

THE UNDERSTANDING OF THE BODY AND MOVEMENT IN MERLEAU-PONTY¹

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ABSTRACT: The author seeks an explanation for Merleau-Ponty's expression "the body understands", to which a real value is applied: the objects of the world have a signification that the body grasps by way of perception. The analysis focuses on Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of perception* and on notes from two of his courses, *Le monde sensible et le monde de l'expression* and *La nature*. In these works, there is a constant allusion to the I can as an underlying and grounding mode with regard to the I think. The French philosopher thus grants a central role to movement that demonstrates the interweaving of the body with the world.

KEYWORDS: Merleau-Ponty. Body understanding. Perception. Movement. World.

INTRODUCTION

In various passages of the *Phenomenology of perception* (from here on *PP*), Merleau-Ponty speaks about an *understanding* that the body fundamentally attains through perception. What is perceived appears to us as

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bearing a meaning. It has an imminent and *pre-objective* signification that is the fruit of what our philosopher calls “inhabiting the thing.” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2012, p. 70-71).³ This signification of the perceived, which has no equivalent in the universe of the intellect,⁴ is only understood if one considers the anchored perceiving subject—situated—in the world. The subject is never an “acosmic” thinker that sees the world from all angles; rather, what he perceives primarily has connotations linked to action, sentiment and the will, rather than the concept (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2012, p. 26). So, throughout *PP*, Merleau-Ponty privileges the Husserlian *I can* over the *I think*, thereby privileging action over thought. On occasion, he also dialectically contrasts both expressions in order to emphasize the temporal primacy of the situated being, understood as a category from which any lived experience begins.⁵

The most obvious question to ask is how we can speak of “understanding”; how can we attribute to the body an operation that is more properly attributed to the intellect? An easy response could be that Merleau-Ponty is using this expression figuratively. But it isn’t so. According to Merleau-Ponty, the body really *understands*, albeit in a different sense than that of the intellect. One can speak of a “broadening” of the term “understanding” and also of an original manner in understanding the body that permits attributing this capacity to it. The clearest example of this understanding of the body are the habits, either motor-like habits or habits of a more complex nature, such as grasping a melody or rhythm.⁶

My proposal in this article is to give an explanation of the body’s understanding on the basis of the notion of motricity. I will establish what is characteristic of perceptive or corporeal signification, in contrast to intellectual signification. It is to keep in mind that, while both complement each other and intermix, perceptive signification is at the basis of all understanding of the intellect. This radicality or originality does not function as a kind of stratum

³ I use the translation of Donald A. Landes, Routledge, USA, 2012.

⁴ See Merleau-Ponty (2012, p. 48): “there is a perceived signification that has no equivalent in the universe of the intellect, a perceptual milieu that is not yet the objective world, and a perceptual being that is not yet determinate being.” See also p. 38-39; 52-53; 58; 81-82. This same idea is already present in *Le primat de la perception et ses conséquences philosophiques* (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1996, p. 13).

⁵ See Merleau-Ponty (2012, p. 88, 139, note 97), in which there is an explicit reference to certain unpublished texts by Husserl. These are collected in *Ideas II*, particularly §§ 38 and 59, where he links the *I can* more directly with the movement of the body. For this topic in Husserl, see Serrano de Haro (1997, p. 185-216).

⁶ See (MOYA, 2012, p. 367-380; TALERO, 2005, p. 443-461), and, from the same author, (2006, p. 191-203).

or structure in which thought is nurtured; instead it provides space for an approach to the world that is different from the one that is the primary fruit of mere reason. In order to focus on the perception-movement relation, I will first analyze the chapter in *PP* entitled “The spatiality of one’s own body and motricity,” included in the first part of the book dedicated to the body. While in this chapter and the work in general the relationship with motricity is extensively discussed, I also integrate within this article the class notes from the courses *Le monde sensible et le monde de l’expression* (1953) and *La nature* (1956-1960), which are not known in the literature I have consulted. This is a contribution that strengthens the thesis of a true understanding of the body closely linked to motricity, a thesis that has not been explicitly discussed in Merleau-Pontian literature. When pertinent, I will also take other works from the French philosopher into consideration.

I have chosen motricity as a perspective for the analysis of the body’s comprehension, because movement is the basis for all forms of action in the living being and, in the case of humans, it is the key to penetrating the relationship they maintain with the world in which they are inserted. Without saying so explicitly, Merleau-Ponty is constantly referring to the original and material strata of human behavior. In this regard it is significant that in his seminar “The philosopher and his shadow,” published in *Signs*, Merleau-Ponty cites this text from Husserl’s *Ideas III*, a text that repays the effort required for reflecting on it:

The reality of the soul finds its basis in corporeal matter, and not the other way around. More generally, the material world is, within the total objective world that we call Nature, a particular world closed in on itself, which does not need the help of any other reality. On the contrary, the existence of spiritual realities, from a world of real spirits, is linked to material nature, and this is not due to contingent reasons, but to questions of principle. When we interrogate the essence of the *res extensa*, this latter does not contain anything that depends on the spirit, nor anything that demands a mediated connection with a real spirit. On the contrary, we find that a real spirit, by its essence, cannot exist except as linked to materiality, being the real spirit of a body. (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2008, p. 201).

The radicalness of the text is surprising, and perhaps for that reason Merleau-Ponty, immediately after citing it, writes, “We do not cite these lines except as a counterweight,” that is, in order to counteract affirmations where Husserl appears to give primacy to the spirit over nature. Further on,

in the same text, he explains: “Phenomenology is not, in the end, either a materialism or a philosophy of the spirit. The operation that is proper to it is that of unveiling the pretheoretical stratum in which the two idealizations find their relative right and are overcome.” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2008, p. 201). The task is to find that point of equilibrium where the spirit, the “psyche,” and the “animus” are not cast aside. Nor is corporeality disrespected, that is, the matter that links us to what in general we call nature. Phenomenology’s task of unveiling successive strata, the covering over of what is existent, can be compared to the task of the archaeologist that seeks the most primitive signs of life or of human existence and organization. The purpose of this article is to descend toward the most basic stratum of movement as an action proper to the human body and interweave movement with perception, since both are present in the pre-reflexive realm.

Various authors are in agreement that for Merleau-Ponty the body is a constitutive or transcendental principle, that is, it is involved in the very possibility of any experience. Our relations with the world, with others, and with ourselves have their origin in corporeal experience.⁷ Without the body not only would we lack perception, which is evident, we would also lack concepts, propositions, and discourse. In the words of Merleau-Ponty we can say: “Perception is a judgement, but one that is unaware of its own reasons, which comes down to saying that the perceived object gives itself as a whole and as a unity before we have grasped its intelligible law.” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2012, p. 44). Before we can define the object, even before we name it, it presents itself to the body with its sensorial properties: texture, colour, smell, taste... the form of an orange appears before we can name it or identify it. The body runs ahead of thought and, for this very reason, it is hidden, we do not notice it. It is important to note that the body’s dimension of motricity cannot be dissociated from the perceptive: the body directs and orients itself to what it knows, while at the same time that what is known arouses its attention. There is a passive and active character in this mutual relation, which should not be understood in a mechanistic or behaviorist manner, as a relation of inputs and outputs; rather, it responds to living in the world as well as to the things that I have referred to above.

In the first part of this article I focus on the insertion of the subject into the world, and analyze the relation of the perceiving subject to space

⁷ See Nagel (2000, p. 483): “In short, the primacy of perception should be understood as a sort of transcendental inquiry into the conditions of possibility of knowledge.”

as a first form of bodily understanding. The second part is focused more directly on the motor intentionality and signification with which one attains a more complete explanation of the relationship between motricity and the body's understanding.

1 KNOWING ABOUT THE PLACE

In the chapter from *PP* that I have already mentioned, Merleau-Ponty contrasts lived spatial knowledge (knowledge about a place) with that which is represented. He will rely on the experiences of a healthy subject, rather than on those of someone unhealthy.⁸ In particular, he will discuss the Schneider case, where a patient suffered a cerebral lesion that affected the motor relation with his own body and with what surrounded him.⁹ The motor experiences of the healthy subject are characterized by their flexibility, spontaneity, and adaptability. In contrast, in the unhealthy person movements are fixed, not spontaneous, to the point that they may even require a kind of deduction or intellectual reflection in order to perform movement. With this opposition Merleau-Ponty sought to better show the characteristics of the body's understanding of space from the perspective of what he calls the proper or phenomenal body (that of the healthy subject), in contrast to the objective or merely physical body (that of the unhealthy subject) studied by the natural and cognitive sciences.

From this latter perspective, space is representatively known as “an identifiable term throughout all of its appearances.” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2012 p. 106). For example, subjects that have suffered brain damage may only be able to situate themselves in a determined place if it is presented within the habitual realm of their actions. In contrast, if an unhealthy subject is asked to point out or touch a place in space or on his body, since it is not a matter of a habitual action, he may be unable to carry out the request, except via the effort of representing either his body or the places indicated. The unhealthy subject's perception of space and his motor capacities belong exclusively to the

⁸ In what follows, I will use the restrictive unhealthy-healthy alternative that Merleau-Ponty employs, but I bear in mind that today scientific study of disabilities distinguishes numerous nuances, such as, for example, people in a situation of disability or of restricted mobility, etc.

⁹ The Schneider disorder is due to a lesion in the occipital region, occasioned by the impact of shrapnel; see Merleau-Ponty (2012, p. 128). This case was studied by K. Goldstein, a psychiatrist and neuropsychologist. M. Luz Pintos Peñaranda recounts the history of the relations between Merleau-Ponty and Goldstein in detail in Pintos Peñaranda (2009, p. 41-60).

habitual world. In contrast, the healthy subject moves without any difficulty from a concrete and spontaneous relation with space to an abstract one. Healthy subjects know their own body's place and that of other objects, and can indicate them either when asked by another, or else because this is what is required by an undertaken action. Merleau-Ponty calls this "a spontaneous and free *spatial thought*." (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2012, p. 106, italics added). Another conclusion that can be drawn from this comparison is that healthy subjects carry out these actions in the most economic manner possible: if they have to pick up or touch something, they do so directly, without needing prior or preparatory action. In contrast, the unhealthy subject needs to prepare the action: first he verbalizes it, repeating the command, while later he positions his body, thus making the performance possible, and then finally executing it. Clearly this is not the economical or reduced movement of the healthy subject (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2012, p. 106).¹⁰

Merleau-Ponty indicates another difference that has to do with the free character of the action and the movement that it implies, upon contrasting a fictitious or virtual action with that demanded by a real situation. The subject, for example, can imitate a military salute, just as actors perform the gestures that are indicated in a script, but don't become involved with them: they move from the real to the fictitious or imaginary without any difficulty. The healthy person and the actor "each detach their real body from its living situation in order to make it breathe, speak, and, if need be, cry in the imaginary." (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2012, p. 107). There is a separation between fictitious movement and a real living situation, such that in the imaginary there is a space of movement unlinked from necessary situations (necessary in the sense of being indispensable for the unfolding of life). This separation also introduces a realm of voluntariness or dominion over one's own body: I make it laugh or cry, because I want it to be so, or because it is what is required by the fictitious situation that I am acting within, which I have voluntarily gotten involved in. The unhealthy person, in contrast, cannot distinguish movement from the occurrence of his actual or real ego. The movement is the result of the action in which the sick person's ego is involved or is, in a certain sense, his ego. Goldstein employs Schneider's description: "My movements and I, we are, so to speak, merely a link in the unfolding of the whole, and I am scarcely aware of any voluntary initiative [...] everything works by itself."

¹⁰ See also Merleau-Ponty (2011, p. 70-73) in which he describes the relations between space and movement.

(MERLEAU-PONTY, 2012, p. 107). It is also explained that they must put their bodies in a situation in which movement can continue autonomously, i.e. they must make their arms, their torsos, etc. available so that they can carry out the order that they have been given, as though their reflexive ego were not involved in it.

On the one hand, the healthy person is able to voluntarily command the movements of his body so that it moves from the real to the fictitious. On the other hand, however, his body disappears in the movement, since the gestures or postures that permit carrying out the action are not experienced constantly or actually, just as there is also no constant perception of motor space. In morbid experiences, it becomes clear that we need a mental or intellectual representation in order to “recuperate” the body that is unavailable to the subject. Rather, the subject has to constantly reformulate its connection with the body in order to lose it again and execute the action.

The motor spontaneity that characterizes the action of the healthy subject is worth emphasizing, based on this brief analysis. The action, and movement with it, initiate spontaneously, both on the real plane and the fictitious.¹¹ In order for this to occur, motor consciousness must be present: people come to know themselves in movement. There is no need for a deductive or reflexive operation of the motor and spatial context. Rather, from that context they continue or carry out the other movements that demand their existence in the world, or the fictitious situation that also forms part of their existence.¹² All of this forms part of the *knowledge of place* that permits movement. This is a knowledge that is generated in the co-existence of the subject and bodily space and, in the words of Merleau-Ponty (2012, p. 108): “[It] is not a nothingness, even though it cannot be expressed by a description, nor even by the mute

¹¹ See Sheets-Johnstone (2011, p. 139, chapter 3). Basing himself on Husserl, the author analyzes the primacy that movement has in the constitution of the subject and of the *I can*. He affirms that movement is the original basis of our subjectivity and that we constitute space and time in our kinesthetic consciousness of movement. In chapter 10, denying the pre-eminence that language has acquired in the analysis of the mind, he argues that in the beginning there was not the word, but rather movement. Life, including human life, in its most fundamental sense, is not a matter of brains or language. Rather, it is more basically an issue pertaining to tactile-kinetic powers (SHEETS-JOHNSTONE, 2011, p. 347-348).

¹² “He does not have his body available merely as implicated in a concrete milieu, he is not merely situated in relation to the tasks set by his trade, nor he is merely open to real situations. Rather, in addition he possesses his body as the correlate of pure stimuli stripped of all practical signification; he is open to verbal and fictional situations that he can choose for himself or that a researcher might suggest.” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2012, p. 111).

designation of a gesture.” As is his wont, Merleau-Ponty explains by contrast, in this case opposing *knowledge of place* to the knowledge of objects in the Kantian sense: it is not a knowledge unified by a law that knows things as though they existed free of any form or local or temporal adherence (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2012, p. 107-108). In his course *La nature*, he expounds on the relationship between movement and the knowledge that the subject has about things, especially from the perspective of the *I can*, thus clarifying the difference from the Kantian objectivity mentioned earlier: the thing appears to the subject as linked to the movements of his body. And the consciousness that the subject has of his body is a slippery consciousness (*glissante*), like that of the capacity to organize certain perceptive functions (*déroutements*). The body is understood as able to move from one appearance to another, organizing what Merleau-Ponty calls a “synthesis of transition.” With his body the subject organizes an understanding of the world, in which the body is not a pure Ego, which would place before itself both the body itself and the thing, but rather, by inhabiting its own body, it will also inhabit things. The thing is not distinguished from the body itself, it is united to it “as though it were embedded in its functioning.” The body does not accompany things externally, but is rather “the field where my sensations are localized.” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1995, p. 106-107). Furthermore, in *Le monde sensible* we find a description of the way in which the person is close to the things in the world, a description which has a clear relationship with corporeality and movement:

I am close to things but not because of an ideal presence. I am close to the thing because it takes possession of my body in order to make itself perceptible to the latter (colour imprints on me a certain vital rhythm, sound gives a certain adaptation of the organ, etc.). [...] I am close to the thing in virtue of an expressive relationship between sensible [objects] and the perceptive organ. (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2011, p. 49).

The subject incorporates the action that the thing exercises in it, that which the latter demands because of the materiality of the organic influence on the sensory apparatus, but also because, as I said above, the subject *inhabits* things.

The constant opposition between the corporeal experience of the unhealthy subject and a healthy one, proposed by Merleau-Ponty in *PP*, allows for distinguishing a relationship with the “thought” world—that of the sick person—from one that is “lived”—that of a normal subject. The knowledge of the body linked to movement occurs in the phenomenal

body that is situated before a space that is flexible, adaptable, ambiguous on occasion, and opposed to represented space, which is fixed, the result of a deduction. Just when the unhealthy subject need not think, when it acts as linked to its habitual existence—that is, its trade or its basic necessities—then it is assimilated to an immediate and lived relationship to the world (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2012, p. 108). The body forms part of the subject-world system, in which a kind of tacit dialogue is undertaken between the requirements of the world and the capacity for responding to them without the mediation of reflection: “In concrete movement, the patient has neither athetic consciousness of the stimulus nor athetic consciousness of the reaction: quite simply, he is his body and his body is the power for a certain world.” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2012, p. 109).¹³

In habitual behaviour and also in the normal relation between the subject and the world, there is a kind of optimal corporeal knowledge: the best movement, the most economic for complying with the requirement by which the action unfolds, thereby creating a dialectic between passivity and activity. Merleau-Ponty affirms that movement has a *ground* that is immanent to it, within which “for the subject, the beginning of kinetic movement is, like perception, an original manner of relating to an object.” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2012, p. 113), because perception and movement form “a system that is modified as a whole.” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2012, p. 113). In the case of an itch caused by a mosquito, the body’s knowledge permits the arm or the hand to find the precise spot where the discomfort is occurring, in order to alleviate it with the action of scratching. The task draws from the body those movements that must fulfil this specific request (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2012, p. 116-117). We encounter this idea in a text of *Le monde sensible* where he speaks of the body’s double function: it responds to that which is offered, and moves, and then returns upon the world in order to signify or designate it (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2012, p. 52).¹⁴

¹³ Merleau-Ponty (2012, 245-246) in which Merleau-Ponty refers to the system that is formed between the subject and the world.

¹⁴ Merleau-Ponty compares the motor reaction of the body with other forms of fit of a cultural or intersubjective type, for example, responses appropriate for the usages of our environment or words, attitudes or a tone of voice appropriate for a specific public. The term that is used to explain this fit is that of “best equilibrium”, because these attitudes are also displayed in the interior of the subject-world system, of which the body is not the only member. The *world* is also made up of other subjects, culture, customs, etc. *Le monde sensible* refers more explicitly to the cultural facet that was already present in the *PP*.

The immediacy that characterizes the action of the subject is an expression of this systematic unity not only in its motor behaviour, but also in its link with the world: the speaker adapts to his audience, not by a “disguise,” but because “we literally are what others think of us and we are our world.” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2012, p. 109). In order to understand the meaning of this affirmation, recall that earlier it was said that knowledge of the body demands some kind of mediation that would explain it as something more than a mere mechanical reaction. The body achieves *fit* with the stimulus because, in some way, it recognizes it as such, it perceives it. But the fitness of the body is the recognition of something that, in some way, is possessed as one’s own. Immediacy, which is highlighted now, can be explained at different levels or perspectives. In the first place, there is immediacy because there is a “display” of capacities or possibilities proper to one’s own body, because we have or are the body, with its potentialities, and this means having a wide field of action.¹⁵ Secondly, immediacy is also explained because there is no clear distinction between subject and world. In *PP* Merleau-Ponty uses the concept of system that integrates the subject and world, while in *The Visible and the Invisible (VI)* this vagueness is made more radical with the concept of flesh (*chair*) (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1964). In neither of the two explanations—be it that of *PP* or that of *VI*—, is Merleau-Ponty seeking to overcome the confused relationship between subject and object, that opacity and generality in which perception occurs and which forms part of the immediacy understood as an adhesion to the world, as interlacing with it.¹⁶ A third explanation of immediacy is found in the notion of horizon: there is a vital area of openness of the subject to the world that is broader than that which permits the immediate action of his perceptive organs. For example, beyond vision and touch the subject has a universe or motor field, and perception is projected in a perceptive horizon. In the case of the unhealthy subject the difficulty of achieving fit with the world is not found in a specific sensory organ, but rather in the completeness relation of the subject with the world considered from this perspective of horizon. The deficiency suffered by the unhealthy subject is found in “the subject’s living region, that opening up to the world that ensures that objects currently out of reach nevertheless count for the normal subject, that they exist as tactile for him and remain part of his motor universe.” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2012, p. 119). Motricity is like

¹⁵ See also Merleau-Ponty (2008, p. 203-204), where Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the interlacing between the body and the world, as well as p. 150-151.

¹⁶ Barbaras (1998, p. 117). In part 2 of this article I will return to this topic.

the ground on which perception occurs because, as I have already explained, the relation of the subject with the world is fundamentally a motor issue. But movement as such is not directly grasped: “It is always before or ahead of or after the moment in which I grasp it.” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2011, p. 89). The interpenetration of the subject with the world, the inhabitation of things, are forms of expressing that original motricity linked to perception.

In the explanations and examples just given, I have mentioned motor finality, that is, the directing of the body to action by way of movement; for example, the action of grasping or touching an object that situates the body in a specific direction. Merleau-Ponty affirms that in the case of practical action movement is present “magically”¹⁷ in its end, right from the beginning, given that it is only by anticipating the end that it attains its goal (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2012, p. 106). It is as though movement had just one act, that is, as though that which it contains from the beginning were to be unfurled in the action. The issue of anticipation has a predecessor in Husserl¹⁸ and has also been studied by contemporary physiology. In what follows I will refer to certain analyses carried out by Berthoz and Petit (2006).

Physiological studies demonstrate that there is a kind of progressive accumulation of neuronal activity that little by little constructs the action that expresses itself at the moment of execution. This is possible thanks to the assemblage of pieces, as occurs with Lego bricks. But it has also been discovered that the stage that precedes action, which the authors call the microgenesis of action, is not simply an accumulation of energy that is waiting for the moment to reveal itself. Rather, the formation of an intention prior to the occurrence of the movement, that is, a content of meaning that will make it so that the movement will not be simply “movement,” that is, motor behaviour, but will be an “action” directed to or with a view to an objective (BERTHOZ; PETIT, 2006, p. 68). There is an extraordinary diversity of mechanisms of anticipation and prediction. For example, the mechanoreceptors measure the derivations of the magnitude of the movement (velocity, acceleration, shock, etc.) which

¹⁷ Regarding the use of the term “magic” in Merleau-Ponty, see Dreyfus (2005, note 7): the author explains that in one way it means that the action occurs without any need to understand how to carry it out. It also can mean a rapport between the body and consciousness that eliminates the problem of an explanation of a causal type. Both ways are related, since the rapport is the “explanation” of the action. In Merleau-Ponty (2011, p. 50), the term “magic” reappears, referring to the affective dimension of the perceived world: “Le monde perçue est pleine de régions magiques que affectent les êtres qui y entrent de propriétés imprévues parce qu’elles son l’habitat d’une catégorie affective.”

¹⁸ “All life rests on anticipation.” (HUSSERL, 1991, II, § 9).

permit an anticipation of the future position of the body. This physiological action permits regulating and, in this way, anticipating movement. The authors affirm that perception is fundamentally anticipative and is explained by the so-called *corollary discharges* by which the brain sends out a copy of the motor order, anticipating the perceptive centres and permitting them to stabilize the perceived world. An example is the perception of distances. On many of the occasions in which we move from one place to another, or in which an object comes toward us, it would be very complex to calculate the distance. Instead, the brain can directly infer the time of contact for an object that is coming near and thereby avoid it (BERTHOZ; PETIT, 2006, p. 70).

These considerations are interesting in the light of the ultimate explanation that the authors provide, which is the relationship of persons or living beings with the world that surrounds them or in which they live. Speaking of anticipation is to attribute to the human organism a property of full rights that derives from an ontology of mutual and formational integration that the organism maintains with its world of life. What occurs in the brief lapse of time—it might be dozens of thousands of a second—that precedes action or perception, shows us that for the perceiving subject “reality” is known via a broad anticipatory construction (BERTHOZ; PETIT, 2006, p. 75). The authors conclude that anticipation is a fundamental property of any organism that possesses a nervous system, and that the list of anticipatory mechanisms does not merely reveal a collection of means—found by evolution—that strengthen fitness. Rather, it is more properly an “advisory notice” from the body regarding the time lived and perceived and, I add, the space lived and the action that is carried out in it, just as I have explained in this part of my article (BERTHOZ; PETIT, 2006, p. 78). This form of knowledge is not exactly the understanding of the body that I am attempting to explain, but it accounts for why, physiologically, there is also a preparation for the interpenetration between the subject and the world.

In this first part of my article I have explained the relation of the subject with space, employing the contrast between the healthy person and the unhealthy person. I have described what we might call motor consciousness, which is at the base of the inherence of the subject in the world and also in what Merleau-Ponty calls “inhabiting things.”

In the second part of the article I will address the issue of how we explain this “re-cognition” that generates spontaneous movements and immediate responses in the subject. Merleau-Ponty asserts that it is not a question of

kinesthetic residues that awaken in the presence of the object (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2012, p. 110-111). I would like to respond to these issues from the perspective of motor intentionality, directly related to the interlacing of the subject and the world.

2 MOTOR INTENTIONALITY AND SIGNIFICATION

In order to advance in the explanation of the content of Merleau-Ponty's affirmation that the body itself understands, the notions of operant motor intentionality are key, as is the motor project. Both display the originary character of movement in bodily understanding. The texts of *PP* are complemented by the notes from *Le monde sensible* that permit a broadening of the notion of perception, and a better explanation of the intermingling of the subject with the world.

Merleau-Ponty (2012, p. xxxii) takes the expression “operant intentionality” (*fungierende Intentionalität*) from Husserl¹⁹ in the same way that he used the contrast between *I can* and *I think*. In *Le monde sensible* this contraposition instead occurs between praxis and gnosis, always seeking to explain the radicality of the body's understanding, and also of the movement that occurred thanks to the *I can*, just as Husserl had suggested.²⁰

Merleau-Ponty is referring to operant intentionality, in the prologue to *PP*, as “the intentionality that establishes the natural and pre-predicative unity of the world and of our life.” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2012, p. xxxii). In it, our desires and evaluations are made manifest, and it offers the original text by which knowledge formulates concepts (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2012, p. xxxii). It is worth emphasizing the anticipatory quality of this form of knowledge, since it presents itself as the condition of possibility in a thetic intentionality. Before this latter can be possible, it is already “operant,” immersed in action: it is an intentionality directly involved in the world, joined with movement and is originary (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2012, p. 453; 113): “The gesture of

¹⁹ The expression is found in Husserl's work *Formal and Transcendental Logic*, § 59. Merleau-Ponty makes reference to this text in *PP*, p. 441, and note 13 (p. 560). I believe that Emmanuel de Saint Aubert's assertion that the expression is never found in Husserl's work is wrong. Perhaps, as he himself affirms, Merleau-Ponty did not take it from that specific text, but rather from the work of Fink, “Das Problem der Phänomenologie Edmunds Husserls,” However, the reference of Merleau-Ponty to Husserl's work is correct. See Saint Aubert (2005, p. 142-143).

²⁰ See note 3 in the article.

reaching one's hand out toward an object contains a reference to the object, not as a representation, but as this highly determinate thing toward which we are thrown, which we are next to through anticipation, and which we haunt.” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2012, p. 140). This form of intentionality exists without the mediation of reflection. Rather, it is the result of the coupling or adhesion of the subject to the world (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2012, p. 8-12).

In habitual behaviours one sees more clearly that the body understands, that what Merleau-Ponty calls a *motor signification* comes to be. This is not the result of a spatial calculation, but rather of a kind of synchrony between the body and space and with the objects that are in it, because the body “understands” either the distance from things, or the affinity with the melody of the body's movement itself, as occurs, for example, in dance. Merleau-Ponty explains what happens in these cases as follows: “Places in space are not defined as objective positions in relation to the objective position of our body, but rather they inscribe around us the variable reach of our intentions and our gestures.” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2012, p. 144).²¹

This quote opens a topic that permits the union of this second part of the article with the topics developed in the prior section, and which can now be more broadly developed. The relationship of the subject with space, that *knowledge of a place*, “can be understood in several senses” according to Merleau-Ponty (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2012, p. 106). That is, one can develop an explanation that is more intellectualist or associationist, or another explanation that has to do with the lived situation of the person: “Bodily space can be given to a grasping intention without being given to an epistemic one.” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2012, p. 106). This distinction marks the contrasts described in *PP* between the healthy subject and the unhealthy one and, in this latter case, between the habitual actions of the unhealthy subject and those that respond to an order, that is, those that occur on the abstract plane: “The patient is conscious of bodily space as the envelope of his habitual action, but not as an objective milieu. His body is available as a means of insertion into his familiar surroundings, but not as a means of expression of a spontaneous and free spatial thought.” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2012, p. 106). Spatial knowledge, which I will emphasize now, is

²¹ The descriptions that Merleau-Ponty gives regarding the perception of colour are especially interesting, both because of the beauty of their expression and of the force that attains com-penetration with the coloured object. In these descriptions the passive trait reappears: in some way colour “inundates” or “penetrates” the subject. See especially Merleau-Ponty (2012, p. 218-220) in which he compares perception with eucharistic communion.

the fruit of a “sort of coexistence with that location.” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2012, p. 108). This is why it is also difficult to explain theoretically, given that it is understood in the context of what Merleau-Ponty calls a motor field or universe, directly linked with the living project of the subject, its mission in the world in which it is situated.

The person is originally linked with the world from a dynamic *I can* but which “hides behind the objective world that it contributes to constituting.” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2012, note 99, p. 523).²² The concealment of the body makes the explanation of the motor signification difficult, but it is also a signal of kinetic spontaneity which, albeit completed by learning, is at the origin of the existence of the subject. As I have already noted, in *Le monde sensible*, Merleau-Ponty compares gnosis and praxis, or rather makes the latter the condition of the possibility of theoretical knowledge: “I want to point out a relationship with the object that is not, initially, one of knowledge. To deeply analyze the notion of knowledge via that of praxis. This is a matter of capturing the spirit in its aborning state.” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2011, p. 52-53). Further along, in this same work, he affirms that in regards to the world of culture one can also consider praxis as either constitutive or originary, since by way of our perceptive consciousness we have a certain familiarity with the things that surround us: “We frequent them” in a way that is more practical than theoretical. The same phenomenon occurs with expressive cultural objects, thanks to an effusion of meaning that is equally tacit (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2011, p. 65). Emphasizing this tacit character of practical intellection, Merleau-Ponty speaks of a “silence” of perception that should be taken in a strong sense. It not only remains silent, it is opposed to language and to enunciations, to the *I know that*, given that it itself is a form of language: “We understand the sensible as though between our body and the subject’s there were a pact that was prior to us, prior to every situation, as though it were speaking a language to us that we don’t have to learn, and about which we know the science.” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2011, p. 58).²³ Continuing with this same idea, Merleau-Ponty suggests comparing perception with a reading in which the “objective” signs or data were inscribed within a “field” that grants them a situational value. All perception is a modulation of a situation, in which the situated subject is not an *I think*, but rather an *I can* (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2011, p. 104).

²² See Leder (1990), especially chapter 1 for a deeper exploration of this concealment of the body.

²³ See also Lefort, (2009, p. 275-292), where the author refers to this silence of the body.

But even this latter state—the *I can*—offers limitations, not being a pure possibility. Its *haecceity* [thisness] imposes certain limits that derive both from bodiliness and any deficiencies that might affect it, as well as the spatio-temporal situation in which movement takes place, as well as action in general. These limitations are primarily expressed in the descriptions of the unhealthy subject, specifically in the *PP* by way of the Schneider case. Illness, in any of its forms, can mean a diminishing of the *I can*, but also a modification of it, as in the case of the substitution that the subject discovers in an object, an artefact, which is added to its potentiality until it becomes one object with it. This is the case with the cane that the blind person uses, which ends up being an extension of his or her arm or hand (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2012, p. 144). The negativity of the deficiency, the difficulty or opposition presented by this relation with the world, causes the person to display original forms of the *I can*: having recourse to artefacts, which I have already mentioned, or the broadening of perceptive capacities, as in the case of the blind person whose senses of hearing and smelling become more acute. But it is not just the sick person that has limitations; we also see the healthy subject restricted in his movements, both because of personal factors as well as environmental ones. Merleau-Ponty does not specifically refer to this aspect, or to the reality that not all the parts of the body are equally available for action and movement. The extremities, for example, seem to be more plastic than the torso or the lumbar region. The hands and legs display more agility and speed in the fulfilment of the movement's purpose, requiring a lesser impulse from the will, almost moving by themselves. For example, there is the rhythm that footsteps acquire when nearing the objective, or the tensing of the hand upon grasping the desired object. These cases show us that the situation, in some way, configures the *I can*, which in turn cannot be explained as a pure capacity; rather, the explanation always resides in a linkage with the world.²⁴

These examples reflect an *I can* that displays itself in the perceptive or sensory field, prior to the will, as the response of the body, without the direction of the rational faculties. Nevertheless, in *Le monde sensible* Merleau-Ponty suggests a broader conception of perception that can also be applied to the intellect, without restricting itself exclusively to the sensory realm. This is why one can speak of a *logos* of perception and of an implicit *logic* of perception. Upon this *logos* is mounted, so to speak, the *logos* of the intellect,

²⁴ I am grateful for the contributions offered to me on this point by the participants in the seminar that I presented at the UIC (Universidade Internacional de Catalúnia), in January of 2016, within the framework of the Seminars organized by the SARX Research Group.

since the object of the intellect redirects to the perceived thing, which forms part of its signification or meaning. Thus a double relationship is established: the perceived is there to be thought, while thought is about the perceived (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2011, p. 54). He concludes: “Everything is perception, but perception is everything, i.e., our idea of perception must be broadened so that it will make possible an analysis of the intellect.” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2011, p. 55). The intellect must open itself, so to speak, to the logos of perception, so that the aforementioned mutual relation between what is thought and what is perceived comes to be.

This broadening of perception confirms the affirmation found in *PP* towards the end of the chapter, regarding the spatiality of the body itself. Motricity is not like a handmaiden of consciousness, it does not carry out any orders given by the intelligence, it does not answer to mental representations. Rather, it has its own reasoning, its own “logic,” if this word can be admitted in this domain (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2012, p. 140). This ‘reasoning’ of the body is displayed in dialogue with the spatio-temporal world that it *inhabits* in opposition to a mere *being-in*; it inhabits space and time (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2012, p. 140). In the same way that *I am* my body, I do not possess it. I am also of space and time (in French one says *à l’espace et au temps*) and this situation is constantly initiated over and over. For this reason, he concludes that the knowledge of the body is not a particular case of knowledge, it is the originary “praktognosia” presupposed in all forms of knowledge (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2012, p. 141). There is a consonance between this affirmation and the prior one, showing that the logos of the intellect is about what is perceived, since both point to the anticipatory and implicit character of perception. Again, in *Le monde sensible*, Merleau-Ponty affirms that there is a relationship of complicity between the quality and the sensory field, which suggests a certain affective and vital rhythm to the subject. Thanks to this synchronization the person can, in the absence of the quality, supply a quasi-presence: an image, a construction of nearly sensible structures for one’s body. There is a vertiginous proximity and, at the same time, a distance that is due to the thing being of another order. It makes the subject vibrate in its body, it reaches the body from within, it causes obsession, but is always beyond the vibration that it communicates (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2012, p. 56). This is the finality that moves the body, not by an intellectual representation, but by the anticipation that I have already mentioned (DORRANCE KELLY, 2005, p. 100-101).

We return, once again, to the difference between abstract movement and the concrete movement that Merleau-Ponty employs as a backdrop in order to compare the behaviour of the unhealthy subject with that of the healthy one (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2012, p. 125). These two forms of movement do not obey the distinction between a movement that is conscious and another that is mechanical or merely physiological. Rather, they require, in order to be understood, that there be “*several ways for the body to be a body, and several ways for consciousness to be consciousness.*” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2012, p. 125, italics by author). One of the ways of being body is expressed by what Merleau-Ponty calls motor intentionality, which is not explained physiologically by a causal connection regulated by the nerve system, which would account for sensorial affections and motor responses. Instead, it is a question of one of the modes of relating the subject to the world, of being in the world: “The subject makes that which surrounds him exist for him: either as the pole of activity and the term of an act of grasping or releasing, or as a spectacle and the theme of knowledge.” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2012, p. 117). Both situations will provide the mode of being body and the mode of being Ego, a pair that cannot be unlinked from one another. Clearly, what we are dealing with now is the world as a pole of activity that arouses this motor intentionality, i.e., a form of bodily movement oriented to action. Concrete movement occurs both in the healthy subject as well as in the unhealthy, but in the latter it is restricted to certain habitual movements, and it turns out to be exhausting for the unhealthy person to display movements that, for example, respond to the indications of another person. One could say that movement, in this case, loses its immediacy and spontaneity. It is no longer a question of movement that is at the basis of knowledge, but rather of a movement that responds instead to intellectual representations.

An appropriate understanding of motor intentionality is made easier by the broadening of the perception mentioned above, since this is how intellectual knowledge is included, for human behaviour is never entirely sensorial or perceptive. The integration of perceptual data in the existence of the person occurs in an “experiential situation” that links or unites the particular or factual—which Merleau-Ponty labels “*haecceity*” [thisness]—with a global consideration that includes thoughts and takes up past sedimentations and future projects. Merleau-Ponty speaks of a “sublimation” of perception, for example of visual contents, at the level of thought in which they are symbolically integrated. But what I wish to emphasize at this point is the sensorial base, in this case visual, upon which this sublimation occurs:

the symbolic function does not depend on vision as its ground because vision is its cause, but because vision is this gift of nature that Spirit had to make for us beyond all expectations, to which it had to give a radically new sense and upon which nevertheless it depended, not merely in order to become embodied, but even in order to exist at all. (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2012, p. 128).

The use of the expression “gift of nature” alludes to a certain passivity, thanks to which we have sensory and perceptive knowledge, without the mediation of any action on the part of the subject. It expresses, in some way, the Kantian concept of experience. However, above all it expresses Merleau-Ponty’s idea of anticipation, which holds that all forms of knowledge are already within us before we possess them in a conscious manner.²⁵ This anticipation also expresses the originary and thus impersonal level at which the perception takes place. Merleau-Ponty says that, rather than saying that “I perceive”, one should say “something is perceived in me”: I grasp myself as already feeling. Experience occurs at what he calls the *primordial level*.

As a result, if I wanted to express perceptual experience with precision, I would have to say that one perceives in me, and not that I perceive [...]. This activity unfolds on the periphery of my being [...] Each time that I experience a sensation, I experience that it does not concern my own being—the one for which I am responsible and upon which I decide—but rather another self that has already sided with the world, that is already open to certain of its aspects and has synchronized with them. Between my sensation and myself, there is always the thickness of an originary acquisition that prevents my experience from being clear to itself. I experience sensation as a modality of a general existence, already destined to a physical world, which flows through me without my being its author. (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2012, p. 223-224).²⁶

In this case, Merleau-Ponty uses the thought of Husserl in order to accentuate, in the matter-form relation, the foundational character of the matter that in intellectual sublimation still continues to be a radical contingency, which grounds knowledge and action, and which is at the base

²⁵ The expression “gift of nature” appears at least three times in *PP*, see p. 45, 224, and 461. It always alludes to a certain receptivity or passivity, an achievement that is attained without any effort.

²⁶ It is impossible to deal, in this article, with this aspect of anonymity and the generality of existence, which needs a broader development. I mention it solely to emphasize the depth of the interweaving between the subject and the world. (TRIGG, 2014, p. 255-271).

of the grasping of being and from which knowledge and action constantly extract its wealth (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2012, p. 128-129). Further on, in texts that also make an express reference to Husserl, he speaks of the unity of the ego as presumed in the horizon of experience offered at the primordial level where the logos is born (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2012, p. 228-229).

Merleau-Ponty illustrates this “founding” relation with the understanding of analogy, which, being an act of grasping that is properly intellectual, depends on perceptive experience. He proposes the example of an analogy between the eye and the ear, which the normal subject easily understands because both are means of access to one and the same *world* that is ante-predicatively evident; this analogy is understood prior to being conceived (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2012, p. 131). Note that he does not say “prior to being known,” but rather “conceived,” because the analogy has already been known—and lived—by the corporeal subject that has experienced his or her visual and auditory relationship to the world. A properly intellectual conception comes to be on the basis of this perceptive knowledge. There is no conception without this peculiar form of understanding; it is not just different from an intellectual proposition, it originates in the things themselves with this anticipatory and simultaneous character, because ideas—which can be called sensory ideas—are born at the same time as the things (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2012, p. 228).²⁷

Taking a step further in order to explain the body’s understanding, from a perspective that is further distanced from the linkage with thought, Merleau-Ponty offers the example of the corporeal knowledge of his own house, which allows him to move about in it easily, without hitting the furniture inside, instead recognizing each in its proper functions:

When I move about in my house, I know immediately and without any intervening discourse that to walk toward the bathroom involves passing close to the bedroom, or that to look out the window involves having the fireplace to my left. In this small world, each gesture or each perception is immediately situated in relation to a thousand virtual coordinates. (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2012, p. 131).

²⁷ Even though in this article I have deliberately left out *The Visible and the Invisible*, this quote from the Working Notes is very pertinent: “*What* consciousness does not see, it does not see because of principles; it does not see because it is consciousness. *What* he does not see is what prepares the vision of others in it (just as the retina is blind at the point where the fibres that permit vision are distributed). *What* he does not see is that which makes him able to see, his linkage with Being, his corporeal nature, the existentials by which the world becomes visible, the flesh in which the object is born.” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1960, italics by author).

The corporeal subject moves about in a determined space, comprehending it not just in its immediate possibilities, but also those things that are possible. The body is not just a *haecceity* or facticity, but also a possibility, because it is a body that *is* a body that is *existing* in the world. *Being* a body is not the same as *having* a body; existing as a body is to reveal the potentialities proper to the body in its relationship with the world, because there is no existence without world. Merleau-Ponty contrasts this knowledge of the world with the mental sedimentations that we constantly employ. Returning to the example of one's own house, he says that we do not have a group of associated images. Rather, it is "my house" because "I have 'in my hands' or 'in my legs' the distances and principal directions to it." (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2012, p. 131). Although in this text Merleau-Ponty mixes intellectual sedimentation with the body's understanding, I wish to extract just the latter, in order to accent the linkage of that understanding with motricity. "To have in one's hands and in one's legs the principal distances and directions" is certainly a knowledge of the body that is sedimented and therefore is also habitual. How do my hands and legs know? How do my legs know that I am nearly at my destination and accelerate their steps in order to get some rest, or to get to my meeting on time? How do they know that I want to hug the beloved person that appears in my sight and therefore they run? The allusion to sedimentation is not accidental: my body indeed knows, on the basis of knowledge that is anterior in time, perceptions that are from my infancy or that have even faded away in the realm of the unconscious. We can apply here what has been mentioned regarding the fact that the corporeal subject always knows, on the basis of other knowledge, that the body is always moving ahead on a knowledge it has already obtained. This knowledge is not explained by the influence of concepts in consciousness, but by perceptions that bring with them other perceptions, and so on. This is why one can speak of a knowledge *of the hands* or *of the legs*; a spatial and motor knowledge of distances and directions.²⁸

The anticipation mentioned at the beginning of this second part of my article has to do with operant intentionality and the motor project. The synchrony of the body with space and objects is directed by the dynamic

²⁸ Merleau-Ponty borrows from psychiatric jargon the concept of "intentional arch," which takes in the entire life of consciousness: concepts, culture, desires, perceptions, as well as the temporal dimension. All those aspects that constitute human existence, considered globally, are unified in the case of the healthy subject, but come apart in the sick person (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2012, p. 138). Even though he doesn't mention it explicitly, Merleau-Ponty is referring to one's own hands, *my hands*, *my legs*, because there is an unavoidable reference to the subject that experiences this form of knowledge.

“I can,” by the primacy of praxis with respect to gnosis. It is the familiarity that the subject has with the world that is at the base of the later intellectual production (AHO, 2005, p. 1-23).²⁹

CONCLUSION

Just as Zahavi and Gallagher indicate, Merleau-Ponty’s analysis is not limited to the way in which the body becomes present in experience. Rather, it is much more the manner in which the body structures our experience, constituting itself in our primary form of being-in-the-world. For these authors, the lived body is neither spirit nor nature, neither soul nor body, neither interior nor exterior, neither subject nor object. All these categories are derivations of something more basic, which is the body as experience (GALLAGHER; ZAHAVI, 2012, p. 153-156). Prior to the intellectual recognition of reality, under the form of truth, there is the experience of this reality. One could speak of a corporeal causality that acts existentially rather than physically. The phenomenological contribution to a solution of the mind-body problem does not take the form of a metaphysical theory of mental causality. Neither does it consist in an explanation of how the body interacts with the mind; rather, it seeks to understand to what degree our experience of the world, our experience of the ego, and our experience of other people are formed and influenced by corporeality (GALLAGHER; ZAHAVI, 2012, p.154).

From this perspective, the body’s understanding acquires a notable relevance and, even though it is not a knowledge that is easy to specify, it lets itself be seen from the relation of the person with space, especially in the spontaneity and motor anticipation that Merleau-Ponty sees in the permanent contrast between the healthy and the unhealthy subject. The originality of this understanding is primarily due to the motor insertion of the subject in the world to which Merleau-Ponty alludes, with the constant comparison between the *I can* and the *I think* or between *praxis* and *gnosis*. Perception and movement intermingle at the origin of experience, and are the basis for later intellectual production.

Even if this is, so to speak, the condition of all knowledge, the thing given to the body, that which the body “frequents,” is far from still being

²⁹ This article points out important coincidences between Heidegger’s thought and that of Merleau-Ponty that can be considered in a later study.

the “pure thing.” In the course of *La Nature*, Merleau-Ponty says that it is imprisoned “like shavings inside my body. The subject is carried towards things by its body, but the role of the body is still unconscious.” One’s knowledge of the body itself suffers lacunae, and the thing is lost in the haze of individual life (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1995, p. 108-109).³⁰ The precarious nature of the body’s knowledge is not a negative trait for Merleau-Ponty. Rather, it is the condition of its radicalness or depth, in the sense that it is from this understanding that every other form of knowledge is derived and links together.

It is not a matter of performing a kind of cognitional reconstitution; rather, we must accept those lacunae that express the intermingling of the subject with the world. In *Le monde sensible*, with the broadening of perception towards understanding, we understand better that motor signification is directly related to the life project of the subject, and implicates the totality of the person. Thanks to this unification, logic and the language of the body intertwine, not just with the world and its demands, but also with the realm of culture and expression.

MOYA, P. O conhecimento do corpo e o movimento em Merleau-Ponty. *Transformação*, Marília, v. 42, n. 1, p. 201-226, Jan./Mar., 2019.

RESUMO: O autor busca uma explicação para a expressão “o corpo conhece”, de Merleau-Ponty, à qual atribui um valor real: os objetos do mundo têm uma significação que o corpo apreende por meio da percepção. A análise se concentra na *Fenomenologia da percepção* e nas notas de dois cursos: *O mundo sensível e o mundo da expressão e A natureza*. Há uma constante alusão ao *eu posso* como um modo subjacente e fundamental em relação ao *eu penso*. Daí, o filósofo francês conferiu um papel central ao movimento que demonstra o entrelaçamento do corpo com o mundo.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Merleau-Ponty. Corpo cognoscente. Percepção. Movimento. Mundo.

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³⁰ In *PP* Merleau-Ponty also speaks of these lacunae and fissures; see p. 349.

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