' individualization is destined to fail as proposed in *The Structure of Behavior*, since it is not a project that is achieved at a certain point in time, but an oscillating way to inhabit the world, based upon the ontology of indeterminacy and shared existence.

Finally, it's important to also acknowledge that, regardless of the above, Merleau-Ponty's whole philosophy is all the time driving us back to human experiences: this is due to what Merleau-Ponty himself recognizes as a fundamental narcissism (cf. Merleau-Ponty 1964, 139): his ontology centers

on the possibility of the Being, what there is, and our only access to the Being is through our position in the world, which is inevitably historically human. Nevertheless, this *humanness* of our perspective is nothing determined nor differentiated from other experiences, since he also highlights the importance of the openness of the Being and the danger of unfounded determinations, as Bimbenet introduces in *Après Merleau-Ponty*: Merleau-pontian conceptual creations such as flesh or expression “they appear to be wide open, and available for further input” (Bimbenet 2011, 11).

NOTES

¹ All references to publications in non-English languages are my translation.

² Also named in other texts, such as *Phenomenology of Perception* as *parole parlée* and *parole parlant*. Here both will be used in an exchangeable way.

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