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ANONYMITY AND SOCIALITY

The Convergence of psychological and philosophical Currents in Merleau-Ponty's ontological Theory of Intersubjectivity

"Every significant proposition of empirical psychology anticipates a phenomenological truth".

Maurice Merleau-Ponty,
Phenomenology and the Sciences of Man

In the prospectus for his later work pronounced in 1952, Merleau-Ponty announced that his move beyond the phenomenological to the ontological level of analysis is motivated by issues of sociality, notably communication with others.¹ I propose to interrogate this priority attributed by the author to this interpersonal bond in his reflections on corporeality in general, marking a departure from *The Structure of Behavior* and *The Phenomenology of Perception*, which privileged the starting point of consciousness and the body proper. My interest lies particularly in exposing the psychological sources of Merleau-Ponty's thinking about the primacy of sociality. Referring to his lectures on *Child Psychology and Pedagogy*, which he delivered as Professor at the Sorbonne in Paris in 1949-52,² I will develop the contention that the developmental psychology of child sociality significantly informed his understanding of relations between self and other laid out in the later texts, and henceforth informed also his conception of the flesh. Specifically, the psychological hypotheses about the anonymous and fusional form initially taken by human sociality appears to play a determining role in his conception of interpersonal life formulated on the ontological plane.³ I will then proceed to point to the internal tensions involved in the theory of sociality based on the thesis of anonymity and disclose an alternative theoretical account, which has the merit of preserving the advantages of the anonymity thesis while avoiding its drawbacks; it also facilitates continued dialogue between Merleau-Ponty's philosophy and recent developmental psychology.

My point of departure is situated in Merleau-Ponty's essay on "The Philosopher and His Shadow."⁴ The principal task taken up by the author there is to deepen Husserl's analyses of constitution from *Ideen II* by means of radicalizing the principle of incarnation. If mind is not absolute but incarnate (or if the philosopher's mind, however luminous, projects a dark shadow), then the principal terms on which Husserl's analysis hangs: the *solus ipse*, the "solipsist" thing, the intersubjective thing, and other persons, need to

be regarded as interdependent and the primacy of the *solus ipse* and its "solipsist" thing over the other person and the intersubjective thing are challenged. The implications of this challenge for the problematic of the relations between self and other which occupies us in this essay are far reaching; they can be made clear by following the way in which Merleau-Ponty revises the *solus ipse* hypothesis to eradicate the subjective bias pervasive in phenomenological analysis and the correlated primacy of the ego over the alter ego.

The *solus ipse* hypothesis is declared an abstraction and a paradox which reveals its own impossibility. It constructs a being (*ipse*) in a state of total isolation or solitude (*solus*). Clearly, it is in principle possible to conceive of a situation in which one is the sole survivor of a disaster which wipes off all other living beings off the Earth and so a *de facto* solitary self. Still, this factual situation, its dramatically disastrous effect notwithstanding, does not remove the *de jure* social dimension of this and any other self's life. A "phantom of the other person" continues to hover around the sole survivor, or at least the conceptual possibility "of an environment in which others could be" is not removed.⁵ Hence bracketing the social world does not suffice to produce an asocial self, or the self remains entangled in the social web even though it can be solitary, and the experience of solitude remains intelligible only within the larger context of a life shared with others. The starting point of analysis must therefore be a social self, and isolating the subject out of this intersubjective network is an artificial and possibly a dangerous move.⁶ If, despite this necessarily constructed and paradoxical nature of the *solus ipse* hypothesis, Husserl nonetheless employs it as a starting point for his analysis of perception, it is, Merleau-Ponty argues, "intended more to reveal than to break the links of the intentional web." The *solus ipse* is a means of testing "the primordial bonds" holding the social web together (PS, p. 175; 221), an *ad absurdum* argument designed to demonstrate the validity of an opposite claim to the one it overtly entertains.

If this is the case, it may come as a surprise that, rather than further pursue the notion of the inherently social self which the *solus ipse* hypothesis, disavowed in Merleau-Ponty's citation of Husserl as a pure "thought-experiment,"⁷ reveals *per contradictio* and to interrogate the experiential qualities of the life shared with others, of which the sole survivor scenario is only an unhappy limit case, Merleau-Ponty prefers to further interrogate the theme of solitude contained in the solipsist hypothesis and search for its "true and transcendental" meaning (PS, p. 174; 219). The theme of solitude thus retains its primacy in Merleau-Ponty's exposition, only its exact meaning requires revision. We may wonder whether, having been rescued from the paradox inherent in the philosophical inquiry conducted from the perspective of a solitary self, we do not now risk falling into another paradoxical situation of interrogating social life by starting with the theme of "true and transcendental solitude." Leaving this question open for the time being, consider how Merleau-Ponty redefines solitude to attain its veritable character.

True, transcendental solitude takes place only if the other person is not even conceivable, and this requires that there be no self to claim solitude either. We are truly alone only on the condition that we do not know we are; it is this very ignorance which is our solitude. (PS, 174; 219/220).

This passage makes clear that the *solus ipse* hypothesis in its traditional understanding does not capture the true meaning of solitude because it continues to theorize other people *as absent* and so as possibly present. Sheer absence of others experienced by an isolated self does not amount to their radical exclusion; the latter must co-involve the exclusion of self proper or involve an exclusion of individuated selfhood in general, both mine and another's. There is true solitude only if there is *nobody* to know it or only agnostic solitude, unaware of *itself* or not attached to a *self*, counts as veritable. The intelligibility of true solitude must then be located on the impersonal level, prior or distinct from the advent of consciousness. In the essay under discussion, Merleau-Ponty qualifies this impersonal level, where "there is neither individuation nor distinction," as "anonymous life" from which discrete bodily selves will emerge (PS, 174; 220). It is well known that this impersonal level is theorized in Merleau-Ponty's ontology under the heading of the flesh of the world. It is the flesh and *its* transcendental solitude then that provides the starting point of Merleau-Ponty's ontology, in contradistinction to the solitary transcendental ego of Husserl's phenomenology.

Merleau-Ponty admits having found direct inspiration for his understanding of transcendental solitude in Piaget's theory of infantile sociality. To be sure, Merleau-Ponty was a decided critique of the intellectualist and logicist interpretative strategies pervasive in the theoretical framework of Piaget's work, based upon the idea that evolving human experience depends on applying theoretical procedures of different orders of complexity. Piaget's developmental psychology belongs to the "classical academic philosophy," which subsumes all facets of human experience under the heading of cognition; in contrast, Merleau-Ponty's professed objective was to return "to activity that is prior to cognition properly so called," and includes corporeal and social aspects of child's experience.⁸ Never denying the central place of Piaget's developmental research in contemporary child psychology, Merleau-Ponty nonetheless critiques his thinking within the lectures series on "The Psycho-sociology of the Child" for its decentered, non-situated, totalizing approach (CPP, 257). Albeit admitting that the origins of intelligence suppose a shift from the shifting or "mobile equilibrium" of perspective in perception to "permanent equilibrium" in abstract thought,⁹ Merleau-Ponty objects, however, that Piaget speaks as if intelligence could be fully absolved from its bond to centered perceptual experience and function in an autonomous and quasi-divine way (CPP, 275). A similar critique of Piaget is reiterated in Merleau-Ponty's working notes in *The Visible and the Invisible*,¹⁰ where he observes that the logicism of Piaget's psychology is

“incompatible with an ethnological experience,” and that Piaget’s absolutist approach need to be relativized and rendered compatible with other regions of knowledge (VI, 204; 258). And yet it is to Piaget’s notion of “egocentrism” (despite its misleading name, which falsely suggests a focus on an egological subject) that Merleau-Ponty returns in a note of April 1960, where he strives to restore the meaning of sensible life irreducible to acts of consciousness, its temporality irreducible to the *consciousness* of the present and the past (VI, 243/244; 296-198). In this note, Merleau-Ponty distances himself clearly from a phenomenology understood as an “ontology that obliges whatever is not nothing to *present* itself to the *consciousness* across *Abschattungen* and as deriving from an originating donation which is an *act*, i. e., one *Erlebnis* among others,” and invokes Piaget’s child psychology in his quest for restoring “life without *Erlebnisse*, without interiority” – a life undistorted by the subjective bias of Husserl’s idealist philosophy.

A similar, this time not personally acknowledged, debt to Piaget’s child psychology occurs in the discussion of veritable solitude from “The Philosopher and His Shadow”. Having unveiled the layer of anonymous life, distinct from individuated selfhood, Merleau-Ponty uses Piaget’s notion of the child’s egocentrism to explain how the indistinction between the other’s and my own body, which typifies this anonymous level, is to be understood. He cites the phenomena of infantile “transitivism” and the confusion between self and other, which are typical of egocentrism, as a hallmark of the “solipsist layer” redefined along the lines of “true and transcendental solitude.”¹¹ It is therefore in direct reference to phenomena studied and interpreted within developmental psychology that Merleau-Ponty pursues his project of supplementing the “bad ontology” of subjective idealism with the “good ontology” of impersonal or anonymous flesh.

Merleau-Ponty lectured extensively on Piaget’s work at the Sorbonne, and the notion of the child’s initial egocentrism is not only addressed at some length within the course series on “The Structure and Conflicts of Infantile Consciousness,” but also revisited in the remaining lectures. In the series on “The Structure and Conflicts of Infantile Consciousness,” following Piaget’s discussion of perception in infancy from *La représentation du monde chez l’enfant*,¹² Merleau-Ponty notes that child’s thoughts and feelings have an egocentric quality. Merleau-Ponty hastens to prevent any misunderstanding of “egocentrism:” egocentrism in no way suggests that the infant is a self-centered being, nor even that the infant is self-conscious. The infant does not withdraw from the external world into the interior sphere of subjective states and the theory of egocentrism does not contain a subjective bias. Contrary to the egological perspective from phenomenology, psychological egocentrism proposes a theory of perception according to which the infant’s perceptual experience is characterized by “excessive realism,” insofar as the infant does not initially identify the personal quality of its perceptions and, unable to distinguish between its own view and the world in general (or the world for others), equates its own *percipi* with the *esse* of world (CPP, 184). This theory

of perception, Merleau-Ponty stresses, does not point to an excessively self-centered consciousness in infancy but testifies rather to an initial lack of (consciousness of) individuated self.

Seen from another angle, the infantile 'proto-self,' unaware of it(self) as a *self*, dissipates into anonymity. Announced within the discussion of child perception, egocentrism thus has far reaching consequences for the problematic of sociality. If the infantile experience is not attached to a self or if the infant is not aware of the limits of its own perspective and does not distinguish it from an alien one, then the infant cannot make any sense of a non-self or another self either. Hence the initial lack of separation or, to use Piaget's own term, *adualism* between self and other in infantile sociality.¹³ This idea of social fusion is reiterated by other child psychologists that Merleau-Ponty lectured on, including Guillaume and Wallon. In Wallon's work it bears the name of syncretism or syncretic sociality, defined as "the indistinction between me and the other, a confusion at the core of a situation that is common to us both" (CRO, 120; 180). A concrete example of this confusion is the aforementioned phenomenon of "transitivism," which is typically exemplified by cases of "emotional contagion," such that distress crying of one infant may spread out to all others in neonate nursery, regardless of their emotional state prior to the event. The dominant interpretation of this transitivist phenomena, accepted by Merleau-Ponty, was to postulate an initial blending of self and other,¹⁴ a spatial syncretism such that "a presence of the same psychic being in several spatial points, a presence of me in the other and the other in me" is possible (CRO, 149; 220).

The reader of earlier comments on Merleau-Ponty's analysis of "true and transcendental solitude" will have no difficulties tracing the threads of Piaget's egocentrism (and Wallon's syncretism) theory in the former's analysis of anonymous life and appreciating the influence of the idea of initial fusion for Merleau-Ponty's own thinking. Piaget provides the conceptual tools for passing from solipsism understood as a subjective or personalized view-point on the world (Husserl) to the radical solitude which is not attached to a self insofar as it does not (yet) center experience on individuated selfhood. Such radical solitude typifies, as will be recalled, the "solipsist layer" revised by Merleau-Ponty. Rather than following the passage, in the manner of Husserl, from a *solus ipse* to the other, from a "solipsist" to an intersubjective thing, Piaget provides the means of undercutting these distinctions by disclosing a stage which knows neither self nor other, neither a "solipsist" nor an intersubjective thing, and so need not pass from the subjective to the shared world, but is situated at a more primordial level which seems to capture life itself, without "without *Erlebnisse*, without interiority." It will remain to be seen whether this primacy is to be understood in a temporal or structural sense. In any case, it should not come as a surprise that Merleau-Ponty openly praises Piaget's "egocentric" theory in his Sorbonne lectures. Against the critics who mistakenly identified this theory with crude subjectivism, he retorts that the claim of initial egocentrism is both refined and correct.¹⁵

It remains to provide the "positive content" of this claim by demonstrating, against the intellectualist grain of Piaget's thinking, that egocentrism should not be conceived of exclusively as a cognitive operation. This is accomplished by rooting egocentrism in the interrelated orders of affectivity and imagination (CPP, 224-235). Drawing, amongst others, on the work of his contemporary Sartre, Merleau-Ponty focuses on the magical quality of the emotions elucidated by the former in *The Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions*.¹⁶ The theory developed there is that emotions are teleological, and their principal aim is to solve a problem that refuses to be dealt with in real terms on the imaginary level. For example, in a fit of anger one may break the object that one fails to utilize for practical purposes, and in this manner annihilate rather than confront the problem. The structural character of this emotional "solution" to the real problem, which leaves the factual state of affairs unaffected but transposes the self to the imaginary realm where mundane problems do not exist, can be discovered also in the relations to others, notably the potential of the human face to affect one directly, regardless of the physical distance (CPP, 228). This "magical" quality of human relations expressed in Alain's motto that *L'homme est un sorcier pour l'homme*, exemplifies in affective terms Piaget's idea of initial indistinction between self and other such that one may be affected by others directly. Furthermore, it points to the impossibility of clearly demarcating perception from imagination, insofar as the perceptual experience of the face exhibits the magical potential which Sartre attributes to imaginary experience alone.¹⁷ The impossibility to oppose perception and imagination has as a corollary a blurring between the body proper and the body of the other, for in face perception I am affected "from the inside" by what to all evidence is situated outside the borders of my own body. This double blurring is, Merleau-Ponty contends, explicable along the lines of Piaget's initial indistinction between self and other.

Having indicated how, according to Merleau-Ponty, egocentrism could be fleshed out by means of phenomenological studies, the issue of the primacy of this egocentric or anonymous level needs to be addressed. Are we to understand that anonymous life is a developmental stage preceding as well as facilitating more advanced forms of social behavior? Framed within the order of psychogenesis, this question can be responded to in the affirmative. Commenting on the insurmountable difficulties encountered by the phenomenological account which theorizes perception of others in terms of the "problem of the alter ego," stipulating that first person access to consciousness is original and the experience of others derived or secondary, Merleau-Ponty proposes that developmental psychology resolves or bypasses this problem. For, "the perception of others is made comprehensible if one supposes that psychogenesis begins in a state where the child is unaware of himself and the other as different beings" (CRO, 119; 179). Since experience is not individuated at first, it may circulate freely and lay claim to the fields which will only subsequently be circumscribed as 'self' and 'other.' The

proto-self can therefore live in proto-others just as well as in it(self) during the phase of egocentrism.¹⁸ This living in the other, feeling at home in their bodies as much as in one's own, which Merleau-Ponty, following Max Scheler, terms pre-communication, prefigures and enables later forms of communication properly so called, wherein a clear distinction between the communicating parties occurs (Ibid.). These later forms of sociality, which, unlike their predecessors, deserve to bear the name of *inter-subjectivity*, thus both break with the initial fusion by singling out distinct selves from the level of anonymity and yet partially preserve the immediate sense of the other, inherited from the time when it was possible to live in more than one body at once. These remnants of living in the other, maintained throughout more advanced forms of sociality, dethrone the privilege of a subjective view point in a permanent fashion and so resolve the 'problem' of knowing selves other than one's own, not only in childhood but also throughout the adult life.

Returning to the ontological standpoint of Merleau-Ponty's thinking, as formulated in "The Philosopher and His Shadow", a similar idea of development from impersonal to personalized life forms appears. Merleau-Ponty characterizes anonymous life as "original ecstasy" of which the other's and my body are born together (PS, 174; 220). He speaks of "emergence" from solitude to intersubjective life (Ibid.), hinting at a temporal process which shifts from a solitary to a social level. Yet he hastens to add that "what precedes" intersubjective life cannot be numerically distinguished from it" (Ibid.) or that the more evolved forms of sociality remain just as firmly rooted in the dynamic of the flesh. The passage from pre-subjective to inter-subjective has a continuous corporeal core: it is a passage from corporeality in general to corporeality which distinguishes between discrete bodies or to inter-corporeality. What Merleau-Ponty says of the body as physical thing becoming animate in the experience of my right hand touching the left one and, in "an extraordinary event," the touched hand starting to touch the right one back and so to say, being born to sensibility, can be said also of the impersonal life becoming inter-subjectivity: "it remains what it was (the event does not enrich it)" (PS, 166; 210). There is nothing added on from outside to corporeality, it is an intra-corporeal development which seems to both awaken the body proper as sensible and social. The question remains, however, what precisely is this "event" which produces the shift from anonymous to personalized perspective? Is sensible reversibility alone conducive to the distinction between discrete bodies, wherein I simultaneously discover the limits of the body proper and of other bodies? Answered in the positive, this implies that reversibility is inter-corporeal from the start – and there is sufficient textual evidence for interpreting the interrelation between the active and passive facets of the senses both as an intra-bodily and as an inter-bodily event.¹⁹ However, if that means to say that the distinction between bodies is primary rather than gradually attained, and corporeality equals inter-corporeality, then the layers of radical anonymity and its "true and transcendental solitude" need to be excluded from the ontology of the flesh

and the starting point provided rather by "transcendental intersubjectivity," to which categories of individuation and selfhood apply from the start. Such a deliberately inter-subjective angle on Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of embodiment might provide a more productive strategy of interpreting his insights, which brings to fruition the convictions formulated by the author in the later stages of his tragically interrupted project.

Before elaborating on this point in more detail, we still need to address the question of what "extraordinary event" could mark the passage from impersonal to personalized life. Returning to Merleau-Ponty's account of psychogenesis (CRO, 119; 179), the event which facilitates the distinction between the body proper and other's body is a visual discovery of the finite contours of the body proper by means of its specular reflection, which subsequently reveals that the body of the other is circumscribed or limited in a similar way:

The progress of the child's experience results in his seeing that his body is, after all, closed on itself. In particular, the visual image he acquires of his own body (especially from the mirror) reveals to him a hitherto unsuspected isolation of two subjects who are facing each other. The objectification of his own body discloses to the child his difference, his "insularity," and correlatively that of others.

The event which disentangles the child from the initial egocentrism or anonymity is henceforth the realization, facilitated by the instrument of the mirror, that the body has a fixed identity similar to that of a mundane thing, that it is a figure distinct from its environment. Merleau-Ponty, according to the neurological reports prevalent at his time, worked with the idea that due to myelination of nerve fibers being a later development (said to occur between the 3rd and 6th month of life), the infant has no bodily equilibrium or no postural schema in the first months of its life and hence no sense of its own body as an organized totality prior to the visual discovery of the bodily image in the mirror reflection (situated around the 6th month). The neurological prematurity of the infantile body making it impossible to develop a minimal sense of distinct selfhood via proprioception at age zero, the infant's notion of self is primarily visual and acquired in a developmental stage of discovery and identification with the specular representation of its own body. The fixed body image supposedly helps to organize the infant's initially chaotic and dispersed sensibility, by circumscribing it from the outside by means of a fixed and static bodily form. One may wonder why the infant should not be able to correlate the visual information about fixed bodily forms and its fluid experience at an earlier date. This is explained by Merleau-Ponty's claim, indebted to the work of Wallon, that the body "begins by being interoceptive."²⁰ Hence, "at the beginning of life there emerges an entire phase in which extroceptivity (i. e. vision, hearing, and all other perceptions relating to the external world), even it begins to operate, cannot do so in collaboration with interoceptivity." (CRO, 121; 183) Based on the scientific

reports available at his time, Merleau-Ponty was therefore obliged to postpone the discovery of selfhood to a developmentally later stage, during which the coordination between the information provided by the visual senses and the inner bodily awareness can be combined.

This explains also why the relations to others or inter-subjectivity properly so called needs to be postponed to a later stage of social development. The infant needs to discover that its body has a confined perceptual form which is not only visually available to its own inspection in the mirror but also appears to others in the very locus in which the child feels its body proprioceptively. Eliciting a sense of the self proper, the discovery of the body image facilitates therefore also the relations to other spectators who can see the child as it figures in the mirror but without the need of taking the detour of a specular reflection. Furthermore, since "the perception of one's own body is ahead of the recognition of the other" (CRO, 121; 182) and can be "transferred to another" (CRO, 118; 177), it facilitates the discovery of others as discrete finite bodies, "in the image" of the infant's body proper discovered in the mirror. Others no longer merge with the infant's own experience and can be grasped as distinct selves. We realize then that the "event" which facilitates the passage from the originary stage of egocentric or fused sociality to inter-subjective relations consists in the double even though not simultaneous objectification of the body: mine and another's.²¹

No such clear passage from the stage of indistinction to that of differentiation between selves is evident or even possible in Merleau-Ponty's ontological system; as previously indicated, the two layers are co-extensive or the former cannot be numerically distinguished from the latter. This can be understood to mean that the flesh is ambiguous, non-identical with itself, and as such contains already all the building blocks of a theory of intersubjective relations. However, if it is true, as I have argued in this essay, that the egocentrism of Piaget significantly informed Merleau-Ponty's understanding of anonymous life and so of the ontology of the flesh, then it is less obvious that intersubjectivity can be fruitfully theorized by starting with purported anonymity. Let me show in detail what exactly the problems involved in such an approach (partially acknowledged by Merleau-Ponty himself) are and conclude this essay with a plea for a philosophy of transcendental intersubjectivity which builds on Merleau-Ponty's own insights while remaining critically aware of the internal tensions between impersonal and personalized life in his own thinking.

Recall that the idea that initial indistinction between selves resolves the traditional problem of knowing others by disclosing a common ground where proto-others are known with the same intimacy as the proto-self, and that this intimacy is not simply abandoned but partially preserved in more differentiated and complex forms of social relations. The knowledge of others would be based on a partial reminiscence of the time when they were not other at all, with the body proper remembering how it once extended into undifferentiated corporeality. The *sensu stricte* philosophical question arises,

however, how this commonality is to be understood. The principle clue for understanding it is the "excessively realist" quality of child experience, which purports to extend to reality at large, including the life of 'others,' even though the distinction between 'self' and 'other' is not operative. However, the purported *range* of the experience, even if unlimited, does not *alone* predict or assure that there is an opening left for the other within it, or that the *relational* character of the social experience germinates already within the primary "realist" state. Phrased differently, it is not the extent (the entire world) but also the relational dynamic of the experience that needs be interrogated and accounted for in any theory that claims to accommodate the experience of others. Theorized in terms of its experiential range alone, indistinction can be understood as a dilation of a subjective and solipsist viewpoint, radical to the extent that it annuls and liquefies itself, just as exteriority in Piaget's egocentrism becomes meaningless if the infant is turned *exclusively* to the outside. Within this theoretical framework, the passage from the egocentric to intersubjective stage can only be thought of as a gradual trimming of the excessively realist pretensions by confining them to some regions of being at the exclusion of others. This passage would however lead only from a dilated to a contracted self, leaving the entire problem of social *relations* unaffected or having to produce them *ex nihilo*. Such trimming would not introduce the category of otherness into the infant's compact world. It seems therefore that the theory of indistinction does not alone predict or facilitate the possibility of experiencing selves whose bodies and sensibilities are discontinuous with one's own (however closely knit self and other might be), and so cannot provide a precursor of relations to others.

It remains to see what the implications of these difficulties for Merleau-Ponty's ontology may be. Let me first point to the difficulties the author encounters already in his lectures on child psychology to give a coherent theory of egocentrism as a social relation. Within the lectures series on "The Child's Relations with Others," commenting on Susan Isaacs' studies of child's social development, Merleau-Ponty argues that the child is in a relation to its parents from the age zero (CPP, 377-379).²² These include at first the parental figure in infantile fantasies, and are progressively transformed into more developed forms of sociality. The relations to the parents provide an infrastructure for relations to other people in general. This analysis leads Merleau-Ponty to conclude, logically, that the relations with others exist from the phase of egocentrism onward, rather than being a later development, and to critically address Piaget's understanding of egocentrism. Merleau-Ponty critiques Piaget's thesis of the late onset of social instincts, which supposedly arise around the 7th or 8th year of age, for an *ex nihilo* creation of relations with others, with no antecedents or prehistory in child's earlier egocentric life. The charge is definitely a fair one, but, in light of our precedent discussion, we need to consider the case that the accuser may be liable to it as well. Some commentators noted already that Merleau-Ponty's presentation of psychogenesis, which resolves the problem of the *alter ego* via

the thesis of original indistinction between self and other, faces the challenge of how the relations to other could ever be derived from the initial stage of fusion.²³

I argued, in reference to Piaget's egocentrism, that the thesis of indistinction alone cannot serve as a forerunner of relations to others. The question is whether Merleau-Ponty's idea of anonymity without individuation, contained in the notion of the "true and transcendental solitude," which revises and radicalizes Husserl's thesis of the *solus ipse*, such that "the other person is not even conceivable" and that "there is no self to claim the solitude either" (PS, 174; 219/220, quoted above), does not encounter an analogous difficulty. How to account for the factual experience of others if we assume the primacy of the transcendental level where the other is theorized *as absent*? Does not factual experience of others produce an effect which is not fully predictable on this level? Why is radical solitude the privileged path into the realm of intersubjectivity? Is this idea not ultimately an abstraction, a product of the thought alone, which bypasses the factual meaning of solitude as a lived experience? Maybe we can read Merleau-Ponty's thesis of the "true and transcendental solitude" as such a thought-experiment, in analogy to the way in which he read Husserl's notion of the *solus ipse*. True and transcendental solitude would then be a paradox which reveals its own impossibility, an *ad absurdum* argument designed to test and demonstrate the validity of an opposite claim to the one it overtly entertains. It would then be a theoretical deviation on the road towards the theory of transcendental intersubjectivity, which Merleau-Ponty defended in the lectures on "The Sciences of Man and Phenomenology," reading it into Husserl's later work.²⁴ Interpreted in this way, the thesis of "true and transcendental solitude" is a source of a positive insight which makes evident, *per negatio*, that self and the other are intertwined and co-dependent in such a way that the former cannot lay any claim to precedence or primacy over the latter. This strategy preserves the merits of the anonymity thesis while avoiding its drawbacks: it abandons the subjectivist bias which regards self-consciousness as primary and foundational and the experience of the other as secondary and derived, but does not encounter the insurmountable difficulties of how self and other arise. It regards the separation between selves as consistent with proximity, gained in the very interaction with the other rather than in a precedent fusional state. It avoids also a related difficulty, to be examined next.

As previously noted, Merleau-Ponty theorizes reversibility of the flesh as a uniform principle, which takes the same form whether it is played out within the limits of the body proper or between my and other's bodies. I have argued elsewhere that despite its aspiration to govern the inter – and intra-corporeal relations at once, sensible reversibility as theorized by Merleau-Ponty is derived from the dynamics of the body proper and subsequently extended onto inter-corporeality.²⁵ In other words, Merleau-Ponty's ontology of the flesh does not conclusively depart from the subjectivist standpoint of his

earlier phenomenology, insofar as it expands what is proper to the embodied self onto generalized corporeality. Let me revisit and further substantiate this argument by completing the discussion of the thesis of anonymous life. Specifically, the question is whether the thesis of anonymity does not result from a similar move that can be witnessed in Piaget's egocentrism, namely a dilation of the self to the point where its sheer magnitude appears to match that of the world in its entirety. One could then regard the solipsist layer revised by Merleau-Ponty along the lines of "true and transcendental solitude" to some extent as a product of a similar dilation of the solitary subject (or *solus ipse*), which is radical to the extent that it annuls the selfhood yet has its source in the subjective standpoint nevertheless. The theory of transcendental intersubjectivity has the merit of wiping out these possible remnants of the subjective bias from Merleau-Ponty's project, which can be traced in the anonymity thesis. It needs to be added that Merleau-Ponty was unaware of this problem and raised the question whether the anonymous stage is not *de facto* a subjective one. He acknowledges that "pre-personal life itself is still one of my views of the world. The child who asks his mother to console *him* for the pains *she* is suffering is turned toward himself just the same." (PS, 174; 220).

This acknowledgment challenges the previously discussed understanding of transitivity as an experience which freely circulates between the fields of proto-self and proto-other. Incidentally, it is also more in line with the psychological research that succeeded Merleau-Ponty's own project, and which provides a growing body of evidence that a minimal distinction between self and other exists from age zero. For example, new interpretations of the fact that distress crying spreads amongst neonates have been made possible by experimental work using audio technology. Martin and Clark (1982) conducted an experiment where calm and crying babies heard a tape recording of themselves or another baby crying. Babies who were initially calm cried more if they heard tape recording of another baby cry than if they heard themselves cry, while babies who were crying initially cried less if they heard themselves rather than another baby cry. These findings provide evidence for discrimination between one's own and another's vocalization in the first hours of human life (average age of babies in this experiment was of less than 30 hours), and so challenge the previously held interpretation of distress crying as indicative of fusion between self and other.²⁶ There is also evidence from Meltzoff et al. that neonate imitation of facial gestures, which has been observed in neonates as young as 10 minutes of age, relies on a distinction between self and other present from birth on. Infants who imitate tongue protrusion for example, do not produce a matching gesture in an automatic-life fashion but via close observation of the other and experimentation with their own body, gradually arrive at the closest possible copy of the gesture perceived on the face of the other and the gesture taking shape on their own unseen face. This suggests that infants rely on proprioceptive feedback from their own face in the process of mimicry *and*

that they distinguish between their own facial movements and those perceived on the other's face.²⁷

The findings from distress crying and imitation behaviors, to name only these two, put into question the validity of the psychological theory of fusional sociality. More importantly still, if it is true, as I have argued throughout this essay, that this theory significantly informed Merleau-Ponty's own thinking, notably his anonymity thesis, then some revision of Merleau-Ponty's views may be called for in light of the recent reports from experimental psychology. That means specifically, as I have pointed out already, locating the foundations of transcendental philosophy in intersubjectivity rather than anonymity. One of the tasks involved in this process of revision would be to find out whether inter-corporeality should be understood as an extension of intra-corporeal reversibility, or whether another understanding is called for. It should be then clear that the plea being put forward in this essay is not to reject but rather to preserve the enormous potential of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of embodiment. This is possible, I believe, by combining philosophical reflection with insights drawn from up-to-date empirical research, in the spirit of the author's own deliberate crossing of the borders between phenomenology and psychology. It seems that despite the internal tensions between fusional and intersubjective accounts of embodied sociality discussed in this essay, Merleau-Ponty's statement that "in today's psychology we have one system with two terms (my behavior and the other's behavior) which functions as a whole," (CRO, 118; 178), a system "me-and-other" (CRO, 146; 216), squares exactly with the psychology of *our* day, and provides an open invitation for continued dialogue across the disciplines.

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NOTES

- 1 "An Unpublished Text by Maurice Merleau-Ponty: A Prospectus of His Work." *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics*, ed. James M. Edie, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964, p. 3. Hereafter PrP. Un Inédit de Maurice Merleau-Ponty," *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*, no.4, 1962, 401-409, p. 401.
- 2 *Psychologie et pédagogie de l'enfant. Cours de Sorbonne 1949-52*, Verdier, 2001. Hereafter CPP.
- 3 This is in agreement with the observations by James Phillips, who finds that the priority of intersubjectivity over perception in Merleau-Ponty's ontology would "grant a singular importance to the studies carried out in the Sorbonne lectures." Phillips' interest lies specifically in how the psychoanalytic themes anticipate the Merleau-Ponty's later work. ("From the Unseen to the Invisible. Merleau-Ponty's Sorbonne Lectures as Preparation for His Later Thought." *Merleau-Ponty, Interiority and Exteriority, Psychic Life and the World*, ed. Dorothea Olkowski and James Morley,

- SUNY Press, 1999, p. 79).
- 4 Hereafter PS. *Signs*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964. *Singes*, Gallimard: 1960.
 - 5 The specific example Merleau-Ponty borrowed from Husserl is of a mass murder in which "the human subject which I am would be alone spared." Having commented on this example, Merleau-Ponty concludes that "To say that the ego "prior to" the other person is alone is already to situate it in relation to a phantom of the other person, or at least to conceive of an environment in which others could be." (PS, 174; 219).
 - 6 Merleau-Ponty notes that Husserl sometimes falls victim to this danger of cutting the *solus ipse* off from others and from nature, e. g. when he "imagines that first mind, then Nature is annihilated, and wonders what the consequences are for the mind and Nature." (PS, 173/74; 219)
 - 7 *Gedankenexperiment* (PS, 173; 219).
 - 8 "Child's Relations with Others." PrP, p. 99. *Les Relations avec autrui chez l'enfant.* Originally published by Centre de Documentation Universitaire, 1951-62, reprinted in *Parcours, 1935-1951*, Verdier, 1997 (p. 181). Hereafter CRO.
 - 9 In abstract thought there is not shift of perspective – unlike in perception, where the mobile perceiver continuously readjusts her perceptual field (CPP, 258).
 - 10 *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonse Lingis, Northwestern University Press, 1968. *Le Visible et l'invisible*. Paris: Gallimard, 1964. Hereafter VI.
 - 11 "The corporeality to which the primordial thing belongs is more corporeality in general; as the child's egocentricity (*l'égoctrisme de l'enfant*), the "solipsist layer" is both transitivity and confusion of self and other." (PS, 174; 220). While in "The Philosopher and His Shadow," Piaget's *l'égoctrisme* is translated as "egocentricity" (*Ibid.*), in *The Visible and the Invisible* it figures as "egocentrism" (p. 243; 296). For the sake of consistency, I use "egocentrism" throughout this essay.
 - 12 Presses Universitaires de France, 1972.
 - 13 A dualism is discussed in Jean Piaget and Bärbel Inhelder, *The Psychology of the Child*, New York: Basis Books, 1969.
 - 14 "Indistinction of the two personalities ... makes transitivity possible" (CRO, 149; 220)
 - 15 "*L'égoctrisme*" *enfantin tel quel l'entend Piaget est un concept très nuancé* (CPP, 183); *l'égoctrisme enfantin: c'est une idée juste* (CPP, 224).
 - 16 *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions*, trans. P. Mairret. London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1981.
 - 17 *Psychology of Imagination*. London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1983.
 - 18 "L'égoctrisme est l'attitude d'un moi qui s'ignore, qui vit aussi bien dans les autres qu'en soi." (CPP, 312)
 - 19 For example: "I see that this man over there sees as I touch my left hand while it is touching my right." (PS, 170; 215) "La main d'autrui que je serre est à comprendre sur le modèle de la main touchante et touchée." (*La Nature, Notes. Cours de Collège de France*, Paris: Seuil, 1994, p. 109). "The handshake too is reversible, I can feel myself touched as well and at the same time as touching." (VI, 187; 142).
 - 20 *Les origines du caractères chez l'enfant*. Paris, 1949.
 - 21 For a more extensive discussion of the mirror stage as a propaedeutic to relations to others see my "The Body, the Mirror and the Other in Merleau-Ponty and Sartre" in *Ipseity and Alterity: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Intersubjectivity*, ed. Shaun Gallagher and Stephen Watson, Presses Universitaires de Rouen, 2003 (in press).
 - 22 *Dans la phase même de l'égoctrisme, il y a chez l'enfant une relation avec autrui.* (CPP, 378). Merleau-Ponty refers to Susan Isaacs' *Social Development of Young Children*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1933.
 - 23 A critique to that effect can be found in M. C. Dillon. "Ecart: Reply to 'Flesh and Otherness.'" *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty*, ed. G. A. Johnson and M. B. Smith, Northwestern University Press, 1990 and Dan Zahavi. *Self-awareness and Alterity*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1999.
 - 24 "As Husserl stated in his last years, the last subjectivity, philosophical, ultimate, radical

- subjectivity, which philosophers call *transcendental*, is an *intersubjectivity*." PrP, 51. Originally published by Centre de Documentation Universitaire, 1953-1963, the first part of this lecture is reprinted in *Parcours deux*, 1951-61, Verdier, 2000 (p. 62).
- 25 "Reversibility and Intersubjectivity in Merleau-Ponty's Ontology." *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, Vol. 33, N° 2, 155-166, 2002.
- 26 This experiment is discussed by George Butterworth in "An Ecological Perspective on the Origins of Self," *The Body and the Self*, ed. J. L. Bermudez, A. Marcel and N. Eilan, MIT Press, 1998, pp. 91-92.
- 27 For an overview of the imitation research and its impact on Merleau-Ponty's view of the development of self-other relations, I refer the reader to "The earliest sense of self and others: Merleau-Ponty and recent developmental studies," Shaun Gallagher and Andrew Meltzoff, *Philosophical Psychology*, vol. 9, No. 2, 1996. Merleau-Ponty's works represented in this essay are "The Child's Relations with Others" and *The Phenomenology of Perception*.

Anonymat et socialité. La convergence de la psychologie et de la philosophie dans l'ontologie merleau-pontienne de l'intersubjectivité

Ce qui motiva, de l'aveu même de Merleau-Ponty, le passage d'un type phénoménologique à un type ontologique d'analyse, ce fut la nécessité de repenser la question de la socialité et de la communication avec autrui. J'examine, dans cet article, cette priorité donnée à la vie interpersonnelle dans l'analyse merleau-pontienne de la corporéité en général, ou de la chair. J'accorde à cet égard une attention toute particulière aux sources psychologiques de la pensée de Merleau-Ponty. Revenant sur ses cours de Psychologie de l'enfant et de Pédagogie, professés en Sorbonne en 1949-52, je développe l'hypothèse selon laquelle la psychologie génétique de la socialité enfantine vient nourrir de manière significative, dans les derniers textes, sa conception aussi bien de l'intersubjectivité que de la chair. Les thèses psychologiques concernant la forme primitivement anonyme et fusionnelle prise par la socialité humaine jouent en particulier un rôle essentiel dans la définition, au plan ontologique, de la vie interpersonnelle. Une telle remarque s'avère évidente en ce qui concerne les efforts de Merleau-Ponty pour placer le départ de l'analyse phénoménologique non pas dans l'hypothèse du *solus ipse*, mais dans la "vraie et transcendante solitude", c'est-à-dire dans l'indivision entre le moi et l'autre.

Me référant à la définition chez Piaget de l'égoïsme infantin, que Merleau-Ponty place au départ du développement psychique, sous la forme d'un être impersonnel et anonyme dont émergent les individus distincts, je pointe la tension interne qui guette inévitablement ce projet de dériver la socialité d'un état d'anonymat initial. Je montre alors qu'on trouve une théorie alternative de la socialité dans la définition merleau-pontienne de l'intersubjectivité transcendante, qui n'est pas simplement un anonymat ou une solitude transcendante. Une telle définition a le mérite de conserver les avantages de la thèse de l'anonymat, sans ses inconvénients : elle renonce au préjugé subjectiviste, qui pose comme première et fondatrice la conscience de soi, et comme seconde et dérivée l'expérience de l'autre, mais évite les difficultés insurmontables concernant l'émergence de soi et d'autrui ; la séparation des consciences et leur proximité ne font pas alternative. Cette théorie, enfin, permet d'engager un dialogue entre Merleau-Ponty et certains développements récents de la psychologie génétique, comme par exemple l'étude de "l'imitation néonatale", selon laquelle un moi corporel élémentaire est présent dès l'âge zéro.

**Anonimato e socialità.
Il convergere di motivi psicologici e filosofici nell'ontologia
merleau-pontiana dell'intersoggettività**

Il fatto che Merleau-Ponty abbia via via dislocato il proprio terreno d'analisi da un piano fenomenologico ad uno ontologico si spiega, nelle parole dell'autore stesso, con l'esigenza di ripensare la socialità e la comunicazione con gli altri. Nel mio saggio, interrogo questa priorità attribuita dall'autore alla vita interpersonale nelle sue riflessioni sulla corporeità in generale o sulla carne. Presto una particolare attenzione alle fonti psicologiche che stanno alla base del pensiero di Merleau-Ponty circa il primato della socialità. Facendo riferimento alle conferenze sulla psicologia e pedagogia del bambino, che egli tenne alla Sorbona tra il 1949 e il 1952, svolgo la tesi secondo cui la psicologia dello sviluppo della socialità nel bambino ha influito significativamente sulla sua comprensione delle relazioni tra il sé e l'altro enunciata nei testi successivi, nonché sulla sua concezione della carne. In particolare, le ipotesi psicologiche sulla forma anonima e fusionale inizialmente assunte dalla socialità umana sembrano svolgere un ruolo determinante nella sua concezione della vita interpersonale e nella sua riformulazione sul piano ontologico. Ciò è particolarmente evidente negli sforzi che Merleau-Ponty compie al fine di sostituire il punto di partenza dell'analisi fenomenologica, l'ipotesi del *solus ipse*, con la tesi della "solitudine vera e trascendentale", cioè di uno stato di originaria indistinzione tra il sé e l'altro, che facilita la diretta comunicazione tra sé distinti.

In riferimento alla tesi di Piaget circa l'iniziale egocentrismo del bambino, che ha condizionato significativamente la concezione merleau-pontyana dello sviluppo del bambino così come quella dell'essere impersonale o anonimo dal quale emergono i sé distinti, sottolineo le irrisolvibili tensioni interne implicite nell'idea di derivare la socialità da un iniziale stato di anonimato. Metto poi in luce, entro il progetto filosofico di Merleau-Ponty, un approccio teoretico alternativo al problema della socialità, incentrato sulla tesi dell'intersoggettività trascendentale piuttosto che su quelle dell'anonimato o della solitudine trascendentale. Dimostro che il primo metodo d'approccio ha il merito di conservare i pregi della tesi dell'anonimato e nello stesso tempo di evitarne gli svantaggi: abbandona la tendenza soggettivista che considera l'autocoscienza come primaria e fondante e l'esperienza dell'altro come secondaria e derivata, ma non incontra difficoltà insormontabili riguardo al problema di come il sé e l'altro abbiano origine, considerando altresì la distinzione tra i diversi sé come compatibile con la loro prossimità. Un simile approccio consente inoltre di tener vivo il dialogo tra la filosofia di Merleau-Ponty e la recente psicologia dello sviluppo, per quanto riguarda, ad esempio, gli studi sull'imitazione neonatale, che presuppongono un sé corporeo di base, presente *ab origine*.