

I and the Other
Matter and Experience of time in Phenomenology

«That consciousness which is hidden in so much flesh and blood is the least intelligible of occult qualities».

Maurice Merleau-Ponty

Introduction

In phenomenology, experience is always first-person experience; that is, a particular subject's experience, never that of a general and abstract subject. How is it possible, therefore, to account phenomenologically for my experience of other people? The problem of how I can experience another I is just that: a problem.

What gives itself to my experience is the body of the other. But the other is not reducible to that body: in fact, he perceives me and has an experience of me which can be considered comparable to the experience I have of him. On the other hand, my being seen by the other still belongs to the sphere of what is given to me, therefore it does not violate but instead confirms the principle according to which every experience is always my experience, first-person experience. For Husserl, in order to be able to trace in the other's body, which is part of my experience, the presence of another person's experience, it is necessary to clarify how, within my own experience, that "leap" is made which allows the emergence, out of an absence, of a latent presence: the presence of otherness.

The problem of how to account for something that is at the same time present (I have an experience of the other not as a mere thing but as a person) and absent (I cannot have a direct experience of what the other experiences) risks falling into aporia at every step.

This is a case of an epistemological aporia, since it is about how it is possible, from my experience, to grasp the presence of the other. The answers to this question, not only in Husserl, but also in Scheler, Levinas, and Sartre, are well known. The strategy we shall attempt to undertake here is of an ontological, rather than epistemological, type. Indeed, our starting point will not so much be

the impossibility of experiencing the life events of others from the first-person experience of my own life events, as the co-participation and reciprocal penetrations, in subjectivity itself, of interiority and exteriority, of subjectivity and extraneity. In the epistemological approach, the other's inaccessibility is originary and needs the activation of a further experience (that of *Einfühlung* in, or identification with, the other) if it is to be overcome; in the ontological proposition, the interweaving of subjectivity with otherness is given in an equally originary and evident way in the notion of embodiment, or living matter.

In this paper I will try to show how the problem of solipsism may be attributed to a particular way of understanding the notion of materiality and how the solving of this problem would therefore involve the retracing of a more original problem of matter.

1. *Matter as residue*

If we confine ourselves to so-called static phenomenology, there are three accepted meanings of the term "matter": 1. matter as feeling, or material *hyle*; 2. matter as perceived content or material property; 3. inanimate or physical matter. The first two meanings have to do with organic matter, the third with inorganic matter. The problem of the sensorial *hyle* arises as the consequence of a distinction, clearly present in Husserl's *Logical Investigations*, although progressively vaguer and more fluid, between intentional experience and hyletic or phenomenal experience. Consciousness is essentially, though not exclusively, intentional consciousness. Conceiving of intentionality as the property that characterizes phenomenological consciousness means placing intentional activity at the center of subjectivity. The object is always grasped from a certain perspective, or from a certain point of view; which in concrete terms means isolating a certain cluster or kernel of determinations. In fact, the partiality of the point of view stamped by intentional consciousness on the object is, in the final analysis, attributable to the particular totality of determinations offered by the noetic structure, and any variation in a given point of view is in turn attributable to variation in a given totality. In the end, phenomenological constitution resides in this determinative process.

To sum up: in so-called static phenomenology, the essence of subjectivity is attributable to its capacity for representation, and the essence of representation is in turn attributable to concept of determination. The aim of the subject's intentional or constitutive activity consists in determining the object of experience, tracing – so to speak – its perimeter or profile.

Nevertheless, as is well known, the intentional or representational function does not exhaust the concept of subjectivity. For Husserl, unlike Brentano, not all states of consciousness are intentional. What there is in addition is feeling, or material *hyle*; and the latter in turn ends up as a residue of the intentional structure or framework.

The distinction between the formal (essential) dimension and the material (additional, residual) dimension of subjectivity, present in so-called static phenomenology, places the problem of the conjunction between the hyletic (or material) and intentional (or functional) dimensions. From this point of view, the very concept of replenishment is not a solution but the name of a problem: that is, the problem of the conjunction between two contents; the phenomenal (material) content and the cognitive-representational (structural) content¹.

We now come to the second meaning of matter, the one that relates to the perceived object. The distinction between intentional (essential) structure and material (inessential) *hyle* is in fact reflected, on the noematic level, in the distinction between extension and *plena*. Just as the purpose of the material *hyle* is to replenish an empty intentional structure, so the purpose of the *plena* will be that of qualifying an extension which is not in itself qualified by the senses. In addition, the relationship between extension and *plena*, like the relationship between intentional structure and material *hyle*, is characterized by the priority accorded to the (empty) functional dimension over the (full) material dimension. Moreover, like intention, extension is an essential (although not defining) characteristic of the material object when faced with the inessentiality of qualification by the senses. If the function of the material *hyle* is that of replenishing an empty intentional structure, without which action would lose its own directionality; the function of the *plena* is that of replenishing an empty extension without which the phenomenon would be destined to lose its own boundaries, thereby frustrating its own status as a *datum*.

The static (noetic and noematic) view of matter seems to lead to a sort of “phenomenological functionalism”, a consequence of what I shall henceforth

¹ The focus on the point of contact, on the conjunction between an authentic cognitive (formal, structural, expressible) dimension and immediate (material, momentary, unarticulated, unexpressed) experience, constitutes a problem which similarly seems destined to remained unsolved in spheres other than the phenomenological: think of the problems of the *qualia* or “what it is like to be” in philosophy of mind; or the problem of the status of observable terms in the epistemological sphere and, lastly, the debate about the distinction between conceptual and non-conceptual content in the philosophy of language. In this sense, the relation between material *hyle* and intentional structure represents merely the latest incarnation of the same problem, which consists in clarifying the epistemological nature of the impact of the experiential dimension on the conceptual framework.

call *logic of the residue*. This expression indicates what in epistemology is termed a paradigmatic assumption. In this specific case, the assumption consists in privileging the formal (indeed, functional) dimension over the material (pathic) dimension, which is affective on the one hand, and qualitative on the other. Such a paradigmatic arrangement allows us to obtain two outcomes.

On the noetic level, it allows reflection to perform its essential task, that of rendering experiences as *objects*. The formal aspect of the act of consciousness in fact allows reflection to exercise the necessary “distance”, that distance which, for example, allows reflection on a perceptual intention and which seems precluded in the case of pain, as of any other sensation. On the noematic level, the distinction between extension and *plena* offers the possibility of identifying the boundaries within which givenness displays itself, or appears, and of being able to exercise that “fragmentation” acknowledged by Husserl as fundamental for the definition of the object.

«There belongs to the essence of extension the ideal possibility of fragmentation. It is then evident that every fragmentation of the extension fragments the thing itself – i.e., splits it into pieces, each of which once again has the full thingly character, that of material thingness»².

Conceiving of the object as a *synholos* of (essential) extension and (inessential) filling qualities or *plena*, or in other words maintaining the thesis of the ontological priority of extension in the constitution of the sensible, material thing, constitutes the antechamber of that “compositional” which has widely been seen (Bergson, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty) as characterizing the “scientific image” and, most particularly, the project of physicalizing experience.

What seems to be shared by the static conception of phenomenology and this project is in the first place the centrality of the notion of determination and, in the second place, the distinction between essential determinations (extension) and inessential determinations (the patina or qualitative veil), which serve to fill the former:

«In particular, each thing is different, each may have its different spatial extension and fill it qualitatively in a very different manner. [...] It must be said of every kind of quality that it may have its own special ways of filling spatial corporeality, covering it, extending itself over it. Yet it is necessarily a quality that fills. The thing knows no other extensive determinations besides

² E. Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining a pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, Second Book, *Studies in the Phenomenology of constitution*, Kluwer, Dordrecht 1989 (1912-29), p. 33.

pure corporeality (the primary quality) and the modifying sensuous qualities, the “qualifying” secondary qualities. [...] The thing is what it is in its real properties, but each one, taken separately, is not necessary in the same sense. Each is a ray of the thing’s being. But corporeal extension is not a ray of real being in that same sense; it is not in the same way (properly speaking, “in no way”) a real property. Rather, it is an essential form of all real properties»³.

The conception expressed by Husserl is, once again, *residual*. In this case, it is a question of a residue relative to extension in space. In the foundational relationship between extension and *plena*, and in the consequent constitution of an independent part, this latter part inherits from extension the fragmentability which the *plena* would not have of themselves (one cannot, for example, fragment red) and this, once again, is further proof of the fact that extension is primary and foundational. On more than one occasion Husserl refers to the intuitive properties as a *patina* or *veil* that covers an extension, thereby offering it qualification. We can push this so far as to say that for Husserl the *plena* are indeed fundamental (we would otherwise not have full phenomena, but only empty phantoms of phenomena), and yet not essential: in fact, it is extension, and only extension, that is actually essential. If the function of the material *hyle* is that of filling an empty intentional structure – without which the action would lose its directionality – the function of the *plena* is that of filling an extension without which the phenomenon would be destined to lose its own contours, its own perimetrization, thereby frustrating its own phenomenal nature.

In conclusion, there are two theses emerging from the static analysis of the notion of matter: the first is the essentiality, or priority, of the morphological-structural or cognitive-representational aspect; the (complementary) second is the residual or secondary status of the material, hyletic, pathic or affective dimension.

If, on the one hand, identifying the essential component of consciousness in its formal framework and the essential component of the object understood in its extension allows the possibility of (noetic) distance and (noematic) fragmentation, on the other hand it is responsible for a sort of “closure”, both of consciousness and of the objects towards which consciousness is directed from time to time.

In fact, to declare the material aspect (in its double sense of *hyle* and *plena*) to be residual in relation to the functional dimension, means conceiving of consciousness as a sort of projector, and the object of consciousness as a sort

³ *Ibi*, p. 34.

of map. The purpose of both is to provide boundaries: boundaries established by intentional activity in the case of consciousness; boundaries determined by extension in the case of the object. Many phenomenological notions – for example those of field, region, stratum, perspective, synthesis, pole – are, not by chance, geographical in their derivation and use. By means of these notions and the philosophical posture that underlies them, consciousness is transformed into thought, or into *cogito*, and the world is transformed into thought world, or *noema*. Now the residual conception of matter (in its dual guise as essentiality of the intentional structure on the noetic level and essentiality of extension on the noematic level) can be called drastically into question. On the noematic front, it is possible to place the emphasis less on the notion of determination than on fluid and dynamic concepts such as resistance, tension, force, thrust, power, which allow us to overcome the concept of the object as a sensibly qualified, extended map.

For our present purposes, it is more interesting to consider the noetic aspect of the matter.

In our opinion, the problem of solipsistic closure is, in fact, connected to the priority afforded to the formal component over the material and to the consequent reduction of subjective activity to projective activity. The so-called conceptual problem of other minds underlies a systematization of this kind.

If my self-experience is of a purely mental nature, what should guarantee the ascriptions of the same states to others? The proper way to respond to this challenge is by considering subjectivity to be essentially embodied. Which means recognizing the inherence between mind and matter, rather than matter's residual character; their intertwining rather than their distinctness from each other; immersion in a body rather than reflexive distance.

This distance is in fact inhibited by the essentially embodied character of subjectivity and by the reversibility (noted also by Husserl, as well as by Merleau-Ponty) which characterizes the *Leib*: my own bodily self-experience is characterized by an interplay between *ipseity* and *alterity*: «when my left hand touches my right, or when I perceive another part of my body, I am experiencing myself in a manner that anticipates both the way in which an other would experience me and the way in which I would experience an other»⁴. For Merleau-Ponty, in a yet more explicit way, the self-experience of subjectivity must contain a dimension of otherness.

⁴ D. Zahavi, *Subjectivity and Selfhood. Investigating the First-Person Perspective*, MIT Press, Cambridge 2005, p. 157.

«Unless I learn within myself to recognize the junction of the *for itself* and *in itself*, none of those mechanisms called other bodies will be able to come to life; unless I have an exterior, others have no interior. The plurality of consciousness is impossible if I have an absolute consciousness of myself»⁵.

From the embodied and embedded character of self-experience derives the impossibility of making the Ego in its entirety an object of reflection («I am not transparent for myself»)⁶. The admission of this impossibility is what allows Merleau-Ponty to assert, heretically for a classical phenomenologist, that «the self-perception is still a perception, i.e. it gives me a *Nicht Urpräsentierbar* (a non-visible, myself)»⁷. Therefore, even before the Other, it is the Ego that is originally un-presentable. In this sense, the *Ego* as *Leib*, turns out to be as impenetrable to itself as is the *alter ego*.

«I can see my eyes in three mirrors, but they are the eyes of someone observing»⁸: from this point of view both *Ego* and *Alter ego* present themselves to me for reflection in the form of *Körper*, which means that, given the originary un-presentability of the self to reflection, the demarcation between *ego* and *alter ego* becomes markedly re-configured. According to Merleau-Ponty, «I can experience others because I'm never so close to myself that the other is completely and radically foreign and inaccessible. I am always already a stranger to myself and, therefore, open to others»⁹. The eye is the point of visibility, its ground zero, the opening of the visible which nevertheless cannot itself be seen. Picking up once again the metaphor of projection, we are dark to ourselves, and yet this darkness is precisely «the darkness needed in the theatre to show up the performance»¹⁰.

2. *Giving too much weight to the present*

As is well known, the pervasiveness of the metaphors of projection and map, together with the objectifying power of reflection, becomes radically re-configured in so-called genetic phenomenology. Indeed in the genetic approach

⁵ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of perception*, Routledge, London 1962 (1945), p. 373.

⁶ *Ibi*, p. 352.

⁷ M. Merleau-Ponty, *The visible and the invisible*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 1968 (1964), p. 249.

⁸ *Ibi*, p. 105.

⁹ D. Zahavi, *Subjectivity and Selfhood. Investigating the First-Person Perspective*, cit., p. 161.

¹⁰ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of perception*, cit., p. 115.

both the “awakened” subjectivity and the understood object, by virtue of being understood, become evanescent thanks to the decisive role played by temporality. This last is not added as if it were extrinsic to contents of consciousness or to objects complete in themselves but becomes the tacit factor which permits the constitution, in a passive manner, of every object. Consciousness, according to this conception, is not in time, but is itself time. The auto-constitutive dynamics of the materials of experience place a limit on that primacy of the functional dimension which characterizes static phenomenology. From the genetic point of view, we are not concerned with entities complete unto themselves, whether they be states of consciousness or understood objects: «every actually present now of consciousness, however, is subject to the law of modification. It changes into retention of retention and does so continuously. Accordingly, a fixed continuum of retention arises in such a way that each later point is retention for every earlier point. And each retention is already a continuum»¹¹.

There is no *datum* of consciousness except insofar *as it is* temporal and, more generally, there is no reality except insofar *as it is* temporal. Thus time becomes the first and fundamental factor in the constitution of objects, precisely by virtue of the dynamics which bring into play the hyletic contents considered in their dimension as *primary sources (ursprüngliche)*. If these contents are no longer chaotic material to be shaped by means of an active intentional act, the schema of apprehension-apprehensional content passes away, as does the more general schema of form-matter. Every temporal constituent, given the impossibility of distinguishing between the dimensions of content-matter and formal-temporal, becomes an interweaving of matter and form.

The introduction of temporality seems capable of dismantling the very closure of static phenomenology, and hence of reconfiguring the problem of solipsism. Both matter understood as material *hyle* and matter as *plenum*, insofar as they are endowed with an autonomous temporal structure, offer the subject that opening which is absent from static phenomenology. Explicit acts of apprehension (*Auffassungen*) or *awarenesses* in fact now emerge from the dynamics within the hyletico-material contents and are attributable to them. This attribution allows consciousness to blur its own outlines in favor of a continuous process of transfusion of one material content into another. Nevertheless, there remains one aspect to which it is worth our while paying attention. Although it has been released from an “extractable” form, the temporal structure that characterizes genetic phenomenology is nevertheless rooted in an originary

¹¹ E. Husserl, *On the phenomenology of the consciousness of the internal Time*, Kluwer, Dordrecht 1991 (1893-1917), vol. IV, p. 88.

impression (*Ur-impression* or *Ur-empfindung*). Although it has been stripped of any reference to an explicit activity of consciousness, just as it has of any return to a possible “inside” or “outside”, the point “now”, or the present available to impression, constitutes the epicenter from which retentions (the past) are held back and by which protensions (the future) are oriented. The endurance or disappearance of hyletic contents is conditional upon their progressive remoteness from the impressional purity in relation to which these contents are retentions or protensions.

Phenomenological consciousness, however much it lacks outlines drawn by the distinction between form and matter, is nevertheless always a consciousness rooted in the present. We shall see shortly how this exclusive rootedness once again exposes phenomenology to the risk of solipsism.

For Husserl, there is no reality that is not temporal: that is, in relation to a consciousness that lasts. This means introducing the essential factor of memory and the relationship between memory and perception. For Husserl, as for Bergson, memory is not a simple placing of past data into some “drawer” or “log book” of our consciousness. Nor, on the other hand, is perception a purely momentary state, a source of data which, then slipping into the memory, would little by little be eclipsed by the horizon of consciousness. Perception is not mere immediacy, not purely current consciousness, but an action that entails a certain duration. This means that every current “now” is incessantly transformed into a retention, leading to a continuum in which every successive moment is a retention of every preceding moment; a sort of comet whose tail is composed of the “trail” or indistinct halo of retentions¹². The comet’s tail is what provides the originary impression (the present) with the adumbrations (*Abschattungen*) it needs: every lasting actuality is thus perceived distinctly in the originary impression, before flowing on into retention until it becomes blurred and finally plunges into the past.

For Husserl «the primal impression is the absolute beginning of this production, the primal source, that from which everything else is continuously produced. But it itself is not produced: it does not arise as something produced but through genesis spontanea; it is primal generation [...]. It can only be said: Consciousness is nothing without impression»¹³; and so-called adequate perception is the continuous passage, in consciousness, of the present into retention; a passing which, in the perception of the now (the head of the comet), finds that

¹² The image of the comet is Husserl’s own «But this now apprehension is, as it were, the head attached to the comet’s tail of retentions relating to the earlier now-points of the motion» (*ibi*, p. 89).

¹³ *Ibi*, p. 163.

absolute “source” which permits the continuous, unitary and indivisible passage made possible by the retention exercised by the retentive consciousness¹⁴. If it is true that in lived time every now-point always and necessarily turns out to be mediated by its own retentive trail, it is also true that there is no retention that is not rooted in a now, exactly as no tail can be anything other than the trail from the head of a comet.

The originary impression, the present, the now, are the necessary fulcrum without which duration cannot unfold. In doing this, Husserl once more identifies a *form*, in this case a temporal form. This is a *linear* or *horizontal* continuity between retention, originary impression and protension, which unfolds ideally (and metaphorically) on a “surface”, a swimming in the temporal current, moving through its whole extension exactly as a swimmer would do.

By means of the priority afforded to presentness or to the “awakened” consciousness (and to the consequent subordination of retention and protension: “every retention is always preceded by an impression”) temporal analysis ratifies the isolation of the subject before its own object, exemplifying once again the problem of solipsism.

3. *Living matter*

A first step towards the overcoming of solipsism may be traced in a new conception of matter. As we have seen, the static model predicts the distinction between a formal component and a material one. On the noetic level, this distinction is realized in the binomial of intentional or representational (essential) structure and material (residual) *hyle*; on the noematic level in the binomial of (essential) extension and (residual) *plena*. Matter will thus present itself, *à la* Descartes, as “something more” in relation to the essentiality of the dimension that is formal, projective, representational on the one hand and extensive on the other.

From this perspective the notion of map becomes crucial in exposing phenomenology to the risk of solipsism: considering *form* as essential in fact

¹⁴ Which determines the difference between retention and memorization, due to their different relationships with perception: the former is structurally in continuity with it, while the latter arises when perception quits the scene. Moreover, memorization (or secondary memory) is free (although dependant on perception), while retention can only occur because there is a perception. We do not decide to perceive something, we simply do it. In the end, retention is primary: if there were no perception and retention there would in fact be nothing to remember.

“closes” subjectivity in the egological circle of its own representations and of the inevitable partiality of its own points of view.

A possible way of avoiding this consequence may be identified in a different conception of matter, a conception which gives priority on the one hand to the hyletic, pathic, affective dimension and on the other to the dimension of the *plenum*¹⁵.

Feeling and *flesh*, both fundamental notions in Merleau-Ponty, reflect the attempt to overcome the gnoseological and ontological predominance of closed notions such as those of *projection* and *map* in favor of open notions like those of *intertwining*, *chiasmus*, *reversibility* between internal and external. Feeling will now be understood not as possessing inert qualities, and still less as a mere response to external stimuli, but as a vital process or rhythm, that rhythm which we can retrace in procreation, respiration and growth. For its own part, flesh will no longer be *mere thing*, extension covered by determined qualities, but living matter, “inwardly tormented”, in which the word “alive” does not function as a predicate – that is, it does not denote a property or characteristic of matter – but rather corresponds to one a modification of it.

From this point of view, it becomes problematic to speak of *qualia*, as we still tend to do in philosophy of mind. The *quale*, understood as a phenomenal or qualitative determination or patina becomes estranged from the vital operations involved in perception, thereby contributing to that flattening and evening out of the subjective experience.

«There are two ways of being mistaken about quality: one is [...] to treat it as an incommunicable impression, whereas it always has a meaning; the other is to think that this meaning and this object, at the level of quality, are fully developed and determinate»¹⁶.

We could say that feeling, and the embodied thought it underlies, have a *thickness* that neither the Husserlian notion of *plena* nor the notion of *qualia* in philosophy of mind have managed to grasp. But in order to be capable of realizing this thickness, notions such as those of feeling and flesh but, almost paradoxically, achieve a sort of *opacity* and *impersonality* extraneous to the egological perspective and to the distinction between internal and external. Immanence is no longer read as an “internal sphere”, a “dwelling” in which the individual finds

¹⁵ This will lead to a different conception of inanimate matter itself, centred not on notions like those of extension, impenetrability, solidity (which all derive from a spatial conception of matter itself), but on dynamic notions like those of resistance, force, etc.

¹⁶ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of perception*, cit., p. 56.

himself “encapsulated”. It is, on the contrary, translated as “being in the world”, in proximity to it, and therefore as being in some way already *external*.

«So, if I wanted to render precisely the perceptual experience, I ought to say that *one* perceives in me, and not that I perceive. [...] Between my sensation and myself there stands always the thickness of some *primal acquisition* which prevents my experience from being clear of itself. I experience the sensation as a modality of a general existence, one already destined for a physical world and which runs through me without my being the cause of it»¹⁷.

Even before representing the world, consciousness *makes itself the world* and does so by means of the body: the body understood not so much as a kinesthetic body with essentially constitutive tasks, and not even as a bodily scheme, but as a dimension in large part autonomous, bearer of a latent and not explicit knowledge, with regard to which notions of background and horizon play a crucially important part.

Flesh is not bodily extension endowed with kinesthetic movement, but originary experience of immersion in the world. It is founded on the reversibility between sensing and sensible: that is, on the apprehension of what we consider “external” as the reverse of what we consider “internal”; exactly «as if space had taken to knowing itself interiorly»¹⁸. By means of it, we do not understand something, but something “is understood in me”.

The constant use of the impersonal form (“is thought in me”, “is perceived in me,” etc.) indicates a new opening up of phenomenology to an ontology of the trans-individual or the inter-corporeal. Every one of our perceptions or thoughts or movements in the world engages with a network of relationships which contribute to the establishment of a sort of “*sensorium commune*”. And this has sensation as its starting point: «I am no more aware of being the true subject of my sensation than of my birth or my death»¹⁹; the sensation «is anterior to myself, it arises from *sensibility* which has preceded it and which will outlive it, just as my birth and death belong to a natality and a mortality which are anonymous»²⁰. Our whole experience therefore engages with a general flux which «runs through me without my being the cause of it»²¹, which does in-

¹⁷ *Ibi*, pp. 150-151.

¹⁸ M. Merleau-Ponty, *The visible and the invisible*, cit., p. 75.

¹⁹ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of perception*, cit., p. 250.

²⁰ *Ibi*, pp. 250-251.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

deed mean that I am nothing but a «certain rhythm of existence»²². This is especially evident in the relationship between the newborn infant and its mother, characterized by a sort of fleshly intersubjectivity. The communication between mother and child is guided by rules that we could describe as circular, like *reversibility* and *transitivity*: the infant wants the mother to comfort it when it suffers pain, and cries so that we could say that it pains the mother in the same way as it is pained by stomach ache.

Conceiving of perception not as a personal act but as an impersonal fabric in which other beings are nothing but “variants of ourselves” radically changes the phenomenological perspective. This new perspective shifts from the personal to the impersonal, from the solipsistic to the relational: all beings constitute themselves reciprocally from the starting point of a common flesh, from matter that is expressive *in itself*.

The relationship between living body and world is not therefore one of mere proximity, but of *implication* – in the sense that the former lives in a space that is, so to speak, oriented – or of situation: «bodily space can be distinguished from external space and envelop its parts instead of spreading them out»²³; «and his body is the potentiality of a certain world»²⁴, in the sense that its movement does not place the world, but *crosses it*.

Sensation, body, and movement are closely correlated terms. By means of sensation, the body and movement set up that «taking up of external by internal and of internal by external»²⁵, that is, the circularity, inherence, reversibility between internal and external that is able to extend and open the subjective dimension to what had, up until that moment, simply been considered *other than itself*. Sensations are not sensory contents, «but a modification of my body»²⁶ that is, symbioses, ways of penetrating into the external environment, which underlie «a ‘primary layer’ of sense experience which precedes its division among the separate senses»²⁷. In this sense it is legitimate to say that «sensation is literally a form of communion»²⁸.

²² *Ibi*, p. 248.

²³ *Ibi*, p. 115.

²⁴ *Ibi*, p. 122.

²⁵ *Ibi*, p. 153.

²⁶ *Ibi*, p. 379.

²⁷ *Ibi*, p. 264. From which derives Merleau-Ponty’s very detailed treatment of the phenomenon of synesthesia (for example, pp. 246 ff).

²⁸ *Ibi*, p. 246.

4. *Giving more value to the past than to the present*

Placing the emphasis on the impersonal and anonymous that live in us, and considering matter as expressive in itself are two sides of the same coin. Both approaches in fact lead to the same result: that of reconfiguring the centrality of the notion of person, or of closed subjectivity, in favor of the story in relation to which individuality emerges and is realized.

Our entire experience inserts itself into a general flux runs through me without my being the cause of it. Consciousness itself thereby becomes an event twinned at birth with the world, involving in this process of differentiation both the natural temporal horizons that constitute its phylo- and onto-genetic evolution, and the cultural horizons into which it has been inserted. From this point of view, consciousness belongs to the individual to the same degree as it belongs to the surrounding world, and not only to that which is specifically human, but also the animal, vegetable and mineral worlds. All beings are “variants of ourselves”, since they emerge from that soil in relation to which family lines emerge as *nodes*, *joints*, *nerves*; or as *essences*, although this term has now taken on a profoundly different connotation. Insofar as they are embodied and temporal, essences in fact arise from beneath, or from the depths, depths from which individual emerge through differentiation.

«Every ideation is borne by this tree of my duration and other durations, this unknown sap nourishes the transparency of the idea; behind the idea, there is the unity, the simultaneity of all the real and possible durations, the cohesion of one sole Being from one end to the other»²⁹.

This means replacing the notion of the pre-categorical, which refers to a horizontal and linear conception, with the notion of the sub-categorical which implies a vertical and interwoven conception. The former, wholly founded on the present, sets loose that very present into a flow made up of retentions and protensions, whereas the ontological priority of the past is the starting point for the latter, which considers the individual or existential present as an opening or dehiscence. We are a *gap*, a *crack*, or a *fold* «since perception is the ‘flaw’ in this ‘great diamond’»³⁰. In this sense (*contra* Descartes), perception is not *something more* but, paradoxically in certain respects, *something less*. Passivity is not a *po-*

²⁹ M. Merleau-Ponty, *The visible and the invisible*, cit., p. 111.

³⁰ *Ibi*, p. 241.

sition of passivity but latency, pre-personal consciousness, a motor dimension already present in sensation.

«Generally speaking, red and yellow favour abduction, blue and green abduction. Now, on the whole, the significance of abduction is that the organism turns towards the stimulus and is attracted by the world – of abduction that it turns away from the stimulus and withdraws towards its centre. Sensations, ‘sensible qualities’ are then far from being reducible to a certain indescribable state or *quale*; they present themselves with a motor physiognomy, and are enveloped in a living significance»³¹.

The perceptual and motor (hence behavioral) aspects are closely correlated. In this sense, Merleau-Ponty makes himself a spokesman, well in advance, for what will be the criticism of the Representational Theory of Mind³² in favor of an Embodied Theory of Mind which, as is well known, considers affective cognition not as instantiated “internally” by the brain or by internal information processing only, but realized by the embodied and embedded organism in interaction with the environment, according to schemes studied by the Sensorimotor Theory of perception³³ and by the Enactive Theory³⁴. The common starting point among these views rests on the idea that motor, sensory and affective processes are integrated with each other, foregrounding action, which «joins mind and body, or more precisely, it deconstructs the artificial divide between inner and outer»³⁵. But what is noted here is the intervention of a further decisive factor: the perceptual aspect and the motor – hence, behavioral – aspect are closely correlated and are both connected to temporality or, rather, to a certain way of understanding temporality. In fact, on closer inspection the notions of inhabiting, inhering, entailing and, above all, the notions of body and movement, have an essentially temporal structure: «This anonymous life is

³¹ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of perception*, cit., p. 143.

³² See J. Fodor, *The Mind Doesn't Work That Way: The Scope and Limits of Computational Psychology*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA 2000; R. Millikan, *Language, thought, and other biological categories: New foundations for realism*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA 1984.

³³ See A. Noë, *Vision and mind*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2009 and J.K. O'Regan, *Sensorimotor approach to (phenomenal) consciousness*, in T. Baynes - A. Cleeremans - P. Wilke (eds.), *The Oxford Companion to Consciousness*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2009, pp. 588-593.

³⁴ See F. Varela - E. Thompson - E. Rosch, *The embodied mind. Cognitive sciences and human experience*, MIT Press, Massachusetts 1991; E. Thompson, *Mind in life: biology, phenomenology, and the sciences of mind*, Harvard University Press, Harvard 2010 and E. Thompson - F. Varela, *Radical Embodiment: neural dynamics and consciousness*, in «Trends in Cognitive Science» 5, 10(2001), pp. 418-425.

³⁵ D. Zahavi, *Subjectivity and Selfhood. Investigating the First-Person Perspective*, cit., p. 161.

merely the extreme form of that temporal dispersal which constantly threatens the historical present»³⁶. In this sense, the bodily dimension is closely connected to memory, since «our body is not primarily *in* space: it is of it»³⁷. Husserl makes a distinction between retention (or primary recollection), indispensable for perception, and memorization (or secondary recollection) as a form of free memory, though not independent of perception. This is a matter of two different types of action, of which the latter (memorization) constitutes the reproductive modification of the former (retention). Both belong to the immanence of temporal consciousness, which can pass, as it were, “horizontally” from one to the other while remaining always on the same plane: the plane of the singular flow of consciousness. It is nevertheless possible to conceive of memory in a sense that we could call “vertical”; that is, no longer as an intentional act, but as survival, to a large extent impersonal, of past images. On this point, Bergson distinguishes between *spontaneous memory*, which lies in the depth of consciousness and records all the events of our entire lives, and *automatic memory*, which extracts the images from the complex of recollections provided by the former – recollections useful for the effective completion of the action sketched out by a current perception, but in a completely different way. In order to describe them, the use of the impersonal once again comes to our aid: we could in fact say that, by means of memory, it is recollected in me. Thus, impersonal time “bridles” personal time through the body: «as an advent of the impersonal, repression is a universal phenomenon, revealing our condition as incarnate beings by relating it to the temporal structure of being in the world»³⁸. In this sense, we can say that our body is our own past. This is a past concerned less with recollection than with *repression*. Recollection «spreads out in front of us, like a picture, a former experience, whereas this past which remains our true present does not leave us but remains constantly hidden behind our gaze instead of being displayed before it»³⁹, while, due to the temporal structure of our experience, every present is capable of «re-integrating into personal existence even that past of all pasts which the stereotyped patterns of our organic behaviour seem to suggest as being at the origin of our volitional being»⁴⁰.

Thus, while for Husserl the temporal object deteriorates or collapses, starting from a currently perceived now-point in a past that is always further from

³⁶ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of perception*, cit., p. 404.

³⁷ *Ibi*, p. 171.

³⁸ *Ibi*, p. 96.

³⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁰ *Ibi*, p. 98.

the awakened consciousness, for Bergson the “past” is not characterized by a progressive distancing from the “now” of perception, but on the contrary by a prolongation of perception towards presentness. The relationship between past and present is therefore not a holding back, and still less a collapse, but an advance, an authentic “progress”: we could say that, rather than receding, memory advances from the past to the present. To sum up, memory is not a distancing of the impressional present but, on the contrary, a movement towards the perceptual present in which the plane of the past’s virtuality is transformed into that of the reality of action. In both cases perception is the foundation of temporal movement, and yet this movement has entirely complementary directions: in one case the present collapses into the past, while in the other the past advances into the present.

«My mental state, as it advances on the road of time, is continually swelling with the duration which it accumulates: it goes on increasing rolling upon itself, as a snowball on the snow [...] Duration is the continuous progress of the past which gnaws into the future and which swells as it advances. And as the past grows without ceasing, so also there is no limit to its preservation. Memory [...] is not a faculty of putting away recollections in a drawer, or of inscribing them in a register. There is no register, no drawer; there is not even, properly speaking, a faculty, for a faculty works intermittently, when it will or when it can, whilst the piling up of the past upon the past goes on without relaxation. In reality, the past is preserved by itself, automatically. In its entirety, probably, it follows us at every instant [...] Our past, then, as a whole, is made manifest to us in its impulse; it is felt in the form of tendency, although a small part of it only is known in the form of idea»⁴¹.

If we now extend the outcomes of memory, considering also the latent recollections present in the deepest layer of consciousness, it becomes simpler to understand in what sense in the second case the individual, precisely because she participates in a long collective *story*, lives in an ontological dimension that becomes open after having been closed. The individual can now be read as come «the saturation of my phenomenal body on to the primordial world»⁴² and her perception as *inherence in things*, and therefore as an event that participates in a common environment.

⁴¹ H. Bergson, *The creative evolution*, The Modern Library, New York 1941 (1911), pp. 7-8.

⁴² M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of perception*, cit., p. 408.

It is more appropriate to refer, not to an intentional direction, but to an «intentional arc»⁴³, an arc which «which projects round about us our past, our future, our human setting, our physical, ideological and moral situation»⁴⁴ and in so doing enables an opening up to the world-environment that it would be reductive to call intersubjective precisely because it is opaque, anonymous and impersonal: «consciousness discovers in itself [...] the opacity of a primary past»⁴⁵; and by virtue of its very opacity it opens itself to something other than itself.

5. *What alterity?*

The theme of the impersonal reconfigures the idea of an “internal”, “closed”, “isolated” subjectivity. Asserting that the Self is founded on an anonymous and impersonal existence, on a pre-reflexive and sub-categorical dimension puts into question the independence of the egological structure. As we have already said, there are essentially two factors that can urge phenomenological description of subjectivity towards closure and isolation: the first is the consideration of the “empty” (projection – that is, the intentional-representational framework – on the noetic level; the map – that is, extension – on the noematic level) as having priority over the “full” (affective, or pathic, consciousness on the noetic level; the *plena* on the noematic level); the second is the consideration of the present, or current actuality – that is, impressional consciousness – as the root of the inactual – that is, of the past and future, or of retention and protension. The metaphors of map and now-point, or of originary impression, in fact contribute to that idealization of the ego (the ego as pole, or identificatory synthesis, of experiences) which is the ante-room of solipsism.

Reflection on the relationship between myself and the other must therefore start from an originary and equidistant dimension. However, this recognition can be understood in two ways.

According to the first, which we shall call *epistemic*, the experience of otherness is already present in the fact that I and others in fact share the same world: if subjectivity and world are related, and if the world contains an essential reference to others, then subjectivity must necessarily share something with alterity and reversibility. The epistemic thesis of alterity is open to certain reservations: maintaining that the difference between self and other derives from, or

⁴³ *Ibi*, p. 157.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁵ *Ibi*, p. 408.

is founded on, an anonymous, shared, undifferentiated dimension, does not in the least solve the problem of intersubjectivity.

«To speak of a fundamental anonymity prior to any distinction between self and other obscures what must be clarified, namely intersubjectivity understood as a relation between subjects. Properly speaking, it does not solve the problem of intersubjectivity, but dissolves it. On the level of radical anonymity there is neither individuation nor selfhood; but there is also no differentiation, *alterity*, or transcendence, and there is, consequently, room for neither subjectivity nor intersubjectivity»⁴⁶.

Therefore it remains hard to understand how the individuality of the Self can emerge from the impersonal dimension.

Nevertheless, there is a second way of understand this originary dimension, a way that we shall call *ontological* (and not ontic), since it does not so much refer to the experience of alterity as to alterity as a largely unconscious condition, tacit, sub-categorical. So if, in one case, alterity comes back into my sphere of consciousness, in the other alterity departs from it. In the latter case, that originary level is in fact expressed in a past which, so to speak, preserves itself by taking on a variety of forms: within the mechanisms of habit, in the motor activity of being alive, in behavior understood as bodily expression. Not the abused concept of behavior as response to an external stimulus, but behavior as a progressive process of differentiation and individuation. It is by means of the break in her own integral experience that the child gradually learns to distinguish between different living bodies, only one of which has first-person sensations. Thus the child understands, precisely through her behavior (when, for example, after a fall she doesn't see other people showing signs of pain), that she cannot live the other's experience and learns that likewise the other cannot live her experiences. Thus it becomes possible to pass from something that is simply "there" for the entire system to something that is only there for a part of the system: that is, exactly for her *own* body. Our record memory is rooted in habit memory, which lives in the somatic depths and creates that motor response, or action, which insinuates itself as difference into the materially real. In this sense, opening up subjectivity to alterity entails, in the first place, conceiving of feeling not as an isolated sensation – still less as a sensible datum or property – but as closely connected to affectivity and motility: that is, as having a «mo-

⁴⁶ D. Zahavi, *Subjectivity and Selfhood*, cit., p. 170.

tor physiognomy»⁴⁷. The flattening of experience in which «the living body became an exterior without interior, subjectivity became an interior without exterior» is now replaced by the proposal of a «certain rhythm of existence»⁴⁸. This is a rhythm which belongs to me as it does to others: «vision is a *thought subordinated to a certain field*»⁴⁹ and experiences «the communication of a finite subject with an opaque being from which it emerges but to which it remains committed»⁵⁰.

The theoretical line that is being traced here is that there is no self-contained first person sphere, but rather a system involving others: the relationship between self and others is not founded on an analogizing apperception, based on which I form an apprehension of the other's subjective life while placing myself, by means of the imagination, in her place (*analogical inference model*).

There is a certain sense in which Husserl himself considers solipsism as an abstraction, a residue of a primary global experience. In some manuscripts he in fact claims that there are two criteria which permit the establishment of the body's own boundaries: 1) a criterion of a tactile nature, based on which the child realizes from a certain point onwards that the sensations present in her hand are not present in the other's hand, and vice versa; 2) a kinesthetic type of criterion, linked to the experience of "I can" (my will allows me to move my body but not the other's body). A very young child experiences her hands or feet visually as objects revolving in her visual field. Not even when the correlation between visual and tactile sensations enables her to grasp that those objects are parts of a feeling body, does she achieve a clear distinction between her own body and the other's body. On the contrary, when the child notices those objects revolving in her visual field, her conclusion is that objects that look like these (the hands or feet of the other) can also be felt⁵¹.

Husserl considers this solution only as a hypothesis, but Merleau-Ponty consolidates it, regarding this over-extension of the living body's constitution as the very foundation of subjectivity. A very young child makes no distinction between public and private, between internal and external experience. She pre-

⁴⁷ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of perception*, cit., p. 243.

⁴⁸ *Ibi*, p. 248.

⁴⁹ *Ibi*, pp. 251-252. While also being central for Husserl, in Merleau-Ponty the notion of field takes on a profoundly different meaning: indeed, if for the former the field indicates the limits of possible variation, for Merleau-Ponty the field, as *fabric of the world* that constitutes us, has a more marked ontological valency.

⁵⁰ *Ibi*, p. 254.

⁵¹ E. Husserl, *Zur Phänomenologie der Intersubjektivität*, Husserliana, vol. XIV, Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague 1973 (1921-1928), p. 490.

sumes that the other simply experiences the same sensations. This total originary absence of perspectival differentiation is crucial.

The other notion, which plays a complementary role to that of community, is the notion of behavior. The notions of habit and behavior, associated with feeling understood as a motor process, become the standpoints for a profound revision of the notion, from which we started, of animated matter conceived no longer as an element separable from a total act but as a *concretion* of a global and integral experience. We are speaking of an experience which cannot be limited to conscious experience. In this sense, the (ontological) discussion of alterity is distinguished from the former (the epistemic), which shows how subjectivity and world may turn out to be deeply correlated, the world being one in which we live in common and not privately. If this latter thesis aims to show how «empathy merely discloses an intersubjectivity already at work»⁵², the former aims to show how our life begins well before the moment in which our memory makes it begin. Furthermore, if it is true that, from an epistemic viewpoint, «it is crucial to avoid conflating the *alterity* of the other and the *alterity* of the self, just as it is important to resist the temptation of assuming the distinction between self and other to be derivative and ultimately founded in a common anonymity»⁵³, it is also true that, from an ontological viewpoint, the self is the result of an evolutionary process of progressive specification starting from a common ground. Moreover, if the epistemic problem of intersubjectivity requires an analysis of the relationship between subjectivity and world («the three dimensions “self”, “others”, and “world” belong together, they reciprocally illuminate one another, and can be fully understood only in their connection»⁵⁴); the ontological problem of alterity focuses on the analysis of the relationship between subjectivity and matter and of that progressive process of differentiation and individuation, which gives rise to the constitution of a self.

If we adopt this perspective, what comes into play is not so much a solution to the (epistemic) problem of solipsism and alterity, as a solution to the (ontological) problem of differentiation and individuation: i.e. of that «absurdity of a multiple solipsism»⁵⁵ which philosophy is called on, helped by the sciences (especially the biological sciences), to decipher.

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⁵² D. Zahavi, *Subjectivity and Selfhood*, cit., p. 168.

⁵³ *Ibi*, p. 175.

⁵⁴ *Ibi*, p. 176.

⁵⁵ *Ibi*, p. 418.

ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to show how, in phenomenology, the relationship between solipsism and alterity is closely connected to the two concepts of matter and temporality. Openness to the Other has in fact two aspects: the first considers sensation and a perceived property as being endowed with a motor physiognomy; the second consists in considering the past as prior to the present, or the now. The subjectivity that emerges is temporal and to a large degree impersonal. In it the representational structure, or map-producing activity, is to a large degree reconfigured in favor of the motor and behavioral dimension. Similarly, focus on the essential character of subjectivity is progressively replaced by a search for processes of individuation starting from a common, inter-corporeal and integrated ontological dimension.