



Body and Thou

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Abstract

Martin Buber has always made it clear that his dialogic principle is not to be treated as an abstract conception but an ontological reality. But admittedly, in *I And Thou* he could only point to such reality and could not properly present it in discursive prose. However there are instances in the text where he strives to do the latter. One particular instance is where he elaborates the emergence of consciousness of "I". Through this elaboration, what Buber has tried to point at is the bringing forth of the primary word 'I-It' forming part of his dialogic principle, as it 'emerges round about' the perceptual consciousness realised in body as some sort of a 'primitive function of knowledge'. However, this still amounts only to an abstract conception, and not to a description of ontological reality as Buber would have aspired for. Hence the thought: what if there exists an endeavour carried out independently of Buber's work, nevertheless in the same spirit as Buber but without his notorious mixing up of philosophy and religion?

There indeed has been such an Existential-phenomenological take on embodiment and perception by the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, as is laid out in his magnum opus *Phenomenology of Perception*. In the present paper we will explicate this interesting coincidence, thereby honouring Buber's aspiration for ontological status to his dialogic principle, at the same time demonstrating how existentially resonating and ontologically converging the thought of these two great thinkers' have been, though they had totally different intellectual pursuits and concerns.

Keywords: I-it; Perceptual consciousness; Intellectual consciousness; Lived body

Introduction

Martin Buber has always made it clear that his dialogic principle, i.e., the duality of primal words viz. the *I-Thou* and the *I-It*, is not to be treated as an abstract conception but an ontological reality. But admittedly, in *I And Thou*¹ he could only point to such reality and could not properly present it in discursive prose. However there are instances in the text where he strives to do the latter. One particular instance is

where he refers to the emergence of the consciousness of the "I". Disconnecting the same from 'the primitive sway of the instinct for self-preservation', which he attributes exclusively to the body, he asserts therein:

Consciousness of the "I" is not connected with the primitive sway of the instinct for self-preservation any more than with that of the other instincts. It is not the "I" that wishes to propagate itself, but the body, that knows as yet of no "I". It is not the "I" but the body that wishes to make things, a tool or a toy, that wishes to be a "creator" (p. 22).

1 Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Grigor Smith, Edinburg: T&T Clark, 1937.

In fact Buber is referring here to the event of the conscious life of man arising in earliest history. And from such an anthropological point of view his take is typical. But what makes it ontologically significant and phenomenologically interesting is his reliance on the bodily aspect, and the peculiar elaboration of the same as he continues, in terms of the phenomenon of perception that is accomplished therein:

Further, a *cognosco ergo sum*, in however naive a form and however childlike a conception of an experiencing subject, cannot be found in the primitive function of knowledge. The "I" emerges round about it. The body comes to know and to differentiate itself in its peculiarities; the differentiation, however, remains one of pure juxtaposition, and hence cannot have the character of the state in which I is implied. But when the I of the relation has stepped forth and taken on separate existence, it also moves, strangely tenuous and reduced to merely functional activity, into the natural, actual event of the separation of the body from the world round about it, and awakens there the state in which I is properly active. Only now can the conscious act of the I take "place. This act is the first form of the primary word I-It, of the experience in its relation to I. The I which stepped forth declares itself to be the bearer, and the world round about to be the object, of the perceptions. Of course, this happens in a "primitive" form and not in the form of a "theory of knowledge". But whenever the sentence "I see the tree" is so uttered that it no longer tells of a relation between the man - I - and the tree - Thou - , but establishes the perception of the tree as object by the human consciousness, the barrier between subject and object has been set up. The primary word I-It, the word of separation, has been spoken (pp. 22-23).

Through this elaboration, what Buber has tried to point at is the bringing forth of the primary word 'I-It', as it 'emerges round about' the perceptual consciousness realised in body as some sort of a 'primitive function of knowledge'. Now, as pointed out in the beginning, this still amounts only to an abstract conception, and not to a description of ontological reality as Buber would have aspired for. Hence the thought: what if there exists an endeavour carried out independently of Buber's work, nevertheless in the same spirit as Buber but without his notorious mixing up of philosophy and religion?

There indeed has been such an Existential-phenomenological take on embodiment and perception by the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, as is laid out in his magnum opus *Phenomenology of Perception*²

2 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith, London: Routledge & Degan Paul, 1962 (hereafter referred to as PP).

Though a contemporary of Martin Buber, and an existential-phenomenologist, Merleau-Ponty's take on human embodiment and perception has been totally independent and unique, and it has laid the foundation for a full-fledged ontology which he intended to formulate pivoted around his later conception of embodiment as 'flesh of the world'³. Interestingly, this foundational analyse of perception amounts to an ontological elaboration of what Buber portrays in the above excerpt as the emergence of the primary word "I-it". In the present paper we will explicate this interesting coincidence, thereby honouring Buber's aspiration for ontological status to his dialogic principle, at the same time demonstrating how existentially resonating and ontologically converging the thought of these two great thinkers' have been, though they had totally different intellectual pursuits and concerns.

Lived Body as the Body, that knows as yet of No "I".

Let us begin with Buber's assertion, "It is not the 'I' that wishes to propagate itself, but the body, that knows as yet of no 'I'. In his phenomenological account of human embodiment and perception, Merleau-Ponty would call 'this body, that knows as yet of no I', the 'lived body' which for him is the natural subject and the synthesizing point of perceptual events. This phenomenological conception of body does away with the traditional conception of body as an objective phenomenon rooted in the Cartesian idea of the same as a certain physio-anatomical complex formed of flesh, nerves, bones etc. wherein it could be envisaged as having a merely contingent relation to one's being. In the Merleau-Pontyan scheme, embodiment owing to its phenomenal aspect is not separable even in thought from one's existence. Merleau-Ponty puts this point in the essay, 'The Primacy of Perception' thus:

...as embodied perceivers, we do not typically understand ourselves as pure egos standing in a merely external relation to our bodies, for example by "having" or "owning" them, instead the body is itself already the concrete agent of all our perceptual acts

And he proclaims there:

I am necessarily an embodied point of view⁴

But such point of view is not something static. It has to be conceived as an incarnation alive and mobile

3 See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968.

4 See, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception And Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History, and Politics*, ed. James M. Edie (Northwestern University Press, 1964), 90-94, 200.

which is directed towards the world. In other words it is a phenomenon basically 'intentional' in its being. This notion of 'intentionality', again part of phenomenological jargon, roughly means the 'aboutness' of experiences. When applied to body it takes the form of 'operative intentionality'- that pre-reflective tacit sensibility, which constitutes our primary openness to the world. And the phenomenology of this primary openness is what according to Merleau-Ponty, perception is.

Thus for Merleau-Ponty, the phenomenon of perception falls exclusively in the domain of the 'natural subject' that body is. However, body conceived as such 'natural subject' by him is in perfect agreement with Buber's notion of the body that knows as yet of no 'I'. This is because of a crucial distinction that Merleau-Ponty draws between perceptual and intellectual consciousness. Hence to justify our claim, before moving forward, we have to explicate this phenomenological scheme.

Merleau-Ponty's Scheme of Intellectual- and Perceptual- Consciousness⁵

In his phenomenological account of human embodiment and perception, Merleau-Ponty draws a crucial distinction between perceptual and intellectual consciousness. Such distinction is drawn based on the peculiar phenomenology of our perceptual experience. From the phenomenology of sense perception, according to him, it is evident that it takes place purely in the spatial dimension of one's being where the subject of perception remains anonymous and opaque. Whereas subjectivity at the level of perception is attributed retrospectively, thereby invoking the temporal dimension and historicity of one's being. Thus, in that account, while perceptual consciousness is conceived to be identical with the spatial dimension of existence, intellectual consciousness is identified with the temporal dimension.

This scheme of perception is founded upon the idea of human subjectivity as a necessarily embodied point of view, wherein the body is itself already the concrete agent of all the perceptual acts. As we have seen above, Merleau-Ponty terms this conceptualization of embodiment, 'lived body'. According to him, the lived body is the synthesizing point of perceptual events. And this synthesis happens always in the present. And in this process, the lived body projects around the present, 'a double horizon of past and future'- thereby

giving the perceptual events a historical orientation.

While explicating the phenomenology of sense experience in his magnum opus, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty puts forth the idea thus:

Perception is always in the mode of the impersonal 'One'. It is not a personal act enabling me to give a fresh significance to my life. The person who, in sensory exploration, gives a past to the present and directs it towards a future, is not myself as an autonomous subject, but myself in so far as I have a body and am able to 'look' (pp. 279).

In other words, the body 'takes possession of time; it brings into existence a past and a future for a present' (ibid.), and thereby creates time instead of submitting to it. And all this happens as a correlate of its eternal perceptual being which, as we have stated already, is impersonal and anonymous.

Now, the 'history' so created is not a genuine history in the temporal sense. "Rather than being a genuine history, perception ratifies and renews in us a 'prehistory'" (ibid.) That is, though the perceptual synthesis marks the present, the realization of such synthesis does not take place in the present. In other words, perception fails to realize the synthesis of its object simultaneously. And in this fact is contained the genesis of time.

It fails at this moment to realize the synthesis of its object, not because it is the passive recipient of it, as empiricists would have it, but because the unity of the object makes its appearance through the medium of time, and because time slips away as fast as it catches up with itself. (ibid.)

Thus unlike the empiricist view point of human embodiment as a passive recipient of sensory inputs, in the Merleau-Pontyan scheme, body takes up an active role in perception, but fails to simultaneously realize this synthesis because this synthesis itself is generative of time, or simultaneity for that matter, the medium through which the object has to make its appearance.

Merleau-Ponty admits it to be true that one finds, through time, later perceptual experiences interlocking with earlier ones and carrying them further. But he reminds us that nowhere in such experience does one enjoy absolute possession of oneself by oneself, since "the hollow void of the future is for ever being refilled with a fresh present" (ibid.)

Thus subjectivity as a temporal synthesis of the perceptual experience of the object appears always on the horizon of such experience. Whereas, in the present and in perception, one's being and consciousness are at one.

⁵ Owing to exactness in application to the present context, this explication has been adopted verbatim from the author's recent publication: Shiva Rahman, "On the Existential Significance of Readiness Potentials" *Phenomenology and Mind* 20, (2021): 204-227. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17454/10.17454/pam-2015>

However, this is so, not because one's being is reducible to the knowledge one has of it, or it is clearly set out before her, but because perception is opaque.

... for it brings into play, beneath what I know, my sensory fields which are my primitive alliance with the world.- but because 'to be conscious' is here nothing but 'to-be-at . . .' ('être à . . .'), and because my consciousness of existing merges into the actual gesture of 'ex-sistence' (pp. 493).

Thus, in the Merleau-Pontyan phenomenological scheme, perception is not a cognitive activity, but the realization of a generic and primitive 'self-world relation' characteristic of human existence, in terms and by means of the 'lived body' and instances of objective reality. And this takes place not in the full light of the day. Rather, what the sentient subject aims at in perception is recognized only blindly, in virtue of the lived body's familiarity with it and the subtle mechanics of the body schema⁶.

Further Analysis

Let us now further analyse Buber's, account of the emergence of the primary word I-it in the light of the scheme explicated above. Referring to the primitive function of knowledge carried out in the body through perception, we have Buber asserting, that "a *cognosco ergo sum*, in however naive a form and however childlike a conception of an experiencing subject" cannot be found in the same. And from the Merleau-Pontyan scheme, now we know why this is so. As per the scheme, even though body takes up an active role in perceptual synthesis, it fails to simultaneously realize this synthesis because this synthesis itself is generative of time and thereby subjectivity. Thus nowhere in such experience does one enjoy absolute possession of oneself by oneself, thereby depriving one even of 'childlike a conception of an experiencing subject'

According to Buber the 'I' emerges 'round about' the primitive function of knowledge carried out in perception. As we have just seen, precisely the same happens in the Merleau-Pontyan scheme where the only ontological qualification has been that the 'I' that is subjectivity, is identified with temporality. And just like Buber suggests, it is literally around the perceptual event that subject as time emerges, when the body 'takes possession of time' as a present perception, bringing into existence 'a past and a future' for such perception.

6 An elaboration of this concept is beyond the scope of this paper. Briefly, body as a system of present positions, as well as one open to an infinite number of equivalent positions directed to other ends (PP 163) - poised and ready to anticipate and incorporate a world prior to the application of concepts and the formation of thoughts and judgments is what he calls 'body schema'.

However it is not the body that is aware of such past or future, but it is the 'I' so formed as temporality which is so aware. And true to the words of Buber, though the body in perception 'comes to know and to differentiate itself in its peculiarities the differentiation, however, remains one of pure juxtaposition- juxtaposition of perceptual instances, to be precise- and hence cannot have the character of the state in which 'I' is implied'.

Now comes the stage when the 'I' of the relation has stepped forth and taken on separate existence. And according to Buber,

...it also moves, strangely tenuous and reduced to merely functional activity, into the natural, actual event of the separation of the body from the world round about it, and awakens there the state in which I is properly active.

In the Merleau-Pontyan scheme, this event of separation is the event of marking the perceptual event in time - that is the arousal of subjectivity as a temporal synthesis of the perceptual experience of the object. And this too is merely a functional activity, because such formation of subjectivity and the synthesis of the object in the scheme is not any culmination but an ongoing and everlasting dialectical process, for every synthesis is both exploded and rebuilt in (or by the generation of) time. As Merleau-Ponty puts it:

There is no related object without relation and without subject, no unity without unification, but every synthesis is both exploded and rebuilt by time which, with one and the same process, calls it into question and confirms it because it produces a new present which retains the past. The duality of *naturata* and *naturans* is therefore converted into a dialectic of constituted and constituting time (pp. 279-280).

Viewed from the subjectivity point of view, this dialectic amounts to the ratification and renewal of a prehistory in terms of perception, and viewed from the temporality point of view, the hollow void of the future is refilled with a fresh present⁷. And this temporal-functional activity actually separates the body from the world and brings about a 'perceiving subject' cast against a 'perceived object' resonating with Buber's assertion: "the I which stepped forth declares itself to be the bearer, and the world round about to be the object, of the perceptions"

For Merleau-Ponty, the above act brings about temporality along with the temporal subject or what he calls 'intellectual consciousness'. Whereas for Martin Buber

7 See Shiva Rahman, "On the Existential Significance of Readiness Potentials" *Phenomenology and Mind* 20, (2021): 218-219

this act is the “first form of the primary word I-It, of the experience in its relation to I.” And according to him, whenever the sentence “I see the tree “ is so uttered that it no longer tells of a relation between the man - I - and the tree - Thou - , but establishes the perception of the tree as object by the human consciousness, the barrier between subject and object has been set up. The primary word I-It, the word of separation, has been spoken.

Conclusion

The original separation from Being has been momentous in Buber’s dialogic scheme of things. And he conceives it with anthropological and historical significance. But by bringing in the bodily dimension into that definitive moment, that too through the phenomenon of perception, Buber has unknowingly given an existential-phenomenological twist to the scenario. The primitive ‘knowing body’ that Buber talks about is in fact the ‘lived body’ and ‘natural subject’ in the Merleau-Pontyan scheme of embodiment and perception. However, rather than assuming historical and anthropological significance, this body assumes existential and ontological significance, thereby fulfilling the Buberian aspiration for an ontological status to his dialogic principle. Also, such significance is re-assumed moment to moment through the necessary temporal-functional activity of perceptual synthesis and subjectivity formation, thereby making the original separation perpetual. So what could be a plausible existential redemption of the state of non-separate Being, where all “I-It” relations would self-transform into the Buberian ideal of “I-Thou” relations? In Merleau-Ponty’s later

aspirations towards a fundamental ontology in terms of body conceived as ‘the flesh of the world’, I can see the possibility of such an existential redemption. From a Buberian point of view, the ontology of ‘the flesh of the world’ has the merit that, even while facilitating such redemption, it will resist ‘philosophical monism’ as well as ‘doctrines of immersion’-towards both of which Buber was averse. This is because of the fact that in the Merleau-Pontyan scheme, as long as the temporal dimension of existence persists, the “I” will be preserved- for in that scheme time is subject!

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