

METAFÍSICA Y PERSONA

Filosofía, conocimiento y vida

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Phenomenology *vs* Scientific Approach to Life. On Some Aspects of the European Cultural Crisis in 19th and 20th Century¹

Fenomenología contra el enfoque cientista a la vida. Sobre algunos aspectos de la crisis cultural europea en los s. XIX y XX

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ABSTRACT

In this paper it is shown how the efforts of Phenomenology can help to overcome the problems that the scientific approach to life unleashed in Western culture. I approach the evolving Western philosophical tradition as a response that re-integrates the unity of human flourishing in its right dimension.

Keywords: Phenomenology, scientism, humanism, Western Cultural Crisis.

RESUMEN

En este escrito se muestra cómo los esfuerzos de la fenomenología pueden auxiliar a superar los problemas del enfoque cientista a la vida desatado en la cultura occidental. En dicho escrito muestro la tradición filosófica occidental como una respuesta que reintegra la unidad del florecimiento humano en su dimensión justa.

Palabras clave: Fenomenología, cientismo, humanismo, crisis cultural en occidente.

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Introduction

In Western philosophy, after the defenestration of traditional metaphysics took place in the 18th century, mostly due to its inability to legitimate itself as a positivist thought, the new science has aimed to establish an objective world, ruling over it without subjective, qualitative and anthropological considerations.

Although not belonging to the phenomenological tradition, Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) is a forerunner of philosophical Existentialism as a radical reflection on human beings and life. Moreover, ahead of the 20th century phenomenology, Schopenhauer's thought contrasts with an epistemological paradigm implicated in naive realism as much as in the theoretical attitude of science, which considers the world and its phenomena (including corporeality) fully accessible and understandable through the principle of material causality. However, as Schopenhauer demonstrated, such a reductionist argument scarcely contributes to bridge the gap between the natural sciences and the humanities, nature and nurture, mechanism and meaning, in such a way that epistemology and ethics end up highlighting two separate paths of humanity.

According to Schopenhauer, looking at life from a philosophical point of view means to be at the service of life itself, that is, to reveal to human beings their own mental automatisms, making them aware of false prejudices and beliefs about their representations of the world. Like any other living being, Schopenhauer claims, humans are governed and dragged by the irrational, disruptive and senseless force of the will manifested in all nature, whose only purpose is to perpetuate and safeguard the survival of the species. Therefore, the birth and death of the individuals are mandatory and the process of individuation fits within a much wider horizon, which is that of safeguarding the species.²

Death leads to the end of the unique temporal phenomenon of the will (as embodied in the organismal life), but not to the will itself that is a blind force (*"Fighting and continuous tearing without any end"*³), relentless, out of time, irrational and only tending to its own realization as a "will to live".⁴ As much ill-fated the destiny of humanity may be considered, it is, nevertheless, shared by all other species.

² SCHOPENHAUER, A., *The World as Will and Representation*, New York: Dover Publication, Inc. 1969 [1st ed., 1818].

³ PRETI, G., *Filosofia*, Enciclopedia Feltrinelli Fischer, Milano: Feltrinelli Editore, 1966, p. 365 (it: *"Lotta e lacerazione continua senza alcun fine"*. Original title: *"Philosophie"*, Fischer Bücherei KG, Frankfurt am Main und Hamburg, 1958).

⁴ PIANA, G., *"Commenti a Schopenhauer II e III"*, 1990. Recuperado de <http://www.filosofia.unimi.it/piana/index.php/commenti-a-schopenhauer>.

Certainly, this is a very provocative message, of very difficult reception, especially in the European cultural context of those years, characterized not only by the hegemony of rationalism, which persuades to an unconditional trust in the human reason and in science's methods and techniques for nature's domination, but also by a romantic vision of humans being at the top of the layers of nature itself.⁵

The "*Automatism by with which the intellect works*" (it. "*L'automatismo con cui opera l'intelletto*") –as Piana argues⁶ with regards to Schopenhauer– obligates us to a kind of knowledge that is based on the principle of cause, which identifies knowing "*in grasping causal connections/links*" (it. "*nell'afferramento di nessi causali*" Piana 1990).⁷ However, while remaining bound to such a mechanism, one cannot grasp the intimate essence of the world precisely because the logical/causal chain of events is more in line with the daily cares of our intellect, with its functioning, than with the real being of the world.

So, what can philosophy do within this scenario, which, on the one hand makes humans prisoners of their own mental and causal representations –in the sense that human beings cannot go beyond their state of nature: the only way they have to think about the objects of the world and their relations is by representation and the causal relation– and on the other hand it makes humans an instrument of the manifestation of the irrational will of nature, endowing them with a body expressing needs and wishes pursuing the struggle for survival?

As it follows from "*The World as Will and Representation*" (1st ed., 1818), philosophy does not represent a pillar to leap over the phenomena themselves, like a sort of trick to go beyond the cognitive limits of human beings. Humans are doomed to pain and suffering instigated by the will to live. There is no way to escape from this. However, philosophy has the task of revealing to mankind the harsh reality and its existential condition, making humans aware of their destiny and of their place in the world.

Although in a different form and with other results, 20th century phenomenology draws attention to some of the concerns that Schopenhauer anticipated in his book "*The World as Will and Representation*" about a century before. Particularly, phenomenology's reflection on the crisis of the positive thought is a crucial step to shed new light on the conflicts arising from the split between knowledge and lifeworld, science, culture and nurture, technique and meaning. The preliminary project of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938)'s phenomenology is to build a methodology upon which grounding

⁵ PIANA, G., "*Commenti a Schopenhauer II e III*".

⁶ PIANA, G., "*Commenti a Schopenhauer II e III*", p. 47.

⁷ PIANA, G., "*Commenti a Schopenhauer II e III*", p. 48.

scientific knowledge. Actually, a large part of questions tackled by the 20th phenomenology face matters arising from the assumption of an existing radical breakup between the empirical world, the mental life and the transcendental subjectivity, which Husserl leaves unresolved.

Some of Husserl's successors, like Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) and Patočka (1907-1977), have additionally developed the issue concerning the natural world, by attempting to explain why its understanding (or more properly, its misunderstanding) through the scientific attitude constitutes a fundamental philosophical problem, which is underlying the cultural crisis of European men in the 20th century. Accordingly, the main concerns are about the pitfalls hidden in the promises of the technical civilization and the limits of mechanistic biology for the analysis of living systems and their behaviour. Hence, the need for the recovery of the meaning of life, which is not just the auto-affective (and auto-narrative) experience of one's own life, but the pre-reflective (pre-categorical) experience of the world, in which human beings plunge into the spectacle of the genesis of their experience of the world.

A special case is represented by Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) –one of the most important representatives of this trend in phenomenology– who attempts a very critical rethinking of the radical bifurcation between nature and culture and even more between the natural/life sciences and the humanities, which the Galilean science and the modern philosophy contributed to separate so much. Focusing on the term 'interpretation', Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the differences between organisms and machines: "*The machine functions, the animal lives –that is, it restructures its world and its body*".⁸ Merleau-Ponty's reconceptualization of nature was highly influenced by the biologist Jakob von Uexküll (1864-1944), according to whom meaning is the key concept of life.⁹

Merleau-Ponty's foremost argument in the course notes on nature at the Collège de France (1956-1960) is the need of understanding the Umwelt as an open field of relational exchanges, where organisms swap around meaningful signs and gestures. Merleau-Ponty's rejection of reductivist biology is grounded on the assumption that such model of living systems aims at providing the invariance with respect to all possible transformations of dynamic processes. That basically means to assume the living body as a threshold or limit-case of all possible bodies, as the geometric form of a triangle is the generalization/abstraction of all possible "embodied" triangular objects we find in the reality.

⁸ MERLEAU-PONTY, M., *Nature. Course Notes from the Collège de France (1956-1960)*, Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2003, p. 162.

⁹ JÄMSÄ, T., "Semiosis in evolution", in Barbieri Marcello (Ed.), *Introduction to Biosemiotics. The new biological synthesis*. Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer, 2007, pp. 69-100.

Nevertheless, biological phenomena are hardly reducible to the generality of physical laws, because specificity lies at the core of evolvability.¹⁰ Moreover, as the philosopher Maurita Harney emphasizes, the analysis of temporality in relation to biological systems as well our sense of time passing,¹¹ for example, also call for a non-reductionist biological approaches to life generally.

In addition, Merleau-Ponty describes the constitution of the biological body in term of esthesiological-libidinal body –i.e., as being-for-others. By this, the biological/culture body may become the foundation of the social and collective being. According to him, the reconceptualization of nature is a crucial step in order to understand how the ensemble subject/world has been historically developed in the form of embodiment. Biology is supposed to explain how the onto-phylogenetic development of an organism represents a pivotal step for the establishment of the lived body as semiotic body.

According to Kauffman and Gare,¹² 20th phenomenology's general rejection of naturalism aims to recover life and humanity.

Especially, Merleau-Ponty's attempt to account for biological organism as the active provider –over the course of its *ontophylogenesis*– for the “genesis” of semiotisation may be the starting point to readmit the semiosis and the semiotisation in the events of nature and in the scientific image of the world, thus finally strengthening the exchange between nature and culture –i.e. between the causality of science and the interpreting attitudes of humanities¹³.

As Maurita Harney¹⁴ points out, in the shift from “disembodied intentionality” (as the mark of the mental) to “embodied intentionality” we may see

¹⁰ PATTEE, H. H., “The problem of observables in Models of Biological Organizations”, in KHALIL, ELIAS L. and BOULDING, KENNETH E. (Eds.), *Evolution, Order and Complexity*, London: Routledge, 1996, pp. 249-264; PATTEE, H. H., “The Physics of Symbols: Bridging the Epistemic Cut”, in *Biosystems*, vol. 60, 2001, pp. 5-21 (<https://www.informatics.indiana.edu/rocha/publications/pattee/pattee.html>); LONGO, G. and MONTÉVIL, M., *Perspectives on Organisms: Biological Time, Symmetries and Singularities*, Berlin: Springer, 2014; LONGO, G. and PAGNI, E., “Extended criticality and structural stability: ‘architectures’ of biological individuation”, in *Philing*, vol. III, num. 2, 2015, pp. 85-114; PAGNI, E., “Why Explicit Semiotic Grounding Is Essential to Biology as a Science?”, *Humana Mente Journal of Philosophical Studies*, Vol. 31, 2016, 2016, pp. 57-72.

¹¹ HANKEY, A., “A complexity basis for phenomenology: How information states at criticality offer a new approach to understanding experience of self, being and time”, *Progress in Biophysics and Molecular Biology* 119, 2015, pp. 288-302.

¹² KAUFFMAN STUART, A.; GARE, A., “Beyond Descartes and Newton: Recovering life and humanity”, *Progress in Biophysics and Molecular Biology*, num. 119, 2015, pp. 219-244.

¹³ BOD, R., “A Very Short History of the Humanities: Patterns versus Interpretations”, Draft version August, 2015. Recuperado de https://www.academia.edu/15764426/A_Very_Short_History_of_the_Humanities_Patterns_versus_Interpretations (Accessed February 10, 2017).

¹⁴ HARNEY, M., “Merleau-Ponty, Ecology and Biosemiotics”, in S.L. Cataldi, W.S. Hamrick (Eds.), *Merleau-Ponty and Environmental Philosophy*, Albany: State University of New York

the possibility to grasp the world as grounded in semiotic processes shared by human and non-human organisms.¹⁵

Referring to what I call one of Merleau-Ponty's main lessons: not any need to evoke the descent of a disincarnated spirit (whatever it is: a soul, a disembodied intentionality or a supernatural force, etc.). As well, not any necessity to think of the world as a cluster of matter following deterministic or statistical laws. By simply regaining the world in the form of an historical reconstruction of the genesis of a meaning (along the path of its *ontophylogenesis*), the human being would be able to interconnect itself and its own natural/cultural history with that of the biosphere where its evolution has been arranged (i.e. embodied meaning).

In the phenomenology, the problem of the natural world as a fundamental question that has great relevance for life has been repurposed by the philosopher Jan Patočka. In *The natural world and Phenomenology*,¹⁶ Patočka demonstrated that science is a process attempting to advance and develop an ever more increasingly sophisticated aim of objectification. According to Patočka, moreover, human beings attempt to subtracted themselves from such process of objectification through the movement.

“The world of pre-theoretical life is the world in which we move, where we are active and we plan, where we feel rooted, and not the world we contemplate [“Il mondo della vita pre-teoretica è il mondo in cui ci muoviamo, in cui siamo attivi e progettiamo, in cui ci sentiamo radicati, e non il mondo che contempliamo”] –Patočka claims.¹⁷ Thus, we find ourselves in a double world: *“in a world with our thought and in a world with our life”* (“in un mondo con il nostro pensiero e in un mondo con la nostra vita”).¹⁸

The modern mechanicism, which in the 20th century has been renewed by positivism,¹⁹ has paved the way for exact predictions, then excluding the subject's own experience of the world.²⁰ However –Patočka says– *“all the world is present to us in the form of meaning”* (“Tutto il mondo è presente come significa-

Press, 2007, pp. 133-146.

¹⁵ See also: HARNEY, M., “Naturalizing phenomenology – A philosophical imperative”, *Progress in Biophysics and Molecular Biology*, vol. 119, Issue 3, December, 2015, pp. 661-669; and HARNEY, M., “Peirce and Phenomenological Naturalism”, in GARE, A. and HUDSON, W. (Eds.), *For a New Naturalism*, Candor N.Y.: Telos Publishing, 2017, pp. 124-143

¹⁶ PATOČKA, J., *Il mondo naturale e la fenomenologia*, ed. by A. Pantano, Milano: Mimesis, 2003 [1st ed., 1967].

¹⁷ PATOČKA, J., *Il mondo naturale e la fenomenologia*, p. 121.

¹⁸ PATOČKA, J., *Il mondo naturale e la fenomenologia*, p. 74.

¹⁹ PATOČKA, J., *Il mondo naturale e la fenomenologia*, p. 80.

²⁰ PATOČKA, J., *Il mondo naturale e la fenomenologia*, pp. 75, 87.

to").²¹ Science simply presupposes that true reality consists in mathematical relationships, without, however, investigating what they are, how they are obtained or how the genesis of their experience is achieved.²²

Like Merleau-Ponty, Patočka emphasizes that the ontological grounding of movement is given by corporeality. "*Life in the natural world is a bodily life*" ("*La vita nel mondo naturale è vita corporea*").²³ "*Pour Patočka, la corporéité est la possibilité première qui possibilise toutes les autres possibilités et elle est, en ces sens, le premier des existentiels. [...]. La corporéité est possibilité de se mouvoir*".²⁴ Accordingly, things are grasped through body orientation: through relations of proximity/distance with respect to the body.²⁵ It is only through the proximity with others –Patočka says– that our perception of the world reaches its fullness, because it is through other bodies that the world becomes the shared horizon of our existence and achieves its immediate evidence.²⁶

Human being's life would be physically impossible, Patočka emphasizes, without any proximity to other humans.²⁷ Our perception is aimed, indeed, to reflect and express the presence of the other.²⁸ "*The other and I find each other in the unity of a significant situation*" ("*L'altro e io ci scopriamo reciprocamente nell'unità di una situazione significante*").²⁹

Patočka's insights on corporeality and ontological movement certainly pave the way to a new philosophical demand, concerning the need of re-thinking of our existential life in terms of "sense of belonging to" (*appartenance*) and realization (*réalisation*), with a clear opposition to the scientific attitude in offering disembodied conceptions of time, space, movement and corporeality.

In this paper I review some aspects of the phenomenological rejection of naturalism in the works of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty and their proposal to overcome the crisis of European rationality by displaying new possibilities of dialogue between humanities, social sciences and natural sciences.

²¹ PATOČKA, J., *Il mondo naturale e la fenomenologia*, p. 86.

²² PATOČKA, J., *Il mondo naturale e la fenomenologia*, p. 81.

²³ PATOČKA, J., *Il mondo naturale e la fenomenologia*, p. 91.

²⁴ BARBARAS, R., *Introduction à une phénoménologie de la vie*, Paris : Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 2008, p. 101.

²⁵ PATOČKA, J., *Il mondo naturale e la fenomenologia*; PATOČKA, J., *Papiers phénoménologiques*, Grenoble: Millon, 1995.

²⁶ PATOČKA, J., *Il mondo naturale e la fenomenologia*, p. 103.

²⁷ PATOČKA, J., *Il mondo naturale e la fenomenologia*, p. 104.

²⁸ PATOČKA, J., *Il mondo naturale e la fenomenologia*, p. 104.

²⁹ PATOČKA, J., *Il mondo naturale e la fenomenologia*, p. 106.

Husserl and the crisis of the European Man

Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), the founder of 20th century phenomenology focuses on a radical reflection on human being by the side of its ambivalent manifestation as *natura naturata* –the body– and *natura naturans* –the spirit– also addressing, through the strictest judgment, the cultural roots of the crisis of European thought and rationality. In The Vienna Lecture delivered in 1935,³⁰ Husserl had put the failure of European rationality in connection with the crisis of the rationalism itself, due to its decadence to “naturalism” and “objectivism”, and he had drastically anticipated the fall of Europe into barbarity and political irrationalism that the historical events of the 20th-century shortly afterwards confirmed. A few years after the publication of the first two parts of the *Krisis*³¹ in 1936, indeed, the whole world helplessly watched the tightening up of totalitarian regimes and the shadow of death and destruction carried on with the advent of World War II.³²

The crisis of European existence can end in only one of two ways: in the ruin of a Europe alienated from its rational sense of life, fallen into a barbarian hatred of spirit; or in the rebirth of Europe from the spirit of philosophy, through a heroism of reason that will definitively overcome naturalism.³³

According to Husserl, the crisis concerning a) the lack of rigorous methodological principles in science, b) the ethical crisis of values and c) the cultural crisis, all present the same epistemic roots: the blindness and, therefore, the loss that the modern European man has of the telos and the questioning about the genesis of the experience and meaning of life. Anyway, what is the red thread that joins together the bewilderment of human beings, the breakup of institutions (like universities, for example) and the civil society as a whole, up to involving the roots of economics and politics? According to Husserl, Enzo Paci remarks, the universities are responsible for the mechanic transmission of knowledge that only pursues the goal of transforming human beings into a trade and an apparatus of the industrial machine.³⁴

³⁰ HUSSERL, E., “Philosophy and the Crisis of European Man” (The Vienna Lecture 1935), in *Phenomenology and the crisis of philosophy*, ed. By Quentin Lauer, New York: Harper & Row publishers, 1965, pp. 149-192.

³¹ HUSSERL, E., *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und tie transzendente Phänomenologie*, L’Aja, 1959.

³² HUSSERL, E., *La crisi delle scienze europee e la fenomenologia trascendentale*, Milano: Net, 2002, p. 2; MORAN, D., *Husserl’s Crisis of the European sciences and transcendental phenomenology. An introduction*, Cambridge University Press, 2012.

³³ HUSSERL, E., “Philosophy and the Crisis...”, p. 192.

³⁴ HUSSERL, E., *La crisi delle scienze europee...*

Schopenhauer himself denounced the widespread crisis present in the university system of that time, where professors of philosophy had turned themselves into mere “professionals”, completely disregarding their vocation (“*scholars see in professorships of philosophy a trade that nourishes the outer man just as does any other*”).³⁵

How to avoid a comparison with the institutional and cultural crisis of nowadays, mostly grounded, among other elements, on the disquieting gap between the educational system and politics? European democracy is affected by a troubling problem, which is lack of representation. This makes the state ever more increasingly distant from the communities that inhabit it, as well as from the people who make up the nations “on map”. Perhaps, is it not such “distance” that gives rise to the opportunity/chance for the establishment of the arm-wrestle between the political tendency to supranationalism and the comeback of all several kinds of nationalism?

As prophetically announced by Max Weber (1864-1920) in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905) and in the two vocation lectures *Science as vocation* (1918) and *Politics as vocation* (1919), the increased rationalization and praxis at work in the capitalist economy, law and science is intended to swallow up all aspects of life, every mechanism of society, by disrupting the ethical instance based on responsibility and transforming humanity into an iron cage.³⁶

In the *Crisis*, Enzo Paci emphasizes,³⁷ Husserl is very concerned about the *revolution in the technical mastery of nature* (the developments in technical and industrial science) insofar “*it is conceived of as a pure domain of nature and man*”.³⁸ In this sense, Husserl takes a position against the reductionism insofar it decreases nature to the status of *thing* and phenomena to the status of cause and effect relationships and physicochemical explanations. The world, the body and the mind are explained the same way. However, the natural causality, understood as such, makes us blind when facing the rising genesis of the experience of the world: a genesis that we share with other peoples and that is grounded on our corporeality and spirituality.

Husserl’s main concern is that the world of life ends up being phagocytised by the factuality of the historical world and the positive thought of the sciences, which is responsible for having broken the primitive unity of being into a frag-

³⁵ SCHOPENHAUER, A., *The World as Will and Representation*, New York: Dover Publication, Inc., 1969, p. XIX [1° ed. 1818].

³⁶ D’ANDREA, D., *L’incubo degli ultimi uomini. Etica e politica in Max Weber*, Roma: Carocci editore, 2005; WEBER, M., *The vocation lectures* (Science as vocation, Politics as vocation), Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 2005.

³⁷ HUSSERL, E., *La crisi delle scienze europee...*

³⁸ HUSSERL, E., “Philosophy and the Crisis...”.

mentation of knowledge and for having depersonalized human beings into automated and unconscious acts. The world-of-life –the original phenomenon that manifests itself in consciousness as an infinite horizon of experience–³⁹ “*is not the objective world in our sense*”, Husserl states in the Vienna Lecture.

The greatest danger inherent to naturalism and in the “modern dualism in interpreting the world”, is to believe that the cultural crisis only concerns the sciences of the spirit and their historical development. As Husserl writes in the *Crisis*, the theory of knowledge has never been considered an historical task. As Enzo Paci points out,⁴⁰ in every age the historical analysis brings us to human beings, to groups and to the intersubjective constitution of culture. Ignoring that the theory of knowledge is characterized as a historical task depends on the fact that we do not know that “*natural science (like all sciences as such) is a title for spiritual activities, those of natural scientists in cooperation with each other*”.⁴¹ This historical transformation of the philosophical spirit, according to Husserl, originated in ancient Greece: then, Greek philosophy constitutes the original phenomenon of the European spirit (*in the shape of a new historicity*) –a cultural spirit that, at the very beginning, keeps under methodological reflection all knowledge, and distinguishes, for the first time, the natural science from psychology, cosmology, politics, technique and art.

In particular, by pursuing the “unconditional truth”, the modern science loses sight of the fact that scientific truth stems from the primal evidence of pre-scientific life, while aspiring to rely it on idealistic and abstract procedures. In this way, however, the result of scientific activity is not real but ideal and detached from “*the natural, the native attitude, of originally natural life*”.⁴²

The Husserlian interpretation of the crisis of European humanity as based on the crisis of rationality and its naturalistic attitude to objectivism is one of the possible readings. Husserl’s exhort is to take a critical stance with respect to the naive (ideal) naturalism of science through the recovery of a rationality grounded on the experiential opening to the being as an intersubjective-based world.

In the Vienna Lecture Husserl argued that despite Einstein’s revolution, relativity is not yet able “*to reformulate the space and time in which our actual life takes place*”, meaning to say that the epistemological/ontological gap between nature and spirit, scientific praxis and life-world is still much wide. Definitively, science is incapable:

³⁹ DERRIDA, J., *Introduzione a “L’origine della geometria” di Husserl*, ed. by Carmine Di Martino, Milano: Jaca Book, 1987, p. 138.

⁴⁰ HUSSERL, E., *La crisi delle scienze europee...*

⁴¹ HUSSERL, E., “Philosophy and the Crisis...”.

⁴² HUSSERL, E., “Philosophy and the Crisis...”.

1. to explain the very deep meaning that science and technology carry for life in terms of the flowing back of their reflections in the subjective and intersubjective genesis of the world;
2. to understand that, finally, the nature investigated by science is “*a product of the spirit*”.

Ultimately, at the origin of deception, according to Husserl, there would be the identification between episteme and ratio, between scientific praxis and method. The scientific ratio ignores the pre-scientific world of life. The scientific world aiming at the truth and at the expression of a true being excludes *a priori* the world of life that presupposes it - not only at the individual but also at the intersubjective level - and in which these ends and these works are reflected.

Merleau-Ponty: new insights in Biology and Anthropology

By these words, ‘the primacy of perception’, we mean that the experience of perception is our presence at the moment when things, truths, values are constituted for us; that perception is a nascent *logos* [...]. It is not a question of reducing human knowledge to sensation, but of assisting at the birth of this knowledge [...] to recover the consciousness of rationality. This experience of rationality is lost when we take it for granted as self-evident, but is, on the contrary, rediscovered when it is made to appear against the background of non-human nature.⁴³

To perceive is to render oneself present to something through the body.⁴⁴

With these words, in the *Primacy of perception*⁴⁵ Merleau-Ponty reopens the interrogation about two fundamental aspects of the philosophical issues announced by Husserl:

1. the concept of nature;
2. the concept of body.

Nature and body such as investigated by positive science are, in fact, a fundamental philosophical problem, since the meaning they take within the scientific community has a broad impact on the collective dimension of being.

⁴³ MERLEAU-PONTY, M., *The primacy of perception. An other essays on phenomenological psychology, the philosophy of art, history and politics*, ed. by James M. Edie, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964, p. 25.

⁴⁴ MERLEAU-PONTY, M., *The primacy of perception...*, p. 42.

⁴⁵ MERLEAU-PONTY, M., *The primacy of perception...*

In this sense, philosophy cannot disregard the relationship between nature and humanity, which also recalls the ontological problem of the relationship between object and subject. The studies carried out by Merleau-Ponty in the following years after the publication of the *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) and related to the new theoretical horizons disclosed by the life sciences (especially biology) along the first half of the 20th century in understanding the biological organism, are complementary to his previous research on the experience of the perceived world which recognizes in the perception, and not in the cogito, the foundation of knowledge.⁴⁶ This does not mean, of course, that all knowledge depends on perception but that the perceptual body allows us to access the world as a symbolic and expressive shared universe.

Contrasting Husserl's *Idee II*, for example, where Husserl defines nature as "the sphere of pure things," Merleau-Ponty claims that perception does not bring us things but what we see.⁴⁷

This conception of pure things has a general tenor; we come spontaneously to adopt it when our I, instead of living in the world, decides to take hold of something, to objectify it. In these conditions, the I make itself indifferent, and the correlate of this indifference is the pure thing.⁴⁸

The three-lecture courses on nature⁴⁹ are Merleau-Ponty's own attempt to put his own reflection on the experience of the perceived world and of life into a multidisciplinary context which includes a dialogue with the life sciences (particularly with biology), in the belief that not only the future of philosophy but the questioning about the human existence, including its relationship with nature and with other species (humanity/animality relationship), as well as the question about the origin of meaning, cannot avoid a deeper and therefore more conscious study concerning the evolutionary processes underlying the establishment of the perceptual body (whose history is deep-rooted in the history of nature and the evolution of life).

As Merleau-Ponty refers to Husserl in his nature courses: "Husserl considered as an essential trait of phenomenology that the world of idealization is constructed on a prereflexive world, a "logos of the aesthetic world", the

⁴⁶ MERLEAU-PONTY, M., *La struttura del comportamento*, introduction by Marcello Ghilardi e Luca Taddio, Milano-Udine: Mimesis edizioni, 2010, p. II.

⁴⁷ MERLEAU-PONTY, M., *Nature. Course Notes from the Collège de France (1956-1960)*, Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2003.

⁴⁸ MERLEAU-PONTY, M., *Nature...*, pp. 72-73.

⁴⁹ 1) 1956-1957 "The concept of Nature"; 2) 1957-1958 "The concept of Nature: Animality, the Human Body and the Passage to Culture"; 3) 1959-1960 "The concept of Nature: Nature and Logos: The human Body".

Lebenswelt".⁵⁰ Taking this one step further, in the lecture courses on nature, Merleau-Ponty shows that the birth and the origin of meaning lie within the evolution itself and are not a deviation or the product of a second history, considering that meaning is understood as the power of life to express the world as a shared symbolic horizon.

According to Merleau-Ponty, the production of meaning (as the power/ability to manifest a communicative/interpretative and agentic attitude within a shared symbolic horizon) comes first and precedes language. To put it even more explicitly, meaning is posited before any activity of thought and rationality. "There is a Logos of the natural esthetic world, on which the Logos of language relies".⁵¹

In the essay *Metaphysics and the Novel*, Merleau-Ponty claims: "Everything changes when a phenomenological or existential philosophy assigns itself the task not of explaining the world or of discovering its "conditions of possibility", but rather of formulating an experience of the world, a contact with the world which precedes all thought about the world itself".⁵²

In this sense, the reductionist paradigm is therefore incomplete, insofar "it is assumed as an ontological premise for the knowledge of the living world" ("se assunto come premessa ontologica per la conoscenza del mondo vivente").⁵³ And it is precisely on this last premise, apodictic, and therefore questionable, that the modern science is based.

In the lecture courses on nature (1956-1957), the French philosopher complains of the isolation within which the philosophy of nature has been destined in the 20th century, which presupposes not only the misconception of the general ontological problem, but a real misunderstanding of the idea of spirit, history and human being. An ontology that ignores nature can only stop at the incorporeal (according to Merleau-Ponty is the perceptual body that covers an ontological and epistemological primacy), thus rolling forward for a "fantastic" image of man, spirit, and history. In this sense, Merleau-Ponty stresses the reflection on the concept of nature as a key point to solve the ontological problem concerning the relationship between object and subject, nature and culture, being and existence, body and consciousness, information and learning.

⁵⁰ MERLEAU-PONTY, M., *Nature...*, p. 72.

⁵¹ MERLEAU-PONTY, M., *Nature...*, p. 212.

⁵² MERLEAU-PONTY, M., *Sense and Non-Sense*, Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1964, pp. 27-28.

⁵³ BRUNI, L. E., *Presentazione a Giorgi Franco: Un mondo di relazioni. La logica del vivente: dalla certezza dell'essere alla esplorabilità del divenire*, Trento: Gruppo editoriale Tangram Srl, 2017, p. 10.

Clarification of the concept of nature - and consequently of the lived body –then– represents a precise philosophical goal: the formulation of a new ontology and perhaps (in more optimistic terms) of a new science of being. If Merleau-Ponty faces up with this inquiry is precisely because he aims to dissolve the epistemological gap that “o pensamento clássico moderno abriu entre humanidade e natureza” (“the classic modern thought has opened between humanities and natural sciences”).

For Merleau-Ponty, it is the body that, through perception, experiences the world by transforming it into a horizon of sense. Significance is deep-rooted in the body. However, how to understand the body here? Not as a quantitative abstraction, to which biology and physiology refer, neither as a metaphysical concept: when, in the lecture courses on nature Merleau-Ponty refers to the flesh of the body, this is not like an abstraction of the aesthetic-libidinal concept of corporeity but the ontological correlate of the flesh of the sensible nature.⁵⁴

For Merleau-Ponty, dualism has to be overcome: the body as a phenomenon of nature and the body as a phenomenon of culture, capable of signifying processes at any level of biological organization and through which the being as a whole comes to expression, are the same body whilst considered from different perspectives.⁵⁵ Thus, we should be careful and avoid considering the one to the disadvantage of the other, making us aware that the two aspects are simultaneous and interconnected and either cannot be separated by an act of abstraction “At the level of being it will never be intelligible that the subject should be both *naturans* and *naturatus*, infinite and finite”.⁵⁶

“I am thrown into a nature”⁵⁷ –Merleau-Ponty claims in the *Phenomenology of perception* (1962/1945) and this is the prerequisite of reversibility visible (sensible)– seer (sentient). The idea of a real contiguity between life and expression is here underscored with particular emphasis:

⁵⁴ MERLEAU-PONTY, M., *Nature...*, p. 218.

⁵⁵ In *L'homme et le monde*, the Czech philosopher Patočka emphasizes Husserl's distinction between “l'attitude naturaliste”, which “voit l'homme en tant corps animé, comme un corps matériel qui, tout en ayant certaines propriétés que d'autres corps n'ont pas, est néanmoins, au fond, du même type que la « chose et ses propriétés »” and “l'attitude personaliste”, with respect to which “les circonstances réelles don't je depends ne se bornent pas aux seules conditions physiques, mais englobent la totalité de l'environnement [...], et mon rapport à cet environnement n'est pas une simple relation causale, mais un rapport de motivation”. These different attitudes also refer to the distinction between “le corps-objet” and “le corps esthésiologique”. PATOČKA JAN, “L'homme et le monde”, tr. E. Abrams, in *Qu'est-ce que la phénoménologie?*, ed. by E. Abrams, Millon: Grenoble, 1988 [1^o ed., 1965], pp. 97-148.

⁵⁶ MERLEAU-PONTY, M., *Phenomenology of perception*, Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1962 [1^o ed. 1945], p. 326.

⁵⁷ MERLEAU-PONTY M. 1962: *Phenomenology of perception*, p. 310.

There is nature wherever there is a life that has meaning, but where, however, there is no thought; hence, the kinship with the vegetative. Nature is what has a meaning, without this meaning being posited by thought: it is autoproduction of a meaning.

[...] Nature is the primordial – that is, the nonconstructed, the noninstituted; [...] Nature is an enigmatic object, an object that is not an object at all; it is not really set out in front of us. It is our soil – not what is in front of us, facing us, but rather that which carries us.⁵⁸

In light of this perspective, we should not expect to feel well reassured by a science (and a technique) that still continues to ignore the world of perception, “*which is revealed to us by our senses and in everyday life*”⁵⁹, and which we especially ignore when we take on a practical or utilitarian attitude which prevents from penetrating it in depth.

As Merleau-Ponty states in *Eye and mind*:

Scientific thinking, a thinking which looks on from above, and thinks of the object-in-general, must return to the “there is” which underlies it; to the site, the soil of the sensible and opened world such as it is in our life and for our body - not that possible body which we may legitimately think of as an information machine but that actual body I call mine, this sentinel standing quietly at the command of my words and my acts. Further, associated bodies must be brought forward along with my body - the “others” not merely as my congeners, as the zoologist says, but the others who haunt me and whom I haunt [...].⁶⁰

In *The world of perception* Merleau-Ponty exposes his doubts whether science can offer to humanity a complete picture of the world and the experience:

... the question is whether science does, or ever could, present us with a picture of the world which is complete, self-sufficient and somehow closed in upon itself, such that there could no longer be any meaningful questions outside this picture. It is not a matter of denying or limiting the extent of scientific knowledge, but rather of establishing whether it is entitled to deny or rule out as illusory all forms of inquiry that do not start out from measurements and comparisons and, by connecting particular causes with particular consequences, end up with laws such as those of classical physics.⁶¹

Unlike what science tells us “Humanity is invested in the things of the world and these are invested in it. To use the language of psychoanalysis, things are

⁵⁸ MERLEAU-PONTY, M., *Nature...*, pp. 3-4.

⁵⁹ MERLEAU-PONTY, M., *The World of Perception*, New York: Routledge, 2004 [1^o ed., 1948].

⁶⁰ MERLEAU-PONTY, M., *Basic writings*, London and New York: Routledge. Taylor & Francis Group, 2004, pp. 291-292.

⁶¹ MERLEAU-PONTY, M., *The World of Perception*, p. 43.

complexes. This is what Cézanne meant when he spoke of the particular 'halo' of things which it is the task of painting to capture.⁶² The signs of things emerge from the perceptual world without a billboard explaining them. There are no preconceived directions to grasp the meaning of the things that talk to us. We simply gain access to them.

Now, if biology could regain consciousness about the fact that the mechanisms of preservation and adaptability of an organism to the environment, in functional and selective terms, are a process that presupposes a very complex level of dynamics and semiotic relationships at any biological organization (cell, tissue... species), this would allow us to express the phenomenon of life and its evolution overcoming the reductive interpretation. I guess that when Merleau-Ponty spoke of the biological organism in terms of a unit of meaning, he meant to show that reducing the living to the sum of its parts and to causal relationships between its essential constituents, prevents from understanding the meaning of the object we handle. As well emphasized by the Italian scientist Franco Giorgi, the reductionist paradigm in biology avoids considering the autonomy of the living as an agent.⁶³

As I attempt to show, then, by reintegrating the semiotic relationships in the explanation of the biological processes, such biology would become part of the merleau-pontyan program of a new ontology of nature.

Ultimately what is lacking in the life sciences is the assumption that life is not understandable by leaping over the genesis of the meaning (that the scientific ratio is continuing to neglect); meaning precedes consciousness and the faculty of language.

According to Merleau-Ponty, nature is not the objectification/reification of the spirit but the source (provider) of an infinite power of expression; the expressive, communicative, interpreting and agentive powers of biological organisms, indeed, come from that same nature they share with other species ("*is the human to be taken in the Ineinander with animality and Nature*"; "*humanity is another corporeity*";⁶⁴ "*We study the human through its body in order to see it emerge as different from the animal, not by the addition of reason, but rather, in short, in the Ineinander with the animal*").⁶⁵ Actually, the esthesiological body shows that "*there is a natural rooting of the for-other*".⁶⁶ before being the manifestation of human *ratio*, the logos is the expression of the species' Umwelt.

⁶² MERLEAU-PONTY, M., *The World of Perception*, pp. 63-64.

⁶³ GIORGI, F., *Un mondo di relazioni. La logica del vivente: dalla certezza dell'essere alla esplorabilità del divenire*, Trento: Gruppo editoriale Tangram Srl, 2017, p. 139.

⁶⁴ MERLEAU-PONTY, M., *Nature...*, p. 208.

⁶⁵ MERLEAU-PONTY, M., *Nature...*, p. 214.

⁶⁶ MERLEAU-PONTY, M., *Nature...*, p. 210.

This also reveals that a human being, even before an individual, is the history of a collective being (of a species): the natural history of the human being is not individual but “the future of a type, of a collective being”: the human body makes the transition to human being by evolution.⁶⁷

In *The world of perception*, in the chapter entitled “*The Animal Life*”, Merleau-Ponty stated that the animal, like the human being, is engaged in a task never concluded. With reference to the behavior of the animal, for example, it is observed that the animal (Merleau-Ponty refers to the dog) is the center of a kind of “putting into shape” of the world that remains unsteady: “he [dog] proceeds unsteadily by trial and error, and has at best a meagre capacity to accumulate knowledge, it displays very clearly the struggle involved in existing in a world into which it has been thrown, a world to which it has no key”.⁶⁸ In the chapter “*Man seen from the outside*” referring this time to human beings, Merleau-Ponty says “we should no longer pride ourselves in being a community of pure spirits; let us look instead at the real relationships between people in our societies. For the most part, these are master–slave relationships. We should not find excuses for ourselves in our good intentions; let us see what becomes of these once they have escaped from inside us. There is something healthy about this unfamiliar gaze we are suggesting should be brought to bear on our species”.⁶⁹

Thus, we find ourselves in a very ambiguous situation, characterized by having an individual body referring to a collective history: everyone is alone and no one can do without others (and not just for purposes); there is no common life that releases us from the burden of ourselves and there is no inner life that is not proof of our relationships with the others and the objects. There is a common fate that binds us to each other.

...the relationship between human beings and things is no longer one of distance and mastery such as that which obtained between the sovereign mind and the piece of wax in Descartes’ famous description. Rather, the relationship is less clear-cut: vertiginous proximity prevents us both from apprehending ourselves as a pure intellect separate from things and from defining things as pure objects lacking in all human attributes.⁷⁰

In the impossibility of finding absolute answers, Merleau-Ponty’s proposal for the salvation of the human being is “*To look at human beings from the outside*”: this presupposes the need of relativizing the human being by displaying its common origins within the emergence of nature and animality.

⁶⁷ MERLEAU-PONTY, M., *Nature...*, p. 214.

⁶⁸ MERLEAU-PONTY, M., *The World of Perception*, p. 76.

⁶⁹ MERLEAU-PONTY, M., *The World of Perception*, p. 89.

⁷⁰ MERLEAU-PONTY, M., *The World of Perception*, p. 66.