

## THE LIVED BODY AS PRE-REFLECTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS: MERLEAU-PONTY ON THE COGITO

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**ABSTRACT:** In this paper, I sketch out Merleau-Ponty's theory of subjectivity as it is presented in the *Phenomenology of Perception*. I will start by showing that Merleau-Ponty's theory presupposes Sartre's notion of consciousness as anonymous and pre-reflective. Merleau-Ponty takes up these features and embeds them in the lived body. The result is Merleau-Ponty's notion of the "tacit cogito" as pre-reflective subjectivity, always presupposed in our everyday embodied engagement with the world and in every explicit reflexive grasp of ourselves as such. Further, I show that the outcome of reflection, the "spoken cogito", presupposes linguistic ability and thus the expressive power of the body. In the end I argue that, contrary to Sartre, who viewed pre-reflective consciousness as a nothing, for Merleau-Ponty the lived body or tacit cogito is always something in and of the world.

**Keywords:** Merleau-Ponty, Subjectivity, Embodiment, Pre-Reflective Consciousness, Sartre

1. If there is one central aim in Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, it could be said that it consists in formulating a radically new conception of subjectivity. In this regard, Merleau-Ponty's main thesis, as is widely known, can be stated as the idea that all forms of subjectivity may be traced back to the "so-called" lived body. In parallel to this thread, which runs implicitly throughout the *Phenomenology of Perception*, there is a chapter on the notion of the cogito, in which Merleau-Ponty presents his explicit theory of subjectivity. In this paper, I would like to draw a connection between what Merleau-Ponty says about the lived body as the basis of subjectivity and the theory of subjectivity that he presents in the chapter on the cogito. Namely, I will consider the idea that Merleau-Ponty's lived body comes to

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occupy the position of what in Sartre's philosophy is called "pre-reflective consciousness" or the "pre-reflective cogito" (which in Merleau-Ponty appears under the guise of the "tacit cogito"). I will argue that Merleau-Ponty's notion is in fact modelled on Sartre's. However, I will also show that they differ in some respects, the most important of which is the fact that, whereas Sartre conceived of pre-reflective consciousness as nothingness, Merleau-Ponty understands pre-reflective consciousness as rooted in the world.

2. We must first sketch out what the idea of the lived body itself stands for. The concept stems from Husserl's distinction between *Leib* and *Körper*. Whereas my body as seen in the mirror or considered as an object from a natural-scientific perspective is a *Körper*, a material thing, my body as it is lived by me in my first-person experience is a *Leib*, that is, a lived body. Merleau-Ponty uses the lived body as a conceptual tool with a view to treading a middle path between intellectualist and empiricist accounts of subjectivity. In common with intellectualists, Merleau-Ponty thinks that subjectivity cannot be reduced to objective processes occurring in the brain – processes seen from a third-person perspective. Against intellectualists, however, he emphasizes the quasi-transcendental role played by the body in opening us up to the world. In other words, he brings out the fact that our bodies cannot be accounted for in purely mechanistic terms, as if they were mere material things. The (lived) body exhibits and creates sense or meaning. Merleau-Ponty thinks that the body is a subject, or at least a proto-subject. The lived body corresponds to the most elementary form of subjectivity, upon which all other, more complex, forms are built and to which they ultimately trace back. As the most primitive form of awareness, the lived body establishes our most rudimentary contact with being and with the world.

As indicated, the lived body takes the place that was traditionally ascribed to the subject inasmuch as it cannot be fully turned into an object, constantly eluding my efforts to grasp it as such. In fact, although the lived body is in some sense aware of itself – or else it would not be *lived* – it can never become an object for me. It is precisely that through which there can be objects in the first place. To the extent that the lived body is the condition of the possibility of my being aware of anything whatsoever, it fulfils a transcendental role in perception. Unlike objects, whose presence presupposes their possible absence, the lived body is always present for me (PhP 92/119).<sup>1</sup> This permanence of the lived body cannot be

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<sup>1</sup> Page numbers refer to the Landes translation of the *Phenomenology of Perception* and are followed by page references to the French edition.

equated with a *de facto* necessity. Merleau-Ponty goes so far as to say that this permanence is a “metaphysical necessity” (PhP 93/120). It is because the lived body always appears to me from the same side that outer objects can show me their successive profiles and preserve their identity in that succession (PhP 95/121-2). The permanence of the lived body functions as an a-thematic background for whatever comes into our perceptive focus (PhP 94/121).

In general, I do not represent my lived body in the same way I am said to “represent” outer objects. This is evident whenever I move my body. In order to move it, I do not need to find it in space as I do other objects. Through what Merleau-Ponty calls the “body schema”, the healthy subject<sup>2</sup> always knows where her body is without this being knowledge of objective spatial relations. The body exhibits a telic capacity by which it projects itself in anticipation of the end of its movement (a movement that cannot be described in geometrical, mechanical terms). The sense of the movement is provided by the practical tasks and daily affairs in which the body is continually engaged.

Even when I try to turn my body into an object by touching it, the body, taken as a lived body, always eludes this transformation. This is visible in the phenomenon of “double sensation”: whenever my left hand attempts to touch my right one, both hands alternate between being the touching one and being the touched one without ever being able to feel the other as the “touching” one, that is, without ever achieving coincidence with one another (PhP 95/122). It is this lack of self-coincidence of the body in the experience of the one hand touching the other that will become the basis for Merleau-Ponty’s later formulation of notions such as the “flesh” and “reversibility” (Dillon 1997: 153ff.). Thus, the illusiveness of the lived body mirrors the illusiveness traditionally ascribed to the subject of knowledge.

Another feature of the lived body is the fact that, even though it possesses some sort of intrinsic reflexivity, it is not closed in on itself, but rather primordially finds itself outside, in the world. The intentionality of the lived body is, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, transcendence towards the world (as was already the case with Sartre’s pre-reflective cogito). As I note above, this does not mean that the lived body completely forgets itself in the world. Although the lived body tends to efface itself in favour of what we may call, for the sake of simplicity, its intentional correlate, it remains aware of itself, even if dimly.

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<sup>2</sup> As is well known, in the chapter on the body’s spatiality and movement (see PhP 100ff/127ff.) Merleau-Ponty gives an extensive analysis of a case (the Schneider case) of what he calls “morbid motricity”.

3. As noted above, Merleau-Ponty's description of the lived body strongly recalls what Sartre says about consciousness, in particular pre-reflective consciousness. However, we still need to determine the extent to which Merleau-Ponty's conception of subjectivity can be assimilated with Sartre's conception. The latter can be very briefly summarized as follows: for Sartre, intentionality—consciousness of something— involves an immediate form of self-awareness. This does not yet imply that consciousness has to reflect upon itself in an explicit manner. Rather, in being directed towards the object, consciousness is implicitly aware of itself as being thus directed to its object (and also, according to Sartre, as not being its object). Explicit consciousness of oneself, or, as Sartre also calls it, reflective consciousness, emerges only on the basis of pre-reflective consciousness of worldly entities.

Sartre first presented the idea of pre-reflective consciousness in his first essay, "The Transcendence of the Ego". In this first version of his theory of subjectivity, Sartre presents pre-reflective consciousness as being impersonal. According to this conception, the ego is a transcendent object generated within the field of impersonal consciousness. According to Gardner (2009), Sartre's theory in the *Transcendence of the Ego* raises several philosophical problems. One of these problems consists in accounting for the self's identity in reflective consciousness (Gardner 2009: 14). If the I of reflective consciousness is the same as the I of reflected consciousness, how does pre-reflective consciousness come to be impersonal and anonymous? Still, according to Gardner (2009: 90), Sartre makes an attempt to solve these problems in *Being and Nothingness*, changing his theory to the effect that pre-reflective consciousness becomes personal and reflective consciousness borrows its reflective structure from pre-reflective consciousness (for more details on the difference between Sartre's theory in his first essay and his theory in *Being and Nothingness*, see Sartre 1945: 139ff. and Gardner 2009: 90ff.).

At face value, we can describe Merleau-Ponty's conception of the lived body as being immediately aware of itself in its opening to the world as involving something very much like Sartre's pre-reflective consciousness. The influence of Sartre's pre-reflective cogito on Merleau-Ponty's account of perception and consciousness has already been noted by commentators like Dillon (1997: 104-5): "Sartre's influence is manifest here. Merleau-Ponty's tacit cogito is modelled upon Sartre's pre-reflective cogito [...]". As a result, Merleau-Ponty's conception of subjectivity may well suffer from some of the problems that affect Sartre's early

theory. For example, not only Dillon (1997: 105f.)<sup>3</sup> but also other commentators (like Barbaras 1991) point out that the notion of the tacit cogito may be incoherent on the grounds that if the tacit cogito is a cogito then it cannot be impersonal, and if it is impersonal it cannot serve as a foundation for reflection. In particular, Barbaras' point is that, in *The Phenomenology of Perception*, the pre-reflective domain is defined by being a mere negation of the reflective domain. The pre-reflective is not characterized by itself, and thus Merleau-Ponty's philosophy in the *Phenomenology of Perception* ends up being implicitly intellectualist and even idealist (Barbaras 1991: 24ff., 31ff., 33ff.).<sup>4</sup>

Certain elements of Merleau-Ponty's characterization of the lived body point to the fact that his point of reference here seems to be Sartre's first theory from the *Transcendence of the Ego* more than the later one from *Being and Nothingness*. This is evident, for example, when Merleau-Ponty says that the lived body is an anonymous entity which is best described by the French impersonal pronoun *on*. For example, in order to account for pathological experiences like the sensation of a phantom arm, Merleau-Ponty relies on the idea that the body is not the object of an immediate or instantaneous apprehension. Merleau-Ponty argues that, in addition to this momentary awareness I have of my body, there is the habitual phenomenon of the body, which allows me to be aware of body parts, such as a phantom arm, which is no longer attached to my body: "Correlatively, my body must be grasped not merely in an instantaneous, singular, and full experience, but moreover under an aspect of generality and as an impersonal being" (PhP 85/111-112). Merleau-Ponty relies on Freud's concept of repression (*refoulement*) to explain that the lived body is akin to an innate complex inasmuch as it functions as a primordial past that can never be fully overcome, shaping all of my life's moments and constituting my primordial attachment to the world (PhP 86/112-113). For me to follow a certain personal course of action, I must have previously belonged to a world in general through the anonymous existence of my body (PhP 86/113).

In parallel with the description of our lived body as a pre-personal entity, Merleau-Ponty describes perception itself as an anonymous event.<sup>5</sup> He says that "every perception takes place within an atmosphere of generality and is presented to us as anonymous" (PhP 223/260). If we wanted to put perceptual experience into words, we could say that "*one* perceives in me, and not that I perceive" (*ibidem*). Merleau-Ponty's point here is that perception is not in my command that

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<sup>3</sup> "How can a cogito be pre-reflective, be tacit? There seems to be a contradiction in terms here" (Dillon 1997: 105).

<sup>4</sup> It should be borne in mind that Merleau-Ponty himself later disavowed the notion of a tacit cogito in his working notes for *Visible and Invisible*.

<sup>5</sup> On the anonymous character of perception, see Dillon (1997: 103, 104).

it points to a given situation, whereas personal acts express my choices. I can choose not to open my eyes, but once I have opened them I cannot choose not to see. He even compares sensation to “a birth and a death” in the sense that, although we are all born and die, and birth and death are events that certainly concern us, we can never experience them as such (*ibidem*). In his words, birth and death are “pre-personal horizons of our life” (*ibidem*).

Since sensation comes, as it were, from beneath me, from a region of my being which is not fully under my control, sensation prevents my experience from being transparent to itself (PhP 223-4/261). Although sensation displays intentionality inasmuch as it reaches an outer object, that object is present to me not as a pure consciousness, a disembodied subject, but rather as a lived body that “espouses” the sensible thing (PhP 221/258). Through my “sensibility” I am open to sensible beings, but I do not constitute them as if they were instances of certain abstract notions. The things that strike my senses are not of my creation. In order to perceive them, my body has to let itself be synchronized with them. Merleau-Ponty says that, as a body, I am “born together” with them (PhP 219/256). Sensation implies not only that things outside me strike my senses, but also that my body somehow takes up the proper attitude so as to be able to perceive each of them. I do not create the sensation of blue or red, but in order to perceive those colours, my body must learn to take on the attitude of “seeing blue” or “seeing red” as a response to what up to that point can only be described as a “vague solicitation” (PhP 259/222).

The entities I perceive through the senses require a certain familiarity on the part of my body if I am to perceive them. This means that, before I can take myself as a conscious, thinking subject—that is, before I can perform the Cartesian cogito—the body has always already opened itself to a world where sensible beings can be found. In relation to perception, reflection always comes later. It is true that a synthesis of the manifold aspects of the perceptible thing must be accomplished. Contrary to what intellectualists hold, however, I perform that synthesis not as a reflecting subject but as a lived body. It is a synthesis that I do not have to re-constitute every time I perceive something. Rather, it is much more akin to an ability of the body, to a “know-how”, which must be learned and practiced. Hence the fact that Merleau-Ponty sees perception as akin to a habit: “in fact, every habit is simultaneously motor and perceptual” (PhP 153/188). This performative dimension of perception can also be expressed by the idea that perception is the correlate not of an “I think”, but rather of an “I can” (PhP 139/171). It is this “know-how” that is brought into play whenever I come before things with a view to perceiving them. This know-how, displayed in the perception of particular things, is in turn an instantiation and development of a more general kinship between my body and the world as a whole (“my own body is the primordial habit, the one that

conditions all others and by which they can be understood” [PhP 93/120]). Before I come to perceive this and that, I am always already opened to the world. Merleau-Ponty says that perception “benefits from work already completed, from a general synthesis constituted once and for all. This is what I express by saying that I perceive with my body or with my senses, my body and my senses being precisely this habitual knowledge of the world, this implicit or sedimented science” (PhP 247/285).

The fact that my body makes use of this implicit and sedimented knowledge contributes, as I have already hinted at, to making perceptual knowledge opaque to itself. In the first place, I can never give an adequate account of my body’s perceptual powers, of what is or what it means to perceive red or green (as if it were possible to further analyse this perception into atomic elements). But more than this, I can never give an account of why my body perceives at all – of why my body opens me to the world, to reality, to things; I can never give an account of what Merleau-Ponty later, in the *Visible and Invisible*, calls our “perceptual faith”. (That is, perception, as Merleau-Ponty makes clear in the preface to the *Phenomenology of Perception*, should be taken as an ultimate fact or given that is not liable to further analysis, although it can be used as an *explanandum* for other facts.) Contrary to what would happen if pure intellection were possible, sensing entails having to do with inexhaustible things that I did not create or constitute in the manner of a transcendental subject. Every sensation takes place within a field, like that of vision, and implies not only more possibilities of sensing within that field but also other possible fields (hearing, touch, etc.). There is always more to know about the objects we see with our eyes and feel with our hands (for example, their hidden profiles). In sum,

if, as we have said, every perception has something anonymous about it, this is because it takes up an acquisition that it does not question. The *perceiving person* is not spread out before himself in the manner that a consciousness must be: he has an historical thickness, he takes up a perceptual tradition, and he is confronted with a present. (PhP 247-8/285)

If I could be aware of my very first perception, it would appear to me as an iteration of a previous grasp of the world, or, as Merleau-Ponty says, an iteration of a “primary pact with the world” (PhP 168/204). It is not possible for perception *not* to carry a past along with it. It is never possible to bring back and perceptually recreate that “primary pact”. Perception always brings with it this “original past, a past that has never been present” (252/289). The question here is how we should understand this “past”. Is it a past in relation to a reflective consciousness, which necessarily “comes after” and takes pre-reflective consciousness for its theme? Or

is it the past of what was never present in the sense of that which we were never conscious of in the first place, not even in a pre-reflective manner? The latter corresponds to Marrato's interpretation (2012). According to him, perception begins in a contingent movement that is given meaning (that is stylized) by the body only afterwards, a posteriori. The "original past" is said to "haunt" the present of consciousness precisely because it represents the essential contingency of perception. My interpretation here goes in the opposite direction: because I assume that Merleau-Ponty's notion of what precedes reflection is influenced by Sartre, I believe that this "original past" was already conscious, even if in a pre-reflective manner.

4. At least in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty does not relinquish the Cartesian notion of the cogito but rather radically reformulates it. According to Merleau-Ponty, there is some truth in Descartes' return to subjectivity, to the cogito. Perception must, by its nature, be aware of itself as such, but instead of being in full possession of itself or being transparent to itself, it evades itself when it is directed towards the perceived thing (PhP 395-6/435-6). The perceived thing cannot be severed from perception. Seeing is not mere thinking of seeing, as Descartes held (PhP 393-4/433-4). If I doubt the thing perceived, I must put my perception of that thing into question as well (PhP 393-4/433). Therefore, the certainty that accrues to perception is equivalent to the certainty I have of the thing perceived (PhP 394/434). One falls with the other. This does not mean that we have absolute certainty of the thing perceived. We are always liable to illusion. The latter, however, has as its condition of possibility our primary contact with the world, our being in, and openness to, the world. We can only doubt this or that particular perception insofar as we already find ourselves in a world (and this means finding ourselves in a perceptual openness to being). What Merleau-Ponty's version of the cogito ultimately points to is the already-mentioned transcendence of the body towards the world (PhP 396/436).

Merleau-Ponty says that even when it comes to so-called inner feelings like love and will, where it seems that the object is produced by the subject and is entirely contained in its "sphere of immanence", there is the possibility of illusion (PhP 397/436-7). He points out that feelings, too, can be true or false (PhP 397-8/437). He emphasizes in particular the case of "false love" (PhP 397ff./437ff.). In the case of "false feelings", as in "false love", it is not as if we are consciously faking our feelings. His point is instead that our feelings possess an ambiguous quality. When we are under their spell, we cannot really distinguish "false" from "true" feelings. It is only afterwards that we realize that a certain love did not engage "my overall being in the world" (PhP 398/438). We can only realize our deception by

regarding ourselves from the vantage point of a posterior knowledge of ourselves. Of course, this presupposes that we, ourselves, should somehow exceed whatever we are living through at each moment:

Thus, we do not possess our entire reality at each moment, and one has the right to speak of an inner perception, an intimate sense, an “analyzer” between us and ourselves, that at each moment goes more or less the distance toward knowledge of our life and of our being. (PhP 399/439)

Since we are not in possession of ourselves, are not transparent to ourselves, talk of degrees of self-knowledge, of self-transparency, is to a certain extent legitimate (PhP 399/439). This does not mean that what falls short of our self-knowledge is some kind of mysterious unconscious. We are always in a state of being dispossessed to ourselves, even though this openness remains ambiguous, and we can thus fail to properly comprehend ourselves. For example, we can harbour feelings towards someone in a way that is not totally clear to ourselves (PhP 401/441). More importantly, however, as was already the case with our perceptual openness to the world, deception regarding ourselves is certainly possible, but it excludes our being absolutely wrong about ourselves. I can doubt what I know or think I know about myself, in particular what concerns my inner life, my thoughts, volitions and feelings, because I am somehow pre-reflectively certain of my doubting. Absolute doubt is self-contradictory, for, taken to the limit, it implies doubting my own doubt (PhP 402/442).

Contrary to the Cartesian model, for Merleau-Ponty consciousness is more akin to a doing than a knowing or representing. (This was already at stake in the idea that perception is essentially a bodily habit.) I can only be certain that I want something, love someone or perceive something if in fact I accomplish my existence in such a way (PhP 401-2/441). The certainty I have of my thoughts stems from their actual existence (PhP 402/442). For this reason, talk of inner perception is to a certain extent inadequate. At the most fundamental level, I am not an object of observation. I find myself only in the intentional act (in wishing, perceiving, wanting, etc.) (PhP 402/442). Inner perception or reflection – the extent to which Merleau-Ponty distinguishes between these is not clear to me – comes only later and would not be possible if I were not first pre-reflectively aware of my intentional act towards an object – of my act of perceiving, wishing, loving, etc. (PhP 402/442). Just as with Sartre, my pre-reflective consciousness of outer things and of my inner feelings precedes and is the condition of my taking myself as an object, that is, of the explicit reflection upon myself which is expressed in the phrase “I think”:

In the proposition “I think, I am,” the two affirmations are certainly equivalent, otherwise there would be no *Cogito*. But again, we must attempt to understand the sense of this equivalence: it is not the “I think” that eminently contains the “I am,” nor is it my existence that is reduced to the consciousness that I have of it; rather, it is the “I think” that is reintegrated into the movement of transcendence of the “I am,” and consciousness reintegrated into existence. (PhP 403/443)

5. After showing that the subject is pre-reflectively projected into the world, into whatever situation it finds itself, and thus that the subject of reflection is not entirely identical to the pre-reflective one, Merleau-Ponty proceeds to show that self-coincidence or self-possession cannot be found in the realm of pure thought either. He tries to show this by analysing the nature of geometrical truths. I cannot enter into much detail concerning this matter. Suffice to say that, for Merleau-Ponty, the presumed self-coincidence of thought is an illusion that masks the expressive (and creative) nature of all language, and hence the perspectival character of truth. According to Merleau-Ponty, thought cannot exist apart from language, and the latter originates in the lived body’s expressive nature; it is one of the ways the body has of producing sense or meaning. Language in its inception does not have the function of representing a pre-existing thought as if it were its mere garment. Furthermore, language, seen as an expressive phenomenon, transcends pre-established, instituted meanings.

When fully accomplished, the linguistic process of expression has the power to induce new meanings out of the established ones. It is true that language’s expressive and creative power is usually hidden beneath the ordinary, day-to-day use. It is the latter that creates the illusion that language consists in a set of conventional signs designating thoughts that can be grasped independently of them. The ordinary use of language is what Merleau-Ponty calls “spoken language” [*parole parlée*]. We can appreciate what language must have been at its inception, the original phenomenon of language, when we consider, for example, great works of poetry, in which ordinary use and its common meanings (the “spoken language”) are dislocated in order to produce new meanings out of them. This phenomenon is what Merleau-Ponty calls “speaking language” [*parole parlante*]. The illusion that thought pre-exists language, that the latter serves merely to express a pre-existent thought, is a necessary illusion and is tied to the nature of linguistic expression itself. Linguistic expression effaces itself in favour of its result (the thought generated by it), forgets its contingency, and creates the illusion that the latter was pre-given. According to Merleau-Ponty, linguistic expression instils in us the idea of absolute truth and the ideal of thought without language (*pensée sans parole*) (PhP 196/231).

Merleau-Ponty’s conception of language has profound consequences for his conception of the cogito. Since the ability to say “I” or “I think” is essentially

linguistic, we must remain opaque to ourselves. We can never manage to make language totally transparent to us since, by nature, all its meanings are ambiguous, that is, on the one hand they are acquired and inherited, and on the other hand they harbour the possibility of meaning beyond what is established. Thus, as a result of his theory of language, thought and subjectivity, Merleau-Ponty puts into question the unconditioned character of the Cartesian cogito, its supposed lack of presuppositions.

In this regard, Merleau-Ponty points out that the cogito that appears in Descartes' second meditation belongs to every human being capable of reflection. In that sense, it belongs to no one in particular. It is a "second-hand cogito". The Cartesian cogito's true formula, according to Merleau-Ponty, should be "one thinks, one is" (PhP 422/462). (It should be borne in mind that this type of anonymity is different from that which belongs to the lived body.) In fact, Descartes' cogito is already a product of the lived body's expressive power and presupposes the acquisition of language. Descartes, and we who follow his thoughts in the second meditation, tend to overlook this precisely because of language's tendency to efface itself in favour of its outcome, in this case in favour of the "I think". The latter, according to Merleau-Ponty, is merely a "spoken cogito" (PhP 424/463). Not that this is what Descartes wanted to convey. He actually had in view that silent presence of myself to myself, but he missed his target. Whenever we are focused on reading Descartes and we perform the Cartesian cogito by saying "I am, I think", "I am a thinking being", we are leaving out of our account the phenomenon of our innermost subjectivity. In Descartes' hands, the cogito becomes a cultural object like any other. However, this does not mean, as post-structuralism would have it, that the cogito is a product of language and for that reason an illusion. I could not even start to read or understand Descartes if I did not have, in a pre-predicate, pre-reflective manner, an awareness of my own life as mine, if the spoken cogito didn't ultimately refer to a tacit cogito:

In writing his *Méditations*, Descartes was aiming at this silent *Cogito*, which animates and directs all of the expressive operations that, by definition, fail to reach their goal, since they interpose – between Descartes's existence and the knowledge that he gains of this existence – the entire thickness of cultural acquisitions; but, on the other hand, these expressive operations would not even be attempted if Descartes had not, at the outset, had his own existence in sight. (PhP 463/424)

However, Merleau-Ponty does not wish to revert to a Sartrean conception of the cogito, essentially defined as not being the in-itself and thus as nothingness itself (which, of course, accords with the idea that the "silent" cogito precedes and is therefore not conditioned by any cultural acquisition). In order to fully appreciate

Merleau-Ponty's theory of subjectivity, it is necessary to understand its predicament. He wishes to keep the idea of subjectivity as pre-reflective consciousness, which therefore cannot be reductively explained away by objective properties, without falling into the idea that the subject is nothing, or into the transcendental, intellectualist variant of Sartre's thesis – the idea that the subject constitutes reality. The problem, to quote Merleau-Ponty, is the following:

to understand how I can be the one constituting my thought in general, without which it would not be thought by anyone, would pass by unnoticed, and would thus not be a thought – without ever being the one constituting any particular one of my thoughts, since I never see them born in plain view, and since I only know myself through them. We must attempt to understand how subjectivity can be simultaneously dependent and indeclinable. (PhP 461/422)

It is true that language already presupposes consciousness. This is why we are able to learn new languages and translate texts from one to another. Beneath the spoken cogito, there is the silent cogito. However, according to Merleau-Ponty, this indeclinable subjectivity does not constitute the world. It grasps itself only in the most fleeting of ways. According to Merleau-Ponty, the tacit cogito only comes to recognize itself in limit situations: when I perceive a threat to my life, for example, or when I perceive the gaze of the other upon me (PhP 426/465). In order to become a true cogito, it is necessary for the tacit cogito to express itself: “the tacit Cogito is only a Cogito when it has expressed itself” (PhP 426/466), and this not only in speech but presumably also in perception and action, given that the body already manifests and produces meaning at the level of perception and movement and that speech can be seen as being on a continuum with them. Thus, the last quote can also be read as implying that the tacit cogito is nothing by itself apart from its immersion the world, apart from the concrete way in which it is (bodily) manifested and acts within it. Merleau-Ponty, in fact, proceeds to make this point in the last remaining chapters of the *Phenomenology of Perception* (the ones that follow the chapter on the cogito): the chapters on temporality and freedom. In the chapter on temporality, for instance, Merleau-Ponty shows that Husserl's absolute consciousness, or what he also calls, following Husserl, “constituting time”, must of necessity appear to itself in succession, without which it would only be an “inarticulate cry” (PhP 450-1/489-90). This seems to be one of his main points of disagreement with Sartre: whereas the latter conceives of the subject as not being its object, and the for-itself as a nothing, Merleau-Ponty conceives of the subject, cogito or lived body right off the bat as a worldly being, as

he will put it later in *Visible and Invisible*— as something *of* the world, beyond and above the fact that it is someone or something for whom the world is.

Even the tacit cogito's unity stems from the way in which its existence is concretely enacted in the world. It is true that Merleau-Ponty seems to have taken this idea from Sartre. Against a position inspired by certain interpretations of Kant, according to which only reflection is capable of accomplishing the unity of the subject, that is, of unifying all my "representations" in the "I", Sartre (1992: 21, 44), and Merleau-Ponty after him, holds the idea that pre-reflective consciousness is self-unifying.<sup>6</sup> I do not have to unify my experiences in the fashion of the Kantian transcendental subject. I am a single temporality, a "cohesion of life" (PhP 430/469). For Merleau-Ponty, the unity of the tacit cogito is akin to the unity of the world. Just as the latter remains at the horizon of all my explicit perceptions – a horizon that can never be adequately brought into view or itself perceived (Romdehn-Romluc 2011: 125ff.) – the subject taken as tacit cogito remains a general project of a being in and towards the world. As noted above, this unity is truly enacted by perceiving and acting in the world. Contrary to Sartre, however, it is embodied subjectivity, the lived body, in which the unity of the tacit cogito consists for Merleau-Ponty. Just as time displays a unity that at each moment revolves around the present, so too my subjectivity is ultimately centred around the body as its point of view on the world. With the arrival of subjectivity (one could say, with the arrival of my life) begins a "field", an "experience" (PhP 429/468), or, as Merleau-Ponty also puts it, a "new possibility of situations" (*ibidem*). It is not that the subject thinks of itself as embodied, as if the idea of the subject were somehow tied to the idea of the body. Rather, it is the subject itself that exists as embodied, for otherwise it would not be a "possibility of situations" – it couldn't even be in what we call a situation. For Merleau-Ponty, to be in a situation is to be in the world by means of my body and to carve out a perspective on it:

If the subject is in a situation, or even if the subject is nothing other than a possibility of situations, this is because he only achieves his ipseity by actually being a body and by entering into the world through this body. If I find, while reflecting upon the essence of the body, that it is tied to the essence of the world, this is because my existence as subjectivity is identical with my existence as a body and with the existence of the world, and because, ultimately, the subject that I am, understood concretely, is inseparable from this particular body and from this particular world. (PhP 431/470)

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<sup>6</sup> At the same time, as Sartre himself acknowledges, he took the idea of a self-unifying consciousness from Husserl's lectures on time. On this see, for example, Zahavi (1999).

6. Thus, to summarize and conclude, one can say that Merleau-Ponty's lived body comes to play the same role as Sartre's pre-reflective consciousness. The lived body is intentionally directed towards the world, and in being so directed it is pre-reflectively aware of itself as such. Pre-reflective consciousness is, in turn, designated by Merleau-Ponty as a tacit cogito. Thus, it can be said that the lived body equals pre-reflective consciousness, which in turn equals the tacit cogito. Given that Merleau-Ponty locates Sartre's pre-reflective cogito in the lived body, there remain significant differences between their conceptions of subjectivity. For Merleau-Ponty, what was traditionally conceived as the Cartesian cogito – or in Sartre's terms, the reflective cogito – is essentially tied to language, and the latter in turn to what Merleau-Ponty calls the body's "natural power of expression" (PhP 187/221). The "I" of reflection stems from the body's attempt to express itself. Moreover, located in the lived body, pre-reflective consciousness is also seen as something in and of the world, as opposed to the Sartrean view of pre-reflective consciousness as something essentially non-worldly.

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