

Ontology and Structure in Merleau-Ponty: The Ontological Sense of Structure in *The Structure of Behavior*

Alex de Campos Moura

Department of Philosophy at the University of São Paulo

alexmoura@usp.br



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Abstract: This paper has two main goals: first, to circumscribe the topic in Merleau-Ponty's work, focusing especially on his first book, and second, to delimit the question in *The Structure of Behavior* itself, focusing especially on his description of the perceptual dimension of structure.

Keywords: Merleau-Ponty; structure; ontology

1. Introduction¹

An already classical topic in discussions about Merleau-Ponty's work concerns the presence and meaning of ontology in his philosophy, especially when it comes to his first texts. According to an important tradition of studies, whose formulations have been highly influential in the research about Merleau-Ponty, the beginning of his work can be mainly characterized either by the fragility of a properly ontological perspective or by the presence of an ontology that is still mostly dualistic².

I do not intend to debate here these interpretations, which is certainly too large for an article. Instead, I propose here to discuss some of the presuppositions involved in the debate, highlighting the possibility of an understanding that emphasizes the presence and the coherence of an ontological comprehension since the beginning of his thought. In particular, I intend to focus on one such presupposition which I deem central to the discussion: the latent supposition that the notion of structure, as presented in *The Structure of Behavior*, has no ontological sense

¹ Previously conceived for the International Congress Merleau-Ponty: Critique and Contemporaneity, held in 2019 at USP, this text presents, in an original and inedited version, and never before published in English, part of the book *Ontology in Merleau-Ponty: Structure, institution and passivity*, published in Brazil in 2018 by me (Moura, 2018).

² Fundamental authors have taken part in this discussion, since the beginning of solid studies on Merleau-Ponty's work. Here, I could emphasize especially the classical works of Claude Lefort and Renaud Barbaras – especially in his already canonical work *De l'être du phénomène*. This work marks the beginning of a new and central wave of systematic studies about Merleau-Ponty in the 1990s, inaugurating a fundamental interpretative tradition.

or reach³. By focusing on the perceptual and perspectival dimension of the notion of structure⁴, I will here argue that, instead, this very notion already involves a proper notion of being and an understanding of its status, since this notion also involves a new understanding of unity and the mode of configuration of its parts⁵.

This paper has, therefore, two main goals: first, to circumscribe the topic in Merleau-Ponty's work, focusing especially on his first book, and second, to delimit the question in *The Structure of Behavior* itself, focusing especially on his description of the perceptual dimension of structure. This restricted focus is justified insofar as it is by treating the articulation between structure and perception that Merleau-Ponty is successful in making explicit the ontological sense that transverses these notions. Moreover, the centrality of the topic of perception

³ Very roughly, my working hypothesis is that one can detect changes in Merleau-Ponty's position throughout his career, but that such changes do not imply a break with or an inconsistency among his initial propositions. On the contrary, such changes would be a consequence of the necessity of radicalizing a constant philosophical and ontological project, a project that was already to be found in his first work. I will not explicitly discuss this hypothesis, but it serves as a background for the questions herein discussed.

⁴ Because of the limitations of space, I will not here analyze all the aspects which the notion of structure involves and by which Merleau-Ponty understands it. In particular, as highlighted above, I will especially focus on the perceptual dimension. Thus, it is important to emphasize that the ontological aspect here analyzed involves the relation of this notion to an active and referential focus, one that can be found especially in biological forms or in other forms in which the notion of life is effectively present; in other words, in forms in which there is *perception*. I intend to discuss in a further study the status of the physical forms in this context.

⁵ Although some studies still insist on dismissing the relevance of *The Structure of Behavior*, a solid tradition has already been formed around interpreting this work. Two important essays dedicated to the topic of structure and to this work should be highlighted here, namely Barbaras's and Bimbenet's work, discussed below; aside from those, Carbone's essay *The Philosopher and the Movemaker: Merleau-Ponty and Cinematic Thinking* (Carbone, 2015) is also highly relevant.

In his *Merleau-Ponty et la Psychologie de la Forme* (Barbaras, 2001), Barbaras establishes the centrality of the notion of structure to Merleau-Ponty's entire oeuvre – it is, indeed, one of its core axes. Although we largely agree with his interpretation, Barbaras distinguishes two moments of the concept of structure inside Merleau-Ponty's work (Barbaras, 2001: 151-152). According to him, the first moment is focused on the discussion around the psychology of form and especially on its impact on the critique of empiricism and intellectualism, while the second moment is focused on the question of form itself, questioning its particular status. The first moment, of which *The Structure of Behavior* and *The Phenomenology of Perception* are considered paradigms, would result in a dialectical solution, one that conceives the relation between essence and existence as a “mediated identity” (Barbaras, 2001: 156). This formulation, whose core is an originary temporality, is supposedly restricted to a negative description (Barbaras, 2001: 157). According to Barbaras, therefore, it is only in the second moment, especially in *The Visible and the Invisible*, that the notion of form would be finally thought of in a positive, non-dual manner, previous to any dialectical solution, and therefore it would be only then that this notion would enter in the field of an ontological reconfiguration.

Bimbenet's study (Bimbenet, 2002), in its turn, focuses on what he describes as a “conceptual migration” found in the notion of form as presented by Merleau-Ponty, which is understood in the movement between science and philosophy. He also refers to the ontological implication of the notion of form in *The Structure of Behavior*, especially in relation to the book's larger project of reconfiguring the relations between conscience and Nature. This topic is also analyzed by him in other works, most notably in his book *Nature et Humanité* (Bimbenet, 2002). As for Carbone, he also makes explicit the relevance of the notion of *Gestalt* already in the beginning of Merleau-Ponty's reflection. In his essay *The Philosopher and the Movemaker: Merleau-Ponty and Cinematic Thinking* (Carbone, 2015), in particular, he shows the centrality of this notion in Merleau-Ponty's discussion about cinema, especially in his text *The Film and the New Psychology*. As Carbone argues, the notion of “montage” is important for Merleau-Ponty not because it is paradigmatic for thinking about cinema, but because it is a privileged example of the working dynamic intrinsic to *Gestalt* (Carbone, 2015: 44).

throughout his work and, in particular, in his first texts will allow us to see more clearly the question that forms the background of this essay: the presence of an ontology in the beginning of Merleau-Ponty's thought.

In summary, our investigation intends to make explicit the connection among the notions of structure, perception, and ontology already at the beginning of Merleau-Ponty's thought.

2. The Structure

Already at the beginning of *The Structure of Behavior*, the notion of structure is first delimited through a confrontation with the classic theories of behavior and, more generally, through a re-reading of the sense of pathological functioning. Merleau-Ponty introduces the notion of pathology not as a "loss" or privation, but as a restructuring of behavior, as the configuration of a unity whose sense must be understood by itself, without reference to a "normal" state (Merleau-Ponty, 1967: 18; 1983: 20)⁶ – a topic that will be constant throughout his work.

For Merleau-Ponty, who is here clearly distancing himself from the theories then in vogue (Merleau-Ponty, 1967: 15-17; 1983: 16-19), a disease cannot be explained by the classic conception of reflex, according to which the behavior was regulated by autonomous devices of integration and inhibition (Merleau-Ponty, 1967: 17; 1983: 19). This inability to explain pathological behavior is due to the fact that such pathologies essentially imply a "qualitative alteration" (Merleau-Ponty, 1967: 18; 1983: 19) of behavior, i.e., a reconfiguration of the general conduct of the sick, an impossible "event" according to the theory of reflex. Since it operates according to the hypothesis of coordination and inhibition, objective thought misses what is essential to a disease: its qualitative reverberation in the behavior of the sick, the effective sense that is introduced in the totality of the organism. Even if the disease is connected to a specific "part," its meaning is inscribed in the behavior as a "whole," since the affected singularity *necessarily* echoes throughout the whole, changing it. The central point ignored by objectivism is precisely this internal connection between the singularity directly affected and its implication on the whole, a connection that makes it impossible to reduce the sense of the disease to the partiality of the directly affected area.

⁶ From now on, we will cite this book first in the original French edition, then in the English translation.

A circumscribed lesion implies a change in the whole and, conversely, the general sense is manifested in each of the parts of the behavior of the sick (Merleau-Ponty, 1967: 69-70; 1983: 64-65). The functional totality and the specific areas echo themselves reciprocally, in such a way that what the disease actually reveals is the existence of a unique structure, in which the partial and the totality reverse themselves constantly, being impossible to dissociate. That is why the notion of disease is connected to a central topic of Merleau-Ponty's work⁷, one that is fundamental not only for *The Structure of Behavior* but also for his whole oeuvre – and one that is also central to my working hypothesis: the recognition of an intrinsic relation between the part and the whole, a reciprocal interdependence in which a term takes no part in a configuration without referring to its other. As we will see, it is by recognizing this relation that Merleau-Ponty will seek to avoid the antinomies of classical thought and, according to my hypothesis, of the latent ontology that lies underneath his propositions.

Hence, what the description of the pathology reveals is a unity in which the part is the very means of expression and realization of the whole. The disease shows the impossibility of supposing a whole formed by merely juxtaposed terms externally connected since it confirms that there are no pre-established circuits that could make the behavior a mosaic of independent parts and the nervous system a regulating mechanism. Disease teaches us that, on the contrary, there is an articulation between multiplicity and unity that is inconceivable for the Tradition. On the one hand, the disease confirms the presence of a qualitative value of behavior, a sense of the whole, something that assures its constancy and its unity. On the other hand, it also shows that this cohesion does not exclude the specificity proper to each of its “sectors.” Pathology is neither entirely identical nor entirely different from itself, and it, therefore, ignores the dilemma between the particular and the totality, between the unity and the singularity. There is indeed a “law” of the organism that unifies it and keeps its cohesion, but this law cannot be considered a consequence of objective mechanisms or subjective processes. Instead, this “law” resides in the “[...] dependence of the parts with respect to the whole” (Merleau-Ponty, 1967: 26; 1983: 26), which is foreign to both finalist thinking and mechanistic theories. The unity, the “norm” that presides over behavior is a product of its own internal organization, thanks to the presence of a way of acting that is intrinsic to it and is responsible for incorporating the parts in a common sense.

⁷ As we will see, this is one of the axes of my interpretation: the recognition of an internal relation between the part and the whole as an operator that is capable of refusing the dualisms of classical ontology.

This “ambivalence” allows us to understand that the nervous system can be subdivided without losing its unitary character, i.e., that it can be organized in partial wholes, connected to specific situations without losing its integrated character, operating in distinct but mutually influenced processes. This simultaneity between the “internal cleavage” and the “organization of the whole” demands one keeps a distance both from a philosophy of coordination – of the part as an element dissociated from the whole – and from a romantic philosophy – of the part as a diluted element of the whole (Merleau-Ponty, 1967: 45; 1983: 43) – thus confirming the new philosophical dimensions implied by the description of behavior. In refusing these two approaches, Merleau-Ponty’s project is better delineated: because he makes explicit this unity, which is already operating in behavior and in which the part and the whole coexist without opposition or assimilation, he is able to undo the separation between a mechanical objectivity and an identitarian subjectivity, thus suspending the pillars that sustain the dualisms of modern thought.

Merleau-Ponty, therefore, introduces the central topic of *The Structure of Behavior*, also described by him as a “new category,” precisely in order to account for this original dimension implied by behavior. This “new category” is the notion of *structure* or *form* (Merleau-Ponty, 1967: 49; 1983: 47)⁸, and it should be understood as being between mechanism and intellectualism⁹, between the passive and the active. Its main feature is precisely this intrinsic articulation between the part and the whole:

For the “forms,” and in particular the physical systems, are defined as total processes whose properties are not the sum of those which the isolated parts would possess. More precisely they are defined as total processes which may be indiscernible from each other while their “parts,” compared to each other, differ in absolute size; in other words the systems are defined as transposable wholes. We will say that there is form whenever the properties of a system are modified by every change brought about in a single one of its parts and, on the contrary, are conserved when they all change while maintaining the same relationship among themselves. (Merleau-Ponty, 1967: 49-50; 1983: 47)

⁸ Here, I will prefer to use the term “structure.”

In his essay, Bimbenet shows that, even if they eventually become equivalent, the notions of form and structure are not, properly speaking, homogeneous and refer to distinct domains (Bimbenet, 2002: 4).

⁹ Barbaras shows how the refusal of mechanism is not the same as a return to some kind of vitalism, since the totality proper to structure refers to a *signification* and not to a “vital force” (Barbaras, 2001: 155).

This primary feature of the structure condenses what the description of behavior had made explicit¹⁰, namely the interdependence between the partial elements and the general unity, a reciprocal and constitutive implication that results in the fact that every singular alteration reverberates throughout the whole and, conversely, that the whole is preserved in each of its elements, in such a way that, even if the parts are modified, the whole maintains its unity. This means that also, here, the introduction of another central operator is recognizable, an operator which is responsible for one of the most important features of the new notion: the existence of a difference that unifies¹¹. Tradition supposed that multiplicity and unity were in opposition; instead, the notion of structure is a witness to a type of unity that is constituted precisely through the multiple and, conversely, a multiplicity that acts through unification. We have here the recognition of a differentiation process that simultaneously sustains the totality and the particularity of the whole due to the constancy of its transformation: because of its regularity, difference assures the general unity; because of its modification, difference assures the singularity of its constitutive moments – according to my general hypothesis, which I tried to develop elsewhere¹², it is a process that is equivalent to the process that will be later described in the analysis of time, of language, and of perception, thus establishing one of the marks of Merleau-Ponty's thought: the affirmation of a unity that is configured and preserved by an internal and self-regulated process of differentiation.

On the one hand, there is the intrinsic “norm,” which affirms the unity and sustains it. On the other hand, this unity is produced through differentiation and is, therefore, never entirely formed, being singularized in partial moments. Its change follows an intrinsic law, which operates in virtue of a general equilibrium state, which guarantees continuity and sense. The reference that unity makes to the part, and vice versa, simultaneously guarantees the structure's cohesion and opening, making it impossible for it to assume a static identity that would change it either into a pure object or into a pure presence to itself. The notion of structure is neither the

¹⁰ In this essay, following the proposed perspective, I will not directly deal with the way that the construction of this concept is related to the very peculiar influence that *Gestaltpsychologie* and, more generally, the extensive debate with the sciences, in particular with biology, had on Merleau-Ponty. Cf., on this matter, especially Bimbenet (2002), which was mentioned above. Bimbenet shows that there are three main different strands in the origin of the concept of structure in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy: *Gestaltpsychologie*, Goldstein's notion of organism, and the ontology of expression.

In the same vein, Barbaras also emphasizes the importance of Goldstein's work in the formulation of Merleau-Ponty's concept of structure (Barbaras, 2001: 154).

¹¹ This is one of the axes of my interpretative proposal. I defend the idea that the understanding of this difference can be found throughout Merleau-Ponty's work and that, even taking into account all the changes it undergoes throughout his reflection, it still maintains the function of being responsible for another notion of unity.

¹² As mentioned above.

notion of disconnected parts nor the notion of an absolute unity, being thus affirmed as a whole of forces or parts in a state of equilibrium or constant change (Merleau-Ponty, 1967: 48; 1983: 46), in which each vector is determined by the magnitude and the direction of the others. Each local change translates into a general redistribution of the forces that guarantee the continuity of their relations. Thus, the system may undergo a change in which its forces are reorganized in a qualitatively different order, but this order is still the expression of its immanent law (Merleau-Ponty, 1967: 148; 1983: 137). The unity of the structure, as an articulation of the factual and the “norm,” is situated in this moment at which the particular and the general, the difference and the unity, reverse and reciprocally sustain themselves.

Structure and perception

According to the hypothesis that I am trying to make explicit, we will now see how it is the recognition of this primary unity proper to the notion of structure that leads Merleau-Ponty into a decisive step in his reflection, in which he makes explicit perception in its originary sense:

Form, in the sense in which we have defined it, possesses original properties with regard to those of the parts which can be detached from it. Each moment in it is determined by the grouping of the other moments, and their respective value depends on a state of total equilibrium the formula of which is an intrinsic character of “form.” In this sense it seems to fulfill all the conditions necessary for giving an account of nerve functioning. Thus it would be possible to define it as a process of the “figure and ground” type. (Merleau-Ponty, 1967: 101; 1983: 91)

As a whole, in which the system configures a general unity irreducible to the sum of its elements, in which the qualitative value of each moment depends on the others and is affirmed as the expression of totality, structure configures a relation of “figure *and* ground,” that is, it acts simultaneously as a particular singularity and as a general configuration: a totality whose elements cannot be conceived without referring to the whole – the “ground” – and whose cohesion cannot be made effective without referring to the part – the “figure.”

Because the notion of structure is a new type of unity – originally reversible and tensed – it forces Merleau-Ponty to take a further step, an “inaugural” movement responsible for a decisive passage in his entire philosophy: the movement toward the universe of perception.

According to Merleau-Ponty, the structure of figure and ground demands a passage from the “physiological world” to the “perceived world,” since only inside the latter can it have a sense (Merleau-Ponty, 1967: 101; 1983: 92):

The function, “dot on a homogeneous ground,” or more generally, the function, “figure and ground,” has a meaning only in the perceived world: it is there that we learn what it is to be a figure and what it is to be a ground. The perceived would be explicable only by the perceived itself, and not by physiological processes. (Merleau-Ponty, 1967: 101-102; 1983: 92)

In contrast to physiology, perception structures a non-dual field¹³, capable of sustaining the hybrid character of structure, maintaining the particularity of its elements without breaking its unity, simultaneous totality and difference: “The analysis of perception will lead to re-establishing a demarcation – no longer between sensation and perception, or between sensibility and intelligence, or, more generally, between a chaos of elements and a higher system which would organize them – but between different types or levels of organization” (Merleau-Ponty, 1967: 100; 1983: 91).

We, therefore, can see here the emergence, besides the notion of structure and still in an embryonic form, of one of the leading threads of Merleau-Ponty’s entire reflection: the recourse to perception as a way to refuse the classical dichotomies. Because perception acts as a unity that does not separate the concrete from the sense, the empirical manifold from the ideal signification, it is its responsibility to sustain the primary structure in which the terms interpenetrate each other without nullifying themselves. Unlike intellectualism, perception affirms no pure unity since there are differences and levels; unlike objectivism, perception affirms no pure particularity, for there is a whole, a totality. Precisely because it is situated before the dualism of Tradition, perception is responsible for anchoring and for making comprehensible the intrinsic dynamic of structure, an internally differentiated whole that aligns the particular to the general.

Moreover, such features of perception are the result of it not operating a “break” between alternative terms, but rather operating a *difference* between “types or levels of organization.” In other words, like with the notion of structure, the perceptual dynamic is organized around an operator capable of intrinsically articulating unity and multiplicity, without relapsing into a

¹³ This meaning of perception, as a spontaneous unification of the manifold, will be amply discussed in *The Phenomenology of Perception*. Indeed, it is one of its central axes.

separation or into an identity of the terms. This operator is called difference. That is why the description of structure leads to the notion of perception, since this new type of unity, neither objective nor subjective but internally differentiated, can only take place in perception. Thus, we should shift the emphasis generally given in the interpretation of Merleau-Ponty toward the centrality assumed by the notion of structure in his work – it is this notion that solicits and inaugurates the long path traveled by his reflection about the status and the sense of perception.

Going back to the discussion about behavior, if the physiological cannot account for it, it is precisely because its conditions are to be found in “[...] the qualitatively variable modes of its global functioning” (Merleau-Ponty, 1967: 102; 1983: 92), which are inconceivable without reference to the perceptual field and its non-dual organization. The nervous system is not a spatial juxtaposition of parts, but a “logical hierarchy of functional levels” (Merleau-Ponty, 1967: 102; 1983: 92), which can only be comprehended in a “richer” order than the order of the physiological phenomena, that is, an order that is capable of operating with structures, with unities of signification (Merleau-Ponty, 1967: 102; 1983: 92): the order of the perceived world. Because it presupposes difference, quality, and value, behavior leads to the perceptual dynamic, since it is only in this dynamic that the concrete unities of signification, unities that are not dependent on an external constitutive activity, can take place.

One example mentioned by Merleau-Ponty in this regard is color perception. He argues that, in color perception, it is impossible to isolate each of the parts involved, to distinguish the stimuli, and to make the perceptual process the result of a sum of localized excitation, even if we have recourse to the integration or coordination hypothesis (Merleau-Ponty, 1967: 89-94; 1983: 80-85). It is impossible to conceive each stimulus first and separately, and then think in a combination that would result in a specific color sensation. This impossibility is due to the fact that my perception does not apprehend isolated entities, foreign to the whole. My perception does not recognize the “color-object,” but, rather, it recognizes what Merleau-Ponty calls the “color level”¹⁴, that is, a certain singular structure in which each term is configured by the organization proper to the whole, to its “state of equilibrium,” attributing to some of its parts the value of ground and to others the value of figure. There is, inside the very perceptual structure, a self-regulation principle, a constant “norm” that has as a result that, when one element changes into a neutral condition, another element is put into evidence, guaranteeing the conservation of the whole. We thus meet again here the same “norm” that had already appeared

¹⁴ This is a clear anticipation of what will later, in the descriptions of the institution, receive the name of dimension.

in the description of the dynamic of behavior, that is, an internal dynamic that works toward the preservation of the whole.

Color, therefore, is not an object or an idea, it is not the expression of a *being in itself* or the manifestation of a *being for itself*. Rather, it is a perceived structure and, because of that, a self-differentiated unity: each of its moments is perceived as a differentiation of the ground in the particularity of the figure and, inversely, each change is understood as indifferentiation of the figure in the generality of the ground. As we saw above, perception operates the transitivity between the part and the whole precisely in this way: by making each of them a differentiation from its other – and, therefore, not its opposite, but the very thing which originally constitutes it, with no possible identification or separation. Perception is thus an internal and self-regulated process that gives unity to the whole, guaranteeing the “reversibility” between figure and ground – part and whole – guaranteeing at the same time the unitary and multiple cores of the structure.

3. Perspectival being

After this first analysis, there remains the task of following the path opened by the passage from structure to perception and to examine the extent to which it unveils a new ontological understanding. Going back both to my hypothesis and to a topic that I consider to be central to Merleau-Ponty’s entire work, it is now possible to make the question we want to ask more precise. If the description of structure demands a shift toward the field of perception it is because only this field sustains a *way of being* in which the reversibility that constitutes the notion of structure can take place, operating in its original and irreducible character. In other words, as the following will make explicit, it is because perception has an ontological sense that it is understood by Merleau-Ponty as being the “locus” of structures.

According to Merleau-Ponty, the central element present in perception – and the reason why he has recourse to it (Merleau-Ponty, 1967: 201; 1983: 186) – is what *The Structure of Behavior* calls perspectivism. For him, this notion means the intrinsic capacity of perception to articulate the “profile” and the “thing” without the help of any external agent by the use of the configuration of the involved terms itself, an impossible process according to objective thinking: “The view of a thing seen through its ‘profiles,’ this original structure, is nothing

which can be ‘explained’ by some real physiological or psychological process” (Merleau-Ponty, 1967: 209; 1983: 194).

As we saw above, the passage from a singular profile to the general totality, from the part to the whole, cannot be conceived as a mechanical process or as an intellectual act, but should rather be thought of as an intrinsic dynamic of the structure itself. Since Merleau-Ponty rejects any causal model, the original structure of perception – perspectivism – is not here equivalent to a “subjective deformation” of the given, a projection of the attributes of consciousness over the object. Rather, it affirms the spontaneous insertion of the part in the whole, a reference to something external and beyond itself: perspective comprehended as a “passage” through which the perceived profile, by its own configuration, ascends to the general unity of the “thing,” without any external aid. Rather than being the affirmation of the subject, it becomes the expression of the constitutive opening that throws the singular into the generality, making it impossible for it to rest in itself:

Perspective does not appear to me to be a subjective deformation of things but, on the contrary, to be one of their properties, perhaps their essential property. It is precisely because of it that the perceived possesses in itself a hidden and inexhaustible richness, that it is a “thing.” [...] Far from introducing a coefficient of subjectivity into perception, it [perspectivism] provides it, on the contrary, with the assurance of communicating with a world which is richer than what we know of it, that is, of communicating with a real world. (Merleau-Ponty, 1967: 201; 1983: 186)

Perspective now becomes a guarantee of the haecceity of the perceived, its insertion into a more solid and broader world, that is, “real” (Merleau-Ponty, 1967: 212; 1983: 196) – a profound inversion of the classical conception. By implying the perceived in a general totality that is not properly given, but that nonetheless operates in it, perception assures it its own density, the result of its belonging to a whole whose articulation is intrinsic to its elements. It is in this sense that perception recognizes an “existential index” in the perceived, that is, precisely by disconnecting its consistency from the activity of a positional subject. Instead of being a subjective trace, perspective is the affirmation of the reality of the thing, turning it into something more than the product of a consciousness: the internal connection of the singular to the “ground” from which it emerges by differentiation, forming itself spontaneously. It is from the dynamic proper to the perceived that it acquires its solidity, in such a way that perspective is now the structure of the real, not of the subject:

For there to be perception, that is, apprehension of an existence, it is absolutely necessary that the object not be completely given to the look which rests on it, that aspects intended but not possessed in the present perception be kept in reserve. (Merleau-Ponty, 1967: 230; 1983: 212)

In helping us to understand the meaning of the recourse to perception, perspectivism also makes it impossible to conceive it as the construction of an “internal double” or of an unfolded, explicit, and subjective *representation*. Perspectivism, as removed from the field of a pure abstraction, is what makes the perceived real and what makes perception an opening to what is other than it. The relation of the profiles to the thing is not, therefore, a “direct knowledge” relation, which would demand an intellectual mediation – a subject responsible for its synthesis, as per the central hypothesis of modern thought. Instead, this relation is an expression of the spontaneous transitivity that guarantees the intrinsic reality of the perceived, the structural opening of one term to the other.

It is here that the core meaning of Merleau-Ponty’s recourse to perception is revealed in its entirety – and thus also the hypothesis I’m arguing for: as he understands perspective, it must leave the epistemological field, the idea of an adequation and of an immanence, in order to be recognized in a structural and open relation, involved by an existential index that makes it impossible for it to rest either in the sphere of the subject or in the sphere of the object. In other words, perspective does not operate anymore as an epistemological element, and one now discovers – and this is a central axis of my interpretation – that it is an ontological operator, that is, an expression of a new understanding of being. This new understanding is not the understanding of an idea (of a translucent totality, *being for itself*) nor of an object (an isolated part, *being in itself*), but is rather the understanding of what Merleau-Ponty describes as *perspectival being*, i.e., a way of being that is produced precisely by the structural transitivity that irredeemably reunites unity and particularity, haecceity and singularity:

Thus, to do justice to our direct experience of things it would be necessary to maintain at the same time, against empiricism, that they are beyond their sensible manifestations and, against intellectualism, that they are not unities in the order of judgment, that they are embodied (*s'incarment*) in their apparitions. The “things” in naive experience are evident as *perspectival beings*: it is essential to them, both to offer themselves without interposed milieu and to reveal themselves only gradually and never completely; they are mediated by their perspectival appearances; but it is not a question of a logical mediation since it introduces us to their bodily

(*charnelle*) reality; I grasp *in* a perspectival appearance, which I know is only one of its possible aspects, the thing itself which transcends it. A transcendence which is nevertheless open to my knowledge – this is the very definition of a thing as it is intended (*visée*) by naive consciousness. (Merleau-Ponty, 1967: 202; 1983: 187-188)

In this central passage, Merleau-Ponty makes explicit the ontological dimension of structure and its configuration through the transitoriness that unites the part to the whole. Perspective is a mode of operation of a being that is simultaneously embodied (*incarnée*) and transcendent, a totality that singularizes itself in its profiles, becoming apprehensible, even if it is always absent from each of such profiles, preserving its haecceity. The “thing,” as perceived in perspective, is the being that gives itself as transcendence, that is, that presentifies itself spontaneously as the imminent horizon or “lining” of each of its particular profiles, a “distant” “presence.” The “thing” is not, therefore, entirely given, since it is “gifted with an interior which I will never have finished exploring,” but it is not entirely absent either, since I am introduced to its “bodily (*charnelle*) reality”¹⁵ through perspective; this “thing,” as a “transcendence that is nevertheless open to my knowledge,” is a totality that is realized *in* its profiles, in which it at the same time presents itself and makes itself absent:

The perceived is grasped in an indivisible manner as “in-itself,” that is, as gifted with an interior which I will never have finished exploring; and as “for-me,” that is, as given “in person” through its momentary aspects. (Merleau-Ponty, 1967: 201; 1983: 186)

The being “for-me,” the singular profiles, are the very structure of the “being in-itself,” of the general unity. United by the perspectival dynamic, one is already the affirmation of the other. Perspectival being, as the indiscernible “in-itself” and “for-itself,” as the “bodily” presence of an absence, “muddles” the terms that Tradition judged as separate, revealing such terms to be simultaneous and reversible moments. In other words, perspectival being condenses in itself the “paradoxes” over which Merleau-Ponty will continuously ponder. In particular, the question, which can be found throughout his work – and that is already a classic topic in the

¹⁵ The reference to the idea of something “bodily,” to a “bodily (*charnelle*) reality,” already in 1938 is surprising – and certainly notable. This notion appears here exactly as the expression of this new ontological configuration, a transition from presence to absence, from immanence to transcendence. It is hard not to recognize here the beginning of what will later acquire a more definitive form in *The Visible and the Invisible*, exactly under the same “name” and concept.

studies about his thought¹⁶ – about the relationship between transcendence and immanence, appears here in one of its most fertile “configurations.” one that is unfolded throughout his whole reflection. Perspectival being, as a “bodily transcendence,” is a structure which was deemed impossible by dualist thought, since it implies a ground for the understanding that is completely different from the one preferred by modern thought. Perspectivism abandons any logical or epistemological reference and embraces this structural transcendence, which makes transcendence constitute itself *in* absence and vice versa, untying the knots that in principle separated immanence and transcendence, particular and totality.

According to Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior* is not yet the “locus” in which this “paradoxical” relation of the aspects to the thing, of the manifestations (*Erscheinung*) to that which is manifested (Merleau-Ponty, 1967: 202; 1983: 187), will be described in its entirety – offering, therefore, important guidance about the path which will be traveled by *The Phenomenology of Perception* and his subsequent studies. Nevertheless, as he himself states, what was made explicit in *The Structure of Behavior* is sufficient for showing that this relation is “original and founds a consciousness of reality in a specific manner” (Merleau-Ponty, 1967: 202; 1983: 187). In other words, and in accordance with my main hypothesis, this work already makes explicit the originary dimension of perception, which will be amply discussed throughout his entire oeuvre, stating that much of the centrality of this notion is due to this new ontological register that is brought by it; in this new register, we find a reversibility between the profile and the totality, a reversibility which is responsible for giving the structure its effective place.

Going back thus to my main proposal, the study of perception and of structure brings to light precisely this ontological dimension which can be found in its understanding. The notion of structure, as described by Merleau-Ponty already in 1938, is supported by the existence of an intrinsic connection between the part and the whole, and underneath this connection, one finds an ontological ground that is foreign to the dualist categories of modern thought. It is in this sense that it allows us to defend the hypothesis that, on the one hand, there is from the beginning an ontology underneath Merleau-Ponty’s descriptions and, on the other hand, that this ontology is constituted through the description of an originary reversibility between the particular and the general, immanence and transcendence – perspectival and perceptual totality,

¹⁶ It is important to note, in this sense, the developments of this topic in recent studies about Merleau-Ponty. Good examples of the broad horizon of this literature are studies such as Wambacq’s, which deal with the relationship between Deleuze’s and Merleau-Ponty’s thought and whose main focus is the attempt to understand the meaning of an intrinsic connection between immanence and transcendence (Wambacq, 2017).

entirely differentiated. In this sense, perhaps an attentive look over the notion of structure would allow us to make explicit the different paths that one finds before these much-debated questions about Merleau-Ponty's thought, especially with regard to its "first steps," its "first bases" and its ontological dimension.

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