

In *Metaphysics, Facticity, Interpretation: Phenomenology in the Nordic Countries*, eds. Dan Zahavi, Sara Heinämaa, and Hans Ruin, Dordrecht, Boston, London: Kluwer, 2003, pp. 23–48.

Obs! All notes are missing.

Merleau-Ponty's dialogue with Descartes:

The living body and its position in metaphysics

Sara Heinämaa

University of Helsinki, Academy of Finland

The Cartesian idea of the human body as a human *non-closed*, open inasmuch as governed by thought – is perhaps the most profound idea of the union of the soul and the body. It is the soul intervening in a body that is *not of the in itself* (...), that can be a body and living – human only by reaching completion in “view of itself” which is thought (...) (Merleau-Ponty *Le visible et l'invisible*, 288/234).

Merleau-Ponty's *Phénoménologie de la perception* (1945) is well known for its detailed descriptions and analyses of bodily experiences. The topic of the body is so central, that the work is often presented, not as an inquiry into perception, but as a theory of a corporeal, bodily subject.

Another notion shared by many commentators is that Merleau-Ponty argues primarily against Descartes. Remy C. Kwant, for example, states in his early study that Merleau-Ponty's “fundamental discovery” was the body-subject and that this meant “victory over Cartesianism” (1963, 11). A great number of recent commentators agree.

I argue in this paper that to characterize Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology as anti-Cartesian simplifies the issue. Although Merleau-Ponty is critical toward Descartes' dualistic ontology, he finds in Descartes' texts an important notion of the mind-body compound and a profound understanding of the philosopher's task. The intimacy of the connection has been documented and emphasized by a number of scholars. I will add to this literature by arguing that the connection is not just topical but also epistemological and methodic.

My interpretative thesis is that Merleau-Ponty's thought is closely connected to Descartes' meditations, from *Phénoménologie* to the late essay, *L'Œil et l'esprit* (1964), and not just in the historical sense that holds for all modern philosophers. Merleau-Ponty does not turn away from Descartes' thought, as Peirce and Frege, or Heidegger and Wittgenstein do. Instead of rejecting or overcoming the meditations, he aims at "recovering" them, thinking with Descartes, as he says (Merleau-Ponty VI 251/198, cf. PhP 459ff./400ff.). To those who insist on asking if he is Cartesian or not, he answers:

The question does not make much sense, since those who reject this or that in Descartes do so only in terms of reasons which owe much to Descartes (Merleau-Ponty S 17/11).

Merleau-Ponty argues that the usual understanding of Descartes as a dualist is biased or anachronistic. He claims that there is a "secret equilibrium" in Descartes' metaphysics, an internal restriction, but we fail to see it for we embrace only one side or aspect of his teaching: "Our science and our philosophy are two faithful and unfaithful consequences of Cartesianism, two monsters born from its dismemberment (Merleau-Ponty ŒE 58/177).

His suggestion is that we should return from our sciences of behavior and from our naturalistic philosophy back to Descartes' meditations on first philosophy – not to repeat these meditations but to comprehend their style of thinking (Merleau-Ponty VI 242/188, cf. PhP xiii/xviii, 459-465/400-406). My aim in this paper is to follow this advise and try to think the mind-body compound anew. I will do this by studying Merleau-Ponty's comments on Descartes, but I also need to make short excursions into Descartes' original texts. The aim is dual: to get a more informed understanding of Merleau-Ponty's

reading of Descartes, but also, through such an exercise, to learn to think about minds and bodies.

1. Three modes of knowledge

Throughout his work, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes that in addition to the mind-body dualism, Descartes offers us an account of the mind-body compound or union. He argues that this notion is not just an ad hoc invention but an integral part of Descartes' view of human knowledge.

We can see Merleau-Ponty developing this reading already in *Phénoménologie*, in the end of the extensive first part titled "Le corps". There Merleau-Ponty first makes a summary of his preparatory criticism of empiricist and intellectualist conceptions of the living body and then he argues:

Thus experience of one's own body runs counter to the reflective procedure which detaches subject and object from each other, and which gives us only the thought about the body, or the body as an idea, and not the experience of the body or the body as a reality. Descartes was well aware of this, since a famous letter of his to Elisabeth draws the distinction between the body as it is conceived through use in living and the body as it is conceived by intellect (Merleau-Ponty PhP 231/199).

Merleau-Ponty's reference is to a letter in which Descartes explains to princess Elisabeth that different modes of thinking must be kept separate if we aim at understanding our possibilities for knowledge. Descartes separates between three ways of knowing. These are different both in their objects and in their methods:

The soul is conceived only by the pure intellect; body (i.e. extension, its shapes and motions) can likewise be known [*connaître*] by the intellect alone; but much better by the intellect aided by imagination; and finally what belongs to the union of soul and body is known only obscurely by the intellect alone or even by the intellect aided by the imagination, but it is known very clearly by the senses (Descartes AT III 691, CSM-K 227).

So according to Descartes' letter, the three objects of human knowledge are: first, soul as pure thought, second, body as extension, and third, the soul-body union. These are discovered by three different operations of the soul. The pure soul is known by the intellect alone, and the extended body is known by the intellect aided by imagination. But to know the soul-body union we need to interrupt our meditations and pay attention to our sensations. Descartes continues:

Metaphysical thoughts, which exercise the pure intellect, help to familiarize [*rendre familière*] us with the notion of the soul; and the study of mathematics, which exercises mainly imagination in the consideration of shapes and motions, accustoms [*accoutume*] us to form very distinct notions of body. But it is the ordinary course of life and conversation, and abstention from meditations and from the study of things which exercise imagination, that teaches [*étudier*] us how to conceive the union of the soul and the body (Descartes AT III 692, CSM-K 227).

Elisabeth had complained in her letters (May 16 and June 20, 1643) that it is impossible for her to conceive the body and the mind both as separate and as connected in the way that Descartes' meditations suggest (Descartes AT III 661, 682-685, cf. AT VII 81-83, CSM 56-57). Merleau-Ponty points out that Descartes' answer is that such a task is based on a misunderstanding: We cannot *at the same time* think the mind and the body as separate and as compounded (Merleau-Ponty PhP 52/42, cf. Descartes AT III 693, CSM-K 227). These thoughts have to be kept distinct:

(...) all human knowledge [science] consists solely in clearly distinguishing [*bien distinguer*] these notions and attaching [*attribuer*] each of them only to the things to which it pertains. For if we try to solve a problem by means of a notion that does not pertain to it, we cannot help going wrong. Similarly we go wrong if we try to explain [*expliquer*] one of these notions by another, for since they are primitive notions, each of them can be understood [*entendüe*] only through itself (Descartes AT III 665-666, CSM-K 218, cf. AT III 691, CSM-K 226).

For Merleau-Ponty, Descartes' main teaching is that we have two kinds of knowledge of bodies which cannot be reduced one to other (Merleau-Ponty N 34). First, we can conceive bodies by the use of intellect and imagination. Thus we find the notion of body as extension and understand individual bodies as configurations of shape and movement. But we can also conceive bodies through sense-experience, and in this mode of knowledge, living bodies appear as habitats of thinking souls. Humans are not machines steered by souls, as we might think when operating with intellect and imagination. In sense perception, they are given as subjects of sensation and perception (Merleau-Ponty PhP 52-53/42-43, cf. Descartes AT VII 32, CSM II 21). In particular, our own bodies are given to us, not just as sensible things, but also as sensing things. Merleau-Ponty refers us to the Sixth Meditation, in which Descartes writes:

Nature also teaches me, by these sensations of pain, hunger, thirst and so on, that I am not merely present in my body as a sailor is present in a ship, but that I am very closely joined, and as it were, intermingled with it, so that I and the body form a unit (Descartes AT VII 81, CSM II 56).

Merleau-Ponty points out that Descartes' advice to Elisabeth is not that she should abandon the notion of the soul-body union as a chimera (ŒE 54-56/176-177, cf. U 15/35). Instead Descartes tells Elisabeth that she should not too often occupy her intellect with metaphysical meditations, but spend only "a few hours" per year in such inquiries (AT III 693, CSM-K 227, cf. AT VII 17, CSM II 12, and AT VIIIA 193, CSM II 5). She should then try to keep in her memory the results of such investigations, and employ the rest of her study time to "thoughts in which the intellect co-operates with the imagination and the sense" (Descartes AT III 695, CSM-K 228). The results of metaphysical thoughts do not give us knowledge of the corporeal reality, but only ascertain the existence of our thought and of God and thus restore our perceptual faith and imaginative thinking (cf. Descartes AT III 695, CSM-K 228). The epistemological lesson is that the results of the three modes of knowing – sense perception, imagination, and intellect – must not be confused.

2. “The sailor in the ship”

Merleau-Ponty emphasizes, throughout his writings, that already in *Meditations*, Descartes unambiguously rejects the classical Platonic understanding of the soul-body relation. In the Sixth Meditation, Descartes argues that the soul *is not in* the body in the same way as the sailor or the pilot is in the ship. In Merleau-Ponty’s reading, this rejection has three aspects.

First, the body is no longer conceived as an instrument of the soul: “our organs are no longer instruments; on the contrary, our instruments are added or joined organs” (Merleau-Ponty ŒE 58/178, cf. PhP 107/91). This means, ultimately, that in sense perception, my body is not present to me as a thing among other things. I do not find my body occasionally, or seize on it for some specific purpose or aim. Rather it is constantly there as this specific something from which I cannot turn away. In the Sixth Meditation, Descartes writes: “I could never be separated from it, as I could from other bodies” (AT IX 60, AT VII 75, CSM II 52). Merleau-Ponty elaborates on this claim in *Phénoménologie*:

To say that it is always near me, always there for me, is to say that it is never really in front of me, that I cannot array it before my eyes, that it remains marginal to all my perceptions, that it is *with me* [avec moi] (Merleau-Ponty PhP 106/90, cf. ŒE 16-20/162-163).

Second, Merleau-Ponty argues that for the sensing soul, its own body marks the “primary here” [premier ici] from which all the “there’s” will come. The perception of an external object, the vision of a tree or an ashtray, for example, includes the difference between here and there: The object is seen as being there, in contrast to the here of the seeing soul-body (Merleau-Ponty ŒE 12/160, 54-59/ 176-178). The “primary here” is not a part or a mode of the extended substance. It is the centre or zero-point of a very different, autonomous spatial order, structured by the distances of near and far, and by the directions of above and below, right and left. My body is the point from which space opens out and unfolds for me as a system of touchable, audible, and visible things.

Space is no longer what was discussed in the *Dioptric*, a system of relations between objects such as

would be seen by a witness to my vision, or by a geometer reconstructing my vision and surveying it. It is, rather, a space reckoned starting from me as the zero point or degree zero of spatiality. I do not see it according to its exterior envelope; I live in it from the inside; I am included in it (Merleau-Ponty ŒE 58-59/178, cf. PhP 114ff./98ff., N 34, VI 24-26/8-11).

In this context, Merleau-Ponty also states that the “primary here” of my body is the place which my soul “inhabits [*habite*]” (ŒE 53/176, cf. PhP 162-164/139-140). By this Merleau-Ponty means that the soul does not just occupy one section or part of the body but is “suffused [*répandu*] throughout the body” (Merleau-Ponty ŒE 60/178). I occupy my body as I occupy my house. There is no one place in my body which would be more mine than the others, or in which I could be located more readily than in the others. The sensing soul is not “hidden away in the body” but intermingled and confounded with it (Merleau-Ponty ŒE 60/178, cf. Descartes AT VII 74, CSM II 52, and AT XI 351, CSM I 339).

This is in obvious contrast with Descartes' arguments according to which the principal location of the soul is in the brain (e.g. AT VIII A 319-320). But according to Merleau-Ponty's reading, Descartes does not present these arguments to annul the notion of the corporeal self involved in sense-experiences, emotions, and sensations. Rather his aim is to problematize the inferences that are naturally and habitually drawn from such experiences, i.e. inferences about the causal origin of the experiences (Merleau-Ponty PhP 60-61/49).

The third implication is that the soul-body union should not be conceived as a composite of the two substances, pure soul and mere matter. The epistemological restriction, explicated by Descartes in the correspondence with Elisabeth, rules out the possibility of discovering the components of the union by intellect and imagination. Both the union and its possible components or parts can be learned only by studying the union as it is experienced.

The union of soul and body is not sealed by arbitrary decree between two mutually external terms, object and subject (Merleau-Ponty PhP 105/88-89, cf. PhP 403/351).

So body as part of the union should not be confused with body as the extended substance; and the same

holds for the soul: as part of the union it is not merely the principle of thinking. This means, ultimately, that Elisabeth's questions are misguided (Merleau-Ponty U 15/35, cf. *ŒE* 55/176). To ask how the pure soul can move the mechanical body is to confuse three categories that are epistemically distinct. What we learn through the operations of pure intellect and through intellect aided by imagination should not be confused with the idea of the union: "it is absurd to submit to pure understanding [*entendement*] the mixture of understanding and body" (Merleau-Ponty *ŒE* 55/176, cf. VI 285-286/232-233). The constituents of the union can be known only through the union. They are not two functional parts of a mechanism discovered by the intellect aided by imagination. For, as Descartes states, "what belongs to the union of soul and the body is known only obscurely by the intellect alone or even by the intellect aided by the imagination, but it is known very clearly by the senses."

However, the confusion is not Elisabeth's device but stems from Descartes' own formulations. In his replies to Gassendi, Descartes states, for example that "it is not necessary for the mind itself to be a body, although it has the power of moving the body" (AT III 387, CSM-K 266). And in the letter to Elisabeth, Descartes explains that the notion of the union allows us to understand how the soul moves the body and acts on it (AT III 665, CSM-K 218). So when Elisabeth then asks Descartes to explain how the non-extensive and immaterial soul could move the material body (AT III 661, 684), her questions elaborate on Descartes' own wordings that leave the concepts of movement and body unspecified.

So Merleau-Ponty's reading emphasizes two aspects of Descartes' philosophy that are often forgotten or overlooked. First, Merleau-Ponty argues that Descartes offers us an anti-Platonist account of the soul-body union that is rich in implications. Second, Merleau-Ponty claims that this notion of the soul-body union is independent of the notions of the two substances. It is not explicable as a combination of pure thought and extended matter but on the contrary offers a new perspective to spatiality, nature, and the self.

Thus, the problem of Cartesian philosophy is not that it overlooks corporeal experiences or bans them from the realm of human knowledge. This is an anachronistic way of reading Descartes.

Rather the problem is that given Descartes' conception of metaphysics as an exercise of pure intellect, the soul-body union seems to fall outside metaphysics. Descartes explains that all knowledge

acquired by the senses is for practical purposes of life only, and he rejects sensations, sense perceptions, and emotions as confused thoughts (e.g. AT VII 351, CSM II 243). So these modes of thought do not seem to have any apodictic truth in them.

Merleau-Ponty states explicitly that this conclusion cannot be accepted (PhP 232/199, ŒE 54-58/176-177, VI 27/11). Descartes' own way of philosophizing, his method for searching for durable principles of knowledge, does not allow for such a demarcation. For if the union restored in the Sixth Meditation is without any truth, then how did the reflections in the First Meditations ever get started? And if the meditation did get started, then how does it conceive its own beginning (Merleau-Ponty PhP iv/x, 48/38)? Merleau-Ponty points out that there is a fundamental tension or paradox in Descartes' thought. But this does not lead him to abandon his meditations. Rather, the Cartesian paradox is something that still needs to be thought through.

We can see Merleau-Ponty returning to the topic again and again, from *Phénoménologie* to *Le visible et l'invisible*. Starting from *Phénoménologie*:

(...) if the description of the unreflected remains valid after the reflection and the *Sixth Meditation* after the *Second*, conversely this unreflected itself is known [*connu*] to us only through reflection and cannot be posited outside reflection as an unknowable endpoint or limit (Merleau-Ponty PhP 52/43, cf. PhP 232/199).

And then in the two series of lectures on the living body and on nature, held in 1947–1948 and in 1956–1957:

If we take the steps of the First Meditation seriously, are we not led to consider the Sixth Meditations as a simple appearance? And conversely, if the Sixth Meditation is taken seriously, how were the steps of the First possible? (Merleau-Ponty U 15–16/35).

The change of perspective is clearly perceivable in the *Meditations*. In the *Meditations* 1 to 3, Descartes takes natural light [intellect] as the reference point; in the *Meditations* 3 to 6, it is natural inclination

[sensation] which makes us believe in the existence of the external world, of our bodies (Merleau-Ponty N 34). And finally right before his death, in March 1961, Merleau-Ponty writes down a working note for himself:

Study the pre-methodic Descartes, the *spontanea fruges*, this natural thought “that always precedes the acquired thought” – and the post-methodic Descartes, that of after VIth Meditation, who lives in the world after having methodically explored it (Merleau-Ponty VI 326/272-273).

The usual reading is that these critical reflections lead Merleau-Ponty to reject Descartes' epistemology as impossible or self-refuting (e.g. Dillon 1988). Another interpretation, more recent and closer to the texts, is that Merleau-Ponty argued that the paradoxes of Descartes' philosophy are based on the duality of our existential condition (Barbaras 1998, cf. Dastur 2001). A third alternative is to argue that Merleau-Ponty's main idea is to reverse Descartes' reflections which “subordinate” our experiences of the living body to mathematical thought (Reuter 2000, 58-59, 131-133, 145-146, cf. Merleau-Ponty PHP 231/199).

In the latter part of this paper, I present a somewhat different understanding. I argue that Merleau-Ponty does not abandon Descartes' ideal of clear and distinct thought nor does he base his epistemology on any prior ontology. On the contrary, it seems to me that his advise is that we should follow Descartes' epistemological principles carefully, more carefully than Descartes himself was able to do. If we do this, then we see that there is a place in first philosophy for sensations and sense perception. This will allow us to give a new, perhaps a more fruitful, formulation to the Cartesian paradox.

3. Sensations

Let me frame my problem afresh. First, Merleau-Ponty makes clear that Descartes offers us a rich notion of the soul-body union, but the philosophical status of the union remains problematic. Second,

Merleau-Ponty does not approve that sensations and what they teach us remain outside metaphysics. He states this explicitly in “Le métaphysique dans l’homme” (1947):

Metaphysics begins from the moment when, ceasing to live in the evidence of the object – whether it is the sensory object or the object of science – we apperceive in an indissoluble way the radical subjectivity of all our experience and its truth value (Merleau-Ponty SN 114/93, cf. 36/27-28).

The usual understanding is that there is no interesting problem here, for Merleau-Ponty overthrows all of Descartes' epistemological teaching and is thus able to found his own philosophy on confused and obscure phenomena. In what follows I offer an alternative reading: I argue that Merleau-Ponty's suggestion is not that we should abandon the rule of clearness and distinctiveness. We will have a philosophy of the living body, not when we forget Descartes' rule, but when we keep in mind what it requires from us:

I call a perception “clear” when it is present and accessible to the attentive mind... I call a perception “distinct” if, as well as being clear, it is so sharply separated from all other perceptions that it contains within itself only what is clear (Descartes AT VIII A 22, CSM I 208).

To see what is at issue here we need to study how Descartes applies his rule to sensations and sense perceptions. This is the part of his reflections that Merleau-Ponty first attacks in *Phénoménologie*. My question is, “What exactly is the main idea behind Merleau-Ponty's critical comments?” To get to the core of the controversy, I need to start with an excursion into Descartes' discussion on sensations.

The received view is that Descartes considers sensations, emotions, and sense perceptions as hopelessly confused thoughts, not just accidentally confused but necessarily confused. A sensation of pain, for example, may be quite clear but is always connected to false notions about its origin, and thus never distinct and cannot be made such.

However, if we study carefully what Descartes actually says, it is not so obvious that this is his view. In *The Principles of Philosophy* (Part I, §46), he states:

For example, when someone feels an intense pain, the perception he has of it is indeed very clear but *is not always distinct*. For people *commonly confuse* this perception with an obscure judgment which they make concerning the nature of something which they think exists in the painful spot and which they suppose to resemble the sensation of pain (Descartes AT VIII A 22, CSM I 208, italics mine).

What Descartes says here is that *commonly* sensations are very confused. And he puts it even more optimistically: they are “not always distinct.” The problem is that sensations are usually connected to false ideas about their causal origin, i.e. about the existence of things and their similarities with my sensations of them (cf. Descartes AT VIII A 9, CSM I 197, and AT VII 35, CSM II 25). When I feel pain (or pleasure), for example, I habitually also entertain the thought that the pain is caused by such and such events or processes in my body. I also have the firm notion that the arm that appears to me as painful, is there, given to everyone, independently of my thoughts.

This is how I usually reason, but Descartes' advice is that I should not take my habitual inferences as the guideline for my philosophical meditations, but on the contrary, should arrest them, withhold my assent from them (AT VIII A 5-6, CSM 193-194, and AT VII 17-19, CSM 12-13).

So on the one hand Descartes argues that our sensations are commonly confused, and on the other hand, he claims that it is possible for us to refrain from our habitual ways of thinking. The arrest is not easy, however, and in the case of sensations it is particularly difficult:

There remains sensations, emotions, and appetites. These may be clearly perceived provided we take great care in our judgments concerning them *to include nothing more* than what is strictly contained in our perception – no more than that of which we have inner awareness. But this is a very difficult rule to observe, at least with regard to sensations (Descartes AT VIII A 32, CSM I 216, italics mine).

So the problem is not that sensations are confused by definition but rather that the task of distinguishing their clear aspects is demanding – “very difficult.” We need to work against our natural habits and inclinations, and we may fail in most cases. But there is no reason to conclude from such difficulties

that the goal is unattainable. On the contrary, Descartes explains:

And as for our senses, if we notice anything here that is *clear and distinct*, no matter whether we are awake or sleep, then provided we separate it from what is confused and obscure we will easily recognize – whatever the thing in question – which are the aspects that may be regarded as *true* (Descartes AT VIII A 17, CSM I 203, italics mine).

As said, the usual reading claims that nothing that is included in sensation passes this test. But this does not seem to be Descartes' meaning, for in that case his remarks about the usual difficulties and complications that we have in regard to sensations would be meaningless. Rather his claim seems to be that it is not easy to arrest judgments in the case of sensations but that in principle this is possible.

The problem of my reading is that, on the other hand, Descartes states very explicitly that sensations and sense perceptions remain outside of metaphysics – we saw this above. So if these thoughts are not confused by definition, then on what ground are they excluded from first philosophy? I suggest that Descartes' reasons for the exclusion are not what is usually believed. Merleau-Ponty's *L'Œil et l'esprit* hints to another alternative.

Merleau-Ponty states that according to Descartes “we can draw [*tirer*] nothing from it [sense perception] which deserves to be called true” (ŒE 55/176, cf. PhP 43/33). This is usually read so that the emphasis is on the word “true”. But if we put the emphasis on the word “draw” instead, then we get a different understanding: sense perceptions are useless, not because they are completely false, but because their truth is barren. They can be purified from confused and obscure elements, but this makes them obsolete for the purposes of inference. In other words, when sensations and sense perceptions are separated from all ideas that are not “included” or “contained” in them, they become almost empty. They have no content from which consequences could be drawn, not individually nor as a set. They have no internal structure and thus cannot function as starting points for inferences of new clarities.

Compare Descartes' treatment of the sensation of pain to his discussion of the idea of God. Assume that both are purified from all obscurities and confusions. The idea of God is still rich in meanings. It includes all kinds of perfections and all of them in the highest degree. Most importantly,

the ideas of necessary existence and supreme benevolence are contained in the idea of God. So we are able to “conclude” that there is an omnipotent creature that does not deceive me (Descartes AT VIII A 9-13, CSM 197-200, and AT VII 21ff., CSM 14ff.). And this inference is perfectly clear.

The idea of pain, on the other hand, includes nothing similar. According to Descartes, it contains no other qualities than the sensible quality of pain. We can confusedly connect it to the idea of location but we cannot find any such idea contained in it: “it is the sensation alone which is perceived clearly” (Descartes AT VIII A 22, CSM I 208). Similarly the perception of white includes in it nothing but this particular color (Descartes AT VII 82, CSM II 56-57), and again the sensation of the sound of the bell when purified of confusions is equally barren (Descartes AT XI 346, CSM I 337).

Merleau-Ponty starts *Phénoménologie de la perception* by a forceful argument against this atomistic or punctual understanding of sensation (PhP 9ff./3ff., 429-432/374-376). He sees it as Descartes' empiricist mistake.

Merleau-Ponty argues that if we manage to arrest the causal and ontological prejudices involved in ordinary perception, and in its naturalistic descriptions, we do not find atom-like or point-like sensations. We do not sense isolated colors, sounds, flashes of light, or pain. The object of sensation is not a “pure quality”; rather such qualities are abstracted from sense perception for the purposes of causal explanation.

What we find, if we really attend to our sensations, is the first appearance of things. These sensed things should not be confused with the determinate objects of scientific thinking nor are they the practical objects of everyday life. They are more primary: “quality is the outline of a thing” (Merleau-Ponty PhP 465/406).

Merleau-Ponty refers to Sartre's example of a red patch to illuminate the problems of Descartes' discussion of sensations. He writes:

This red patch which I see on the carpet is red only in virtue of a shadow which lies across it... finally this red would not literally be the same if it were not the “wooly red” of a carpet (Merleau-Ponty PhP 10/5).

And he repeats the argument later, in the chapter on the Cogito, by using Descartes' example of pain felt “in” the amputated limb:

When... I am sure of having sensed, the certainty of some external thing is involved in the very way in which the sensation is articulated and unfolded before me: it is a pain *in the leg* (Merleau-Ponty PhP 431/376).

The claim is that when we purify our sensations and perceptions from preconceptions, we do not end up with isolated qualities but with whole fields or textures of them. An isolated sensation would amount to not sensing anything and thus to no sensing at all (Merleau-Ponty PhP 11/5). In *Phénoménologie*, Merleau-Ponty summarizes his view by stating that there are no “anchorless quale” in our consciousness (PhP 429/375); in *Le visible et l'invisible*, he argues that qualities are “pregnant with texture” (Merleau-Ponty VI 180/136).

Merleau-Ponty claims that the sensation of mere red or of mere pain is a theoretical postulate and results from the confusion between the first and the third person perspectives. We do not find from perceptual experience anything like this, neither in actual experience nor in any of its possible variations. These “contents” are just theoretical entities postulated for the purposes of an explanation of behavior developed from a 3rd person perspective (Merleau-Ponty PhP 46-49/37-39). They distort philosophical inquiries that aim at an understanding of perceptual faith.

So Merleau-Ponty's diagnosis is not that Descartes' epistemological principles or his method is mistaken, but that his notion of sensations is prejudiced. The problem is that Descartes compromises his epistemology for the purposes of his physiology. If one were to follow his principles to the letter, a place would open in metaphysics for sensations and sense perceptions as well as for the soul-body union.

If Cartesianism is radicalized in this way, is it without problems? A complete metaphysics? A methodology that allows an account of any experience?

In the last section of my paper, I will outline a negative answer by using Merleau-Ponty's comments on Descartes as my guideline: Descartes' metaphysics is not complete but laid open by

internal tensions. For even though Merleau-Ponty does not accept the notion that Cartesian doubt banishes from metaphysics all sensations, and all thoughts based on them, he still claims that sense perceptions constitute the unthought-of element of Cartesian philosophy and that its failure to think them, to reflect on them, is fundamental.

4. The factual thinker

In Merleau-Ponty's reading, Descartes' metaphysics is paradoxical: The meditations open the possibility of radical reflection but at the same time they restrict this possibility. Contrary to totalizing interpretations, Merleau-Ponty argues that Descartes' philosophy is limited from inside (ŒE 57/177). The limit of Cartesianism is in its understanding of factuality.

Already in *Phénoménologie*, Merleau-Ponty makes clear that what remains problematic for Descartes is the *fact* of vision. He writes:

But even if we grant that existence, individuality, "facticity" are on the horizon of Cartesian thought, it remains to be asked whether it has taken them as themes (Merleau-Ponty PhP 54/44).

This is reformulated in *L'Œil et l'esprit*:

The enigma of vision is not done away with; it is relegated from the "thought of seeing" to vision in act. Still this *de facto vision* and the "there is" which it contains do not upset Descartes' philosophy (Merleau-Ponty ŒE 54/176).

How should we understand these critical remarks about Descartes' treatment of "factual vision"? How should we understand Merleau-Ponty's complaint that Descartes does not let "de facto vision" upset his philosophy?

It is crucial to notice that Merleau-Ponty's emphasis is not on the word "vision", but on the

words “factual” and “de facto”. The difference may seem minor, but I believe that it is crucial. When Merleau-Ponty says that Descartes is naïve about “factual vision” or “de facto vision”, he does not make a complaint about the explanations Descartes is able to offer for human vision, for animal vision, or for vision in general. The complaint is more specific. It concerns the vision of the meditating subject. The critical claim is that, even though he may be able to explain all other occasions of vision, he cannot account for his own:

Analytic reflection becomes a purely regressive doctrine, according to which every perception is a muddled form of intellection, and every setting of bounds a negation. It thus does away with all problems except one: that of its own beginning (Merleau-Ponty PhP 48/38).

Merleau-Ponty argues that, in the Cartesian framework, the facticity, thisness [*eccéité*] of perception “is simply its own ignorance of itself” (PhP 48/38). So his criticism is not the general complaint that Descartes cannot include the soul-body union in his metaphysics. Rather the problem is that Descartes cannot account for his own specific condition, for the fact that he, as the meditating subject, de facto is such that he sees, hears, and senses (Merleau-Ponty ŒE 12-13/160-161). To understand Merleau-Ponty remarks better, let us see how Descartes proceeds in *Meditations*.

Merleau-Ponty’s reference is to the Sixth Meditation. There, before entering into the discussion of the mind-body union, Descartes goes through his previous meditations and summarizes their results. He reminds the reader that he has a clear and distinct idea of himself as a thinking thing. He notices that he also has a distinct idea of extended matter. And then he proceeds to point out that, besides this, he finds in himself “certain special modes of thinking, namely imagination and sensory perception” (Descartes AT VII 78, CSM II 54, cf. AT VII 35, CSM II 24).

So the result of the preceding meditations is not that the meditator is a thinking thing in abstracto, but that he is a specific kind of a thinking thing, one that understands and wills but also sees, hears, and imagines.

Descartes goes on to explain that these modes of thought are not necessary for there to be a thinking self. They do not belong to the essence of thinking. Thus, in principle, the self, its stream of

thoughts, could consist exclusively of ideas of its own existence, of God, and of rational numbers. But in fact, the specific thinker that is found through the meditations has also other kinds of thoughts: sense perceptions and imaginations, sensations, emotions and appetites as well as the idea of the soul-body union based on them (Descartes AT VII 76, CSM 52).

Merleau-Ponty's critical claim is that Descartes cannot account for this fact about his own condition by sticking to the principles and to the order of philosophizing that he proposes.

The quasi-explanations that Descartes offers are based on God's benevolence and the use-value that sensations have for living beings. Descartes points out that we have sensations and sense perceptions because they promote our survival and well-being as corporeal souls:

...the proper purpose of the sensory perceptions given to me by nature is simply to inform the mind of what is beneficial or harmful to the composite of which the mind is a part (Descartes AT VII 83, CSM II 57, cf. AT IX 430, CSM I 376).

The problem is, however, that this explanation cannot convince the meditator that proceeds in the order that Descartes recommends. For at this phase, the meditator does not yet know that he *is* a corporeal thing. He only knows that he feels, hears, and sees, and if he sticks to Descartes' principle of clarity and distinctiveness, he still refrains from making any conclusions about the origin of such thoughts.

If the meditating philosopher now, at this point, comes to wonder, not yet if his thoughts are reliable, but first why he even has them, then the reference to God's truthfulness and benevolence is futile. For as long as the meditator refrains from connecting his sensations to thoughts about their origin, there is no use-value in them.

The explanation by God's omnipotence is equally unsatisfactory: If we ask why it is that we think as we do, and answer that it is because God made us such, then nothing is understood. The next question comes up: Why did he make us such thinkers and not thinkers of some other kind? And to answer that his reasons are beyond our understanding, is not to answer.

According to Merleau-Ponty, the explanation by God is "mythical in the Platonic sense of the word" (U 15/35). At this phase of the meditation the attributes of God cannot function as reasons, they

are “designed to remind the reader that philosophical analysis does not exhaust experience” (Merleau-Ponty U 15/35).

The vital knowledge or “natural inclination” which teaches us the union of body and soul, once the light of nature has taught us the distinction – it seems contradictory to guarantee this by divine truthfulness which is nothing but the intrinsic clarity of the idea (Merleau-Ponty PhP 52/42, cf. PhP 231-232/199).

Thus Merleau-Ponty argues that Descartes actually discovers himself, not as a thinking self, but as a sensing, perceiving self, and that he is unable to adjust this discovery to his account of the essence of soul. Merleau-Ponty asks how – through what operation – does Descartes move from the primary experience of being a sensing, perceiving, and willing soul to the experience of being “pure thought” (Merleau-Ponty PhP 232/199). Descartes does not answer this, for the question never comes up. In Merleau-Ponty's reading, he avoids the problem by eliminating the fact of sensing from his results, and by merely stating that his essence is thinking in abstracto (Merleau-Ponty PhP 48/38, 111-112/95, cf. PhP 454/396).

So what is the crucial omission of Descartes' meditations, what is the unthought-of element that Merleau-Ponty refers to? The problem is not that Descartes fails to explain how pure thought can be *connected* to pure matter. We saw above that Merleau-Ponty argues that this problem is based on a misunderstanding, and is not what Descartes aims at solving in his metaphysics. But neither is the omission in the understanding of the *function* of sensations. Such thoughts are given to us by God to ensure that we know about and can take care of ourselves as soul-body unions. We may be unhappy about the nature of the explanation, but we must acknowledge that there is a place for the question of function in Descartes' system.

What remains unthought in the meditations is the *fact* that Descartes – or anybody meditating with him – actually has sensations and sense perceptions. This is not a minor omission but fundamental to the whole project. Merleau-Ponty argues that only a sensing perceiving being is able to understand Descartes' epistemological rules. Sensations are needed, not to justify or ground other modes of

thinking, but to give sense to Descartes' instructions for doubting and arresting of consent. The core claim of Merleau-Ponty's criticism is that Descartes tacitly bases his notion of clear and distinct perception on the model of perceptual faith and perceptual givenness (Merleau-Ponty PhP 49-50/39-40).

A non-sensing, non-perceiving thinker could not grasp what Descartes means when he says that he should arrest perceptions that are not "present" and "accessible" to our mind or not "sharply separated" from all other perceptions. Such a soul would not be able give meaning to the defining terms, "present", "accessible", and "separated". Consider, for example, an angel that only has ideas of extended matter and of itself. Or take a more recent example, brains in the vat, and assume that its "stream of consciousness" does not include any sensations and sense perceptions but only rational numbers. Merleau-Ponty's claim is that without the experience of seeing, these souls could not understand Descartes' rule, and thus would fail to distinguish doubtful thoughts from apodictic ones.

So the Sixth Meditation, the final one, is not just a result of the preceding meditations. It also grounds them.

The philosopher's task in this situation is to inquire into this relation of dependency, to study how the modalities of sensing and perceiving contribute to the idea of clear and distinct thought. The conclusion that Merleau-Ponty draws from his dialogues with Descartes is that philosophical thought has to return to the *concrete act of perceiving*. This is not a rejection of the eidetics of experience. Rather Merleau-Ponty attacks the deeply seated notion that the methods of abstraction are adequate for eidetic inquiries. He argues that the philosophical task is to follow the actual, concrete movement of thought, not to be engulfed by it, but to study its different variations and the operations by which the variations are attained (Merleau-Ponty PhP 48-53/38-42).

In *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Merleau-Ponty argues that the transcendental-eidetic method of Husserl's phenomenology makes possible the realization of this task. Phenomenology represents a "new type of reflection" (Merleau-Ponty PhP 57/45), which allows a non-regressive return to perception. The argument starts already in the introduction when Merleau-Ponty discusses the paradoxes of Descartes' philosophy (PhP 57-77/45-63). But he is able to bring the argument to conclusion only after extensive inquiries into the experiences of one's own body and the perceived world. This happens in the chapter on Cogito. Merleau-Ponty writes:

Through phenomenological reflection I discover vision, not as a “thinking about seeing”, to use Descartes' expression, but as a gaze at grips with a visible world... When I turn towards my perception, and pass from direct perception to thinking about that perception, I reenact it [ré-effectue] (Merleau-Ponty PhP 404/351, cf. PhP 431-432/376, 453-455/395-397, VI 58-59/36-37).

In *Le visible et l'invisible*, Merleau-Ponty still sees Husserl as the philosopher who taught us that we should not confuse reflection on perception with operative perception. But he argues that Husserl's eidetic phenomenology leaves open the problem of the genesis of the idealizations attained by reflection (Merleau-Ponty VI 70/46). On the basis of the results and shortcomings of Husserlian phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty proposes a mode of hyper-reflection that would take into account itself and the changes that it introduces into experience. This mode of reflection “would not lose sight of the brute thing and the brute perception and would not finally efface them” (Merleau-Ponty VI 61/38).

In *L'Œil et l'esprit*, Merleau-Ponty illuminates his understanding of philosophical task by the model of painting. He points out that the painter does not look at things as we naturally look, but neither does he arrest the operation of natural perception. He still looks but now with specific aim of giving visual expression to the thing as well as to his own vision and its divergence and distance from other visions.

It seems to me that Merleau-Ponty's discussion of painting is part of a larger attempt to offer a genetic account of eidetic inquiries - a genealogy of philosophy as an eidetics of experience. His suggestion is that we should understand the nature and origin of eidetic thought, not by the model of geometry as Husserl suggests following Descartes, but by the model of artistic creation.

However, to argue for this reading is beyond the scope of this paper. I can only offer two quotes from *Le visible et l'invisible* that show the direction that Merleau-Ponty was heading after his dialogues with Descartes and Husserl:

...the essence is not *the* answer to the philosophical question, the philosophical question is not posed in us by a pure spectator: it is first a question as to how, upon what ground, the pure spectator is

established, from what more profound source he himself draws (Merleau-Ponty VI 147/109).

And a few pages below:

When philosophy ceases to be doubt in order to make itself disclosure, explication, the field it opens is indeed made up of significations or of essences – since it has detached itself from the facts and the beings – but such significations and essences which do not suffice to themselves, which overtly refer to our acts of ideation and are lifted by them from a brute being, wherein we must find again in their wild state the guarantees of our essences and our significations (Merleau-Ponty VI 148-149/110).

REFERENCES

Alanen, Lilli 2003: *Descartes's Concept of Mind*. Harvard University Press.

Aristotle: *De Anima*. Trans. by J.A. Smith. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1931.

Barbaras, Renaud 1998: *Le tournant de l'expérience: recherches sur la philosophie de Merleau-Ponty*. Paris: Vrin.

Dastur, Françoise 2001: *Chair et langage: essais sur Merleau-Ponty*. Fougères: Encre marine.

Derrida, Jacques , [1962] 1978: *Edmund Husserl's Origin of Geometry: An Introduction*. Trans. by John P. Leavey, jr. New York: Nicholas Hays.

Derrida, Jacques 1967: *La voix et le phénomène*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.

Descartes, René AT: *Œuvres de Descartes I-XII*. Rev. ed. Ed. by Charles Adam and Paul Tannery.

Paris: Vrin/C.N.R.S., [1964-1976] 1996.

Descartes, René CSM: *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes I–III*. Trans. by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984-1991.

Dillon, Martin 1988: *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*. Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Fredlund, Anna Petronella 1997: "Descartes' Merleau-Pontian meditations." Paper presented in the 36th annual conference of *The Society of Phenomenological and Existentialist Philosophy*, Lexington.

Frege, Gottlob 1918: "Das Gedanke." In *Beiträge zur Philosophie des deutschen Idealismus I*, pp.58–77.

Gaukroger, Stephen 1989: *Cartesian Logic: An Essay on Descartes' Conception of Inference*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Gaukroger, Stephen 1992: "The nature of abstract reasoning: philosophical aspects of Descartes' work in algebra." In John Cottingham (ed.): *The Cambridge Companion to Descartes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Heidegger, Martin [1927] 1993: *Sein und Zeit*. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag.

Heidegger, Martin [1954] 1990: *Vorträge und Aufsätze*. Pfullingen: Verlag Günter Neske.

Heidegger, Martin 1957: *Der Satz vom Grund*. Pfullingen: Verlag Günter Neske.

Heinämaa, Sara 1999: "Wonder and (sexual) difference: Cartesian radicalism in phenomenological thinking." In Tuomo Aho and Mikko Yrjönsuuri (eds.): *Norms and Modes of Thinking in Descartes*.

Acta Philosophica Fennica 64. Helsinki.

Heinämaa, Sara 2002: "From decisions to passions: Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of Husserl's reduction." In Ted Toadvine and Lester Embree (eds.): *Merleau-Ponty's Reading of Husserl*. Dordrecht, Boston, London: Kluwer.

Heinämaa, Sara 2003: *Towards a Phenomenology of Sexual Difference: Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Beauvoir*. Lanham, Boulder, New York, London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003.

Husserl, Edmund [1913] 1976: *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie, Erstes Buch: Allgemeine Einführung in die reine Phänomenologie*. Husserliana III, 1-2. Ed. by Karl Schuhmann. Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff.

Husserl, Edmund 1952: *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie, Zweites Buch: Phänomenologische Untersuchungen zur Konstitution*. Husserliana IV. Ed. Marly Biemel. Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff.

Husserl, Edmund: *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie: Eine Einleitung in die phänomenologische Philosophie*. Husserliana VI. Ed. by Walter Biemel. Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1954.

Husserl, Edmund [1939] 1954: "Die Ursprung der Geometrie als intentional-historisches Problem." In *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie*. Husserliana VI. Ed. by Walter Biemel. Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff.

Koivuniemi, Minna 2002: "The Cartesian union of a mind and a body – a genuine unity," paper presented in *Actions and Passions in Early Modern Philosophy*, Department of Philosophy, University of Helsinki.

Kwant, Remy C. 1963: *The Phenomenological Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty*, Pittsburgh: Dunesque University Press, Louvain: Editions E. Nauwelaerts.

Madison, Gary Brent 1990: "Flesh as otherness." In Galen A. Johnson and Michael B. Smith (eds.): *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty*. Evaston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press.

Marion, Jean-Luc 1992: "Cartesian metaphysics and the role of the simple natures." Trans. by John Cottingham. In John Cottingham (ed.): *The Cambridge Companion to Descartes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice N: *La Nature: Notes cours du Collège de France*. Ed. by Dominique Séglaard. Paris: Seuil, [1968] 1994.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice PhP: *Phénoménologie de la perception*. Paris: Gallimard, [1945] 1993. (In English *Phenomenology of Perception*. Trans. by Collin Smith. New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1995.)

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice S: *Signes*. Paris: Gallimard, [1960] 1998. (In English *Signs*. Trans. by Richard C. McCleary. Evaston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, [1964] 1987.)

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice SN: *Sens et non-sens*. Paris: Gallimard, [1947] 1995. (In English *Sense and Non-Sense*. Trans. by Hubert L. Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus. Evaston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1964.)

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice U: *L'union de l'âme et du corps: Chez Malbranche, Biran et Bergson*, Notes prises au cours de Maurice Merleau-Ponty à l'École Normale Supérieure (1947–1948). Ed. by Jean Deprun. Paris: Librairie Philosophique J.Vrin, 1997. (In English *The Incarnate Subject: Malebranche*,

Brian, and Bergson on the Union of Body and Soul. Trans. by Paul B. Milan. Ed. by Andrew G. Bjelland Jr. and Patrick Burke. New York: Humanity Books, 2001.)

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice VI: *Le visible et l'invisible*. Ed. by Claude Lefort. Paris: Gallimard, 1964. (In English *The Visible and the Invisible*. Trans. by Alphonso Linguis. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1975.)

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice VII: *L'Œil et l'esprit*. Paris: Gallimard, 1964. (In English "Eye and mind." Trans. by Carleton Dallery. In *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics*. Ed. by James M. Edie. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1964.)

Moran, Dermot 2000: *An Introduction to Phenomenology*. London and New York: Routledge.

Peirce, Charles Sanders [1868] 1998: "Proem, The rules of philosophy." In *Change, Love, and Logic: Philosophical Essays*. Ed. by Morris R. Cohen. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press.

Plato 1997a: *Alcibiades*. Trans. D.S. Hutchinson. In *Completed Works*. Ed. by John M Cooper. Indianapolis, Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company.

Plato 1997b: *Republic*. Trans. G.M.A Crube, rev. C.D.C Reeve. In *Completed Works*. Ed. by John M. Cooper. Indianapolis, Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company.

Reuter, Martina 1999: "Questions of sexual difference and equality in Descartes' philosophy." In Tuomo Aho and Mikko Yrjönsuuri (eds.): *Norms and Modes of Thinking in Descartes*. Acta Philologica Fennica 64. Helsinki.

Reuter, Martina 2000: *Questions of the Body, Sexual Difference and Equality in Cartesian Philosophy*,

Doctoral dissertation. Department of Philosophy, University of Helsinki.

Reuter, Martina: 2002: "Existerar det 'Carteniska' subjektet? Fenomenologiska och feministiska perspektiv på René Descartes' subjektuppfattning." Unpublished manuscript, 2002.

Rozemond, Marleen 1998: *Descartes' Dualism*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: Harvard University Press.

Ryle, Gilbert [1949] 1980: *The Concept of Mind*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Shapiro, Lisa 1997: "Élisabeth et Descartes: la maladie, le remède et la nature féminine." In Elisabeth Beranger, Ginette Castro, and Marie-Lise Paoli (eds.): *Femme et nature*. Bordeaux: Maison des Sciences de l'Homme d'Aquitaine.

Shapiro, Lisa [1999] 2002: "Princess Elisabeth and Descartes: The union of soul and body and the practice of philosophy." In Genevieve Lloyd (ed.): *Feminism and History of Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Sartre, Jean-Paul 1943: *L'être et le néant: essai d'ontologie phénoménologique*. Paris: Gallimard.

Slatman, Jenny 2001: "L'impensé de Descartes: Lecture des notes de cours sur *L'ontologie cartésienne et l'ontologie d'aujourd'hui*." *Chiasmi International*. Paris: Vrin, 295–308.

Smith, Michael B. 1999: "Transcendence in Merleau-Ponty." In D. Olkowski and J. Morley (eds.): *Merleau-Ponty, Interiority and Exteriority, Psychic Life and the World*. New York: SUNY.

Taminiaux, Jacques 1982: "Gestell et Ereignis." In *Recoupements*. Bruxelles: OUSIA.

Toadvine, Ted 1997: "The art of doubting." *Philosophy Today*, vol. 41, no. 4, pp.545–553.

Tollefsen, Deborah 1999: "Princess Elisabeth and the problem of mind-body interaction." *Hypatia*, vol. 14, no. 3, pp.59–77.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig [1969] 1972: *Über Gewissheit – On Certainty*. Ed. by G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright. Trans. by Denis Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe. New York, San Francisco, London: Harper & Row.

Yrjönsuuri, Mikko 1999: "The Scholastic background of Cogito ergo sum." In Tuomo Aho and Mikko Yrjönsuuri (eds.): *Norms and Modes of Thinking in Descartes*. Acta Philosophica Fennica 64. Helsinki.

Yrjönsuuri, Mikko 2003: "Soul as an entity." Unpublished manuscript.