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## A SPANISH CONCEPTION OF THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF EXISTENCE

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The “phenomenology of existence” is one of the contemporary currents of philosophy which have developed taking existence as its central concern. The purpose of this article is to present my conception of this fundamental field of phenomenological research. In order to do this, I will analyze phenomenology *of* existence in the double sense of the genitive or better as a bidirectional phenomenological-existential movement; that is to say, on the one hand, I will explore the sense and scope of phenomenology for existence and, on the other hand, the meaning of existence for the phenomenological existential movement. With the aim of describing this twofold dynamics, I will begin by clarifying certain concepts of the Husserlian method that have frequently either been ignored or misinterpreted and, therefore, have impeded us from understanding the meaning of what the founder of phenomenology called “personal existence.” After this elucidation that takes place at the static level of phenomenology, I will apply some key concepts of genetic phenomenology to existence in order to develop my own account of the existential phenomenology. Given that Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961) was a pioneer in the study of the most representative Husserlian texts dealing with the major issues of genetic phenomenology—such as time, space, lived body, intersubjectivity and life-world—, I will draw from his philosophy to open a dialogue with María Zambrano (1904–1991), as an example of the possibilities offered by a—comparative—phenomenology for the study of existential problems, specifically for the development of a phenomenology of sensing and being sensed that goes beyond of the paradigm of representation.

*Keywords:* life-world, living reason, person, movement, embodiment, flesh, sensing.

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# ИСПАНСКАЯ КОНЦЕПЦИЯ ФЕНОМЕНОЛОГИИ ЭКЗИСТЕНЦИИ

МАРИЯ КАРМЕН ЛОПЕС САЕНС

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«Феноменология экзистенции» является одним из современных философских течений, которое исходит из рассмотрения экзистенции как своей центральной проблемы. Цель этой статьи — представить мое понимание этого фундаментального поля феноменологического исследования. С учетом поставленной цели я проанализирую феноменологию экзистенции в двойном смысле генитива, или, точнее, рассмотрю ее как двунаправленное феноменологически-экзистенциальное движение. Иначе говоря, я, с одной стороны, буду исследовать смысл и возможности феноменологии по отношению к экзистенции, и, с другой стороны, значение экзистенции для феноменологического экзистенциального движения. Имея в виду описание этой двойной динамики, я начну с прояснения тех понятий гуссерлевского метода, которые часто игнорируются или неверно интерпретируются, и, тем самым, препятствуют пониманию того, что основатель феноменологии называл «персональной экзистенцией». Вслед за этим прояснением, осуществляющимся на уровне статической феноменологии, я воспользуюсь некоторыми ключевыми понятиями генетической феноменологии с тем, чтобы развить мою собственную интерпретацию экзистенциальной феноменологии. Учитывая, что Мерло-Понти (1908–1961) был пионером в изучении наиболее репрезентативных текстов Гуссерля, посвященных основным проблемам генетической феноменологии — времени, пространству, живой телесности, intersubjectивности и жизненному миру — я буду исходить из его философии, чтобы начать диалог с Марией Самбрано (1904–1991) в качестве примера возможностей, открываемых компаративной феноменологией для исследования экзистенциальных проблем, прежде всего для феноменологии ощущения и ощущаемой телесности, выходящей за пределы парадигмы репрезентации.

*Ключевые слова:* жизненный мир, живой разум, личность, движение, телесность, плоть, ощущение.

## 1. WHAT IS “PHENOMENOLOGY OF EXISTENCE”?

We understand by “phenomenology of existence,” the use of the phenomenological method to describe and understand existence and, on the other, the deployment of the meaning of existence in phenomenology, especially from the works of E. Husserl in which the life-world (*Lebenswelt*) is recovered as ground-giving (*Bodengebend*) of the ego, of phenomenology and of the sciences. The crisis that Husserl detects in the last of these is precisely due to the fact that this ground has been forgotten; it is a crisis of rationality and meaning of existence (*Existenz*) (Husserl, 1976b, 10). J. Taminiaux preferred to speak of “existential phenomenology” to refer to Husserl’s latest re-

flections which were continued by other phenomenologists, concerns that go beyond the old oppositions between the world and consciousness, sensitivity and thought, psychology and philosophy (Taminiaux, 1956, 81)<sup>1</sup>.

This objective is also reflected in our understanding of the “phenomenology of existence” as a theoretical-practical and axiological task in which both terms are intertwined. The three dimensions are present in Husserlian notion of reason. The Husserlian responsibility for this all-encompassing rationality has been considered as an “existential rationalism” (Loidolt, 2022), and constitutes the nucleus of an ethic that has been described as “existential” (Warren, 2022). Thus, although phenomenology requires knowledge of its method, neither this is exclusively descriptive nor is phenomenology reduced to a methodology. Nor is it limited to discovering the enormous work carried out by Husserl, who, incidentally, never made a programmatic exposition of phenomenology or bothered to methodically define its stages, because he never considered it finished. This is consistent with our conviction that phenomenology, more than a compendium of concepts and texts, is an attitude, one that has given rise to a current that is ongoing, and which continues to be studied in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to address the problems we face. As B. Waldenfels says, “for its founder it was always a ‘work-philosophy’” (Waldenfels, 1997, 11); what keeps it still alive is precisely the opening of its ultimate purpose, together with the constant stimulus of questioning. Indeed, phenomenology was always redone by Husserl himself and his followers, thus making its characterization difficult, but enriching it with its uninterrupted movement that, far from being something accidental, forms part of its genesis, its generativity and reason itself as a constant movement of self-elucidation. This is how we understand phenomenology.

As regards the Husserlian phenomenological conception of existence (*Existenz*, *Dasein*), it generally designates real-natural existence, but is not reduced to it, as naturalism intends. There are also acts of consciousness, essences and mentions or intentions towards objects, although theirs is not an existence in space-time, but an ideal existence; nor is it an intrapsychic existence, as psychologism thinks. The epochē—a key piece of the phenomenological method—does not deny or seek proof of existence, but rather keeps us open to its different modes of manifestation, precisely because it provisionally brackets the judgment of existence of spatio-temporal reality (Husserl, 1976a, 65). Moreover, the epochē entails a change from the natural to the phenomenological attitude toward reality. We understand this change as a freedom and deten-

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<sup>1</sup> P. Ricoeur also speaks of the “Phénoménologie existentielle” (Ricoeur, 1951). Dupont refers to “phenomenological existentialism” (Dupont, 2014, 11. Note).

tion, both necessary to think about what we encounter in the natural attitude. Husserl himself considers the phenomenological reduction as an initial step before re(con)duction to the transcendental ego which does not affect the existence of the self and the empirical world, but rather unifies the experiences and gives validity to their being (Husserl, 1973, 65). Husserl does not doubt, therefore, existence. Neither does he reduce the world to consciousness, because the world continues to be what it is; what the reduction does is meditate on its multiple modalities of being given, regardless of the prevailing prejudices.

With respect to phenomenological re(con)duction to intersubjectivity, this is not an empty solipsistic exercise, but one which sheds light on the co-existence of free subjects which bestow meaning upon their relationships and exist within a generative framework and an interhuman present (Husserl, 1976b, 256). This form of generativity and historicity is unbreakable. The correlate of this co-existence of meaning throughout history is objectivity, that is, the understanding of objects as existent and intersubjectively valid. Finally, the present to which Husserl refers here is not mere presence, but a living-present (*lebendige Gegenwart*) which is depresentified in the retentions and protentions of the temporal flux and in the unitary flow of the historical development.

In *Die Krisis* Husserl goes as far as to state the epochē—and the phenomenological attitude belonging to it—in an existential sense, specifically as a “complete personal transformation comparable to a religious conversion,” but which, unlike that, constitutes the greatest existential evolution possible for mankind as such (Husserl, 1976b, 140). What does this existential metamorphosis consist of? In performing the epochē, the world of life ceases to be a mere externality of the particular worlds with regard to each other and becomes a total communal phenomenon; then, it appears as existent for us, as a world with meaning, because existence, in Husserl, is neither simple facticity nor psychic existence, but, as he says in reference to the geometrical existence, “it is the existence of what is objectively there for ‘everyone’” (Husserl, 1976b, 367), and, as such, existence of what has universal and omnitemporal validity. When existence directs itself towards the universality contained in the idea of philosophy, and towards its rationality, understood as self-responsibility, “a new stage of human existence with ideal norms for infinite task” is reached (Husserl, 1976b, 338).

“The idea of philosophy” is not philosophy in the world of ideas, but in the life-world or horizon of human existence. The science of this world belongs to the domain of transcendental subjectivity, because it is not one of the particular sciences, but science in the strict sense, conscious of the crisis of the positive sciences and of old rationalism. Husserl does not preoccupy himself too much with the scientific charac-

ter of the sciences, but rather with what they mean for human existence. Hence, these impactful words of Husserl:

Merely fact-minded sciences make merely fact-minded people [...] In our vital need—so we are told—this science has nothing to say to us. It excludes in principle precisely the questions which man, given over in our unhappy times to the most portentous upheavals, finds the most burning: questions of the meaning or meaninglessness of the whole of this human existence. (Husserl, 1976b, 3–4, 6)

This is how Husserl responds to the triumph of the factual and of the sciences that have lost sight of all subjective values and the reason for what is given. Once the loss of the meaning of science for our existence as human beings was diagnosed in the years that followed the Great War and during the Great Depression of the 1930s, when the promises of growth predicted by business science were unfulfilled, Husserl manifests the insufficiencies of the sciences, as well as those of the human beings who embraced them. From his perspective, the human being is not just another reality in the world of facticities, but instead, in addition to being a psychophysical being, he has a personal being that co-exists in a personal community. Personal existence has two levels: the first is still pre-personal, that is, an existence that is still anonymous; the second stage is that of truly personal existence, the authentically philosophical, understanding philosophy not as a discipline, but as “the constant function (*Funktion*) of becoming completely human and realizing a full humanity” (Husserl, 1976b, 486).

In personalistic attitude, relations between things and persons are not given as causal relations, but rather as motivations. The re(con)duction of this attitude to the phenomenological attitude constitutes a step from the unreflective life in the world to the transcendental life which experiences that world with sense. Husserl bases this transcendental life on the phenomenological task of self-sense-investigation (*Selbstbesinnung*). This demonstrates that in *Die Krisis* there is an evident existential dimension. Husserlian interest in the life-world, history and ethical responsibility increases in this work. The forgetting of this world by the sciences and naturalism has led to a crisis of rationality that has repercussions on them, as well as on human beings.

Husserl’s criticisms of the sciences of his time are similar to those that existentialists direct at scientism; however, those criticisms do not lead Husserl and the existentialists to abandon either science or rationality. In the same way that Husserl’s ideal of phenomenology as a radical science did not hinder its communication with psychology and the empirical sciences, the phenomenologists of existence dialogued with the sciences of their time.

Among all of them, we choose to dialogue with Merleau-Ponty to briefly develop our particular phenomenology of existence below. Some would prefer to exam-

ine the *Daseinsanalyse* of Husserl's disciple Heidegger, although he soon turned away from Husserl and became more interested in Being than in existence. Others think that Sartre was more faithful to the latter and, at the same time, to Husserl. For his part, the young Levinas highlighted the relevance of the philosophical attitude of the founder<sup>2</sup> of phenomenology, an attitude which "constitutes for man a *way of existing* through which he attains his spiritual destiny" (Levinas, 1998, 48).

We opt for Merleau-Ponty because of his unusual beginning in phenomenology, to which he then contributed throughout his life, remaking it in the unfolding and folding of his own conception of existence. Moreover, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is contemporary to 20<sup>th</sup> century Spanish philosophy; therefore it shares the same "spirit of time," particularly, a common interest in human life or existence.

## 2. MERLEAU-PONTY'S GENETIC PHENOMENOLOGY

The phenomenology of existence values genetic phenomenology, focused on the genesis of the ego rather than on the static phenomenology of the constitution. In contrast to the students of Husserl, Merleau-Ponty begins by studying the manuscripts on this other phenomenology, complementary to statics, manuscripts that he had consulted in the Husserl archives in Louvain from 1937. Hence, in common with a large part of post-Husserlian phenomenology, he has connected the genesis of ego with the life-world and with the lived body (*Leib*), understanding this in its relations to that, and as a vehicle of our being-in-the-world (*être-au-monde*).

He conceives of phenomenology as the questioning and resumption of Husserl's efforts instead of simply repeating what he said. That is what the very movement of his thought allows us. He assumes, like Husserl, the general thesis of the natural attitude to later apply an epoché and an incomplete, indirect and even deferred reduction, I would say, which redirects us to the being-in-the-world. He does not accept, however, the reduction to the transcendental ego. Already in *The Structure of Behavior* he establishes that, in order to reach perception as a type of original experience in which the real world is constituted in its specificity, Husserl needed the phenomenological reduction, understood as "an inversion of the natural movement of consciousness" (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, 236)<sup>3</sup> whose objective was to delve into the natural attitude that, following Fink, is linked to the transcendental attitude.

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<sup>2</sup> I refer the interested reader to my work of 2022 (López Saenz, 2022a).

<sup>3</sup> The footnote reads thus: "We are defining here the 'phenomenological reduction' in the sense which is given to it in Husserl's final philosophy."

Merleau-Ponty believes that this reduction was not a solution for Husserl, as demonstrated by the constant Husserlian revisions of it. These are due to the fact that he always comes up against that irreducible ontological residue that, paradoxically, only appears from the bottom of the phenomenological reduction, understood in Fink's way as "wonder," from which philosophizing springs, this philosophizing being named by Ortega y Gasset as "para-doxa," given that it breaks with the familiarity of the world to find new meanings. In the words of Merleau-Ponty,

a good part of phenomenological or existential philosophy consists of being astonished at this inherence of the self in the world and in others, in a description of this paradox and confusion, and in an attempt to make us *see* the bond between subject and world. (Merleau-Ponty, 1996, 74)

Thus understood, the reduction becomes the formula of an existential philosophy (Merleau-Ponty, 1972, IX), since it leads us to the life-world and to the *Urdoxa* (primal faith) in our existence. The purpose of this reduction that remains conscious of its limits is to become aware that the reduction cannot be performed in a vacuum, but always keeping in mind the existence in which one wishes to deepen, and, as Merleau-Ponty affirms, quoting *Ideen III*, "When Husserl says that reduction goes beyond the natural attitude, he immediately adds that this transcendence preserves 'the whole world of the natural attitude'" (Merleau-Ponty, 1960a, 205). Phenomenology does not leave the natural attitude behind, rather the latter is a preparation for the former as well as the sphere of the personal attitude to which Husserl referred: "The transcendental attitude is still and in spite of everything 'natural' (natürlich)" (Merleau-Ponty, 1960a, 207–8) while the former is linked to the existence of a material nature, as Husserl says (Husserl, 1952, 117).

No spiritual dimension exists in itself, but always in relation to the natural substratum and, therefore, it is necessary to understand "Nature as the other side of man as flesh—no wise as 'matter.' Logos also as what is realized in man, but nowise as his *property*" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, 328–274). This implies that there is neither matter in a raw state nor pure spirit, but an imbrication in which spirit and matter are structurally—not substantially—differentiated, because "the soul is the hollow of the body, whereas the body is the filling of the soul" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, 286). The solution to the classic problem of the relationship between soul and body is vertical being (not horizontal being, represented as an object in front of a subject) whose elucidation will be the task of the new ontology of Merleau-Ponty in search of a new type of being, a being by pregnancy which contains its own negation.

This ontology was already present in the first works of Merleau-Ponty as well as in his conception of the phenomenology of the life-world as a path that returns



from the objectivism in which we were settled to the lived experience, which only acquires meaning for us through language. Merleau-Ponty goes even further and prioritizes speech (*parole*) over language (*langue*). As we have developed, (López Sáenz, 2006), he does this at the same time that he looks below the conceptual meaning of the words, an existential meaning which is not only translated by them, but which “inhabits them, and is inseparable from them” (Merleau-Ponty, 1972, 212). Expression brings the meaning into existence, opening a new dimension to our experience.

This reciprocity defines verticality as a round trip whose goal is depth, which is an ontological dimension and the task of philosophy itself. Indeed, philosophy deepens, penetrating all dimensions of existence, awakening them to the world and reactivating their relational senses. When the reflection assumes this task, it delves into the unreflective, takes it out of the ignorance of itself and makes existence appear to us as being distinct to as a mere duplicate of life. This does not mean, however, that reflection loses its own character or that it pretends to ignore its origins (Merleau-Ponty, 1989, 56). Since all reflection is rooted in a pre-reflective, the phenomenologist maintains the productive tension between the two.

In existence there is only a partial coincidence between the unreflective and the reflection and, therefore, the philosopher is—as in Husserl—a perpetual beginner: he does not consider any knowledge or experience as definitively acquired, and accepts the infinite nature of the phenomenological task. This implies that there is no pure thought, but always incardinated and in motion thanks, in part, to the unthoughts<sup>4</sup> that act as those hollows between thoughts that are neither contrary to what has already been thought nor objectified thoughts, but rather the invisible side of any philosophical work, the one which no deconstruction can exhaust because it is what interrogates us.

A parallel tension to the one that takes place between the reflective and the unreflective, the thought and the unthought is that of the dependence of philosophy on non-philosophy: the latter constitutes the initial, constant and final situation of the former. Hence philosophy is only the “renewed experience in making its own beginning” (Merleau-Ponty, 1972, IX). Thus, phenomenological philosophy can be practised as a style of thinking, that which exists as a movement before being thought, and whose thought wills to seize the meaning of the world or of history as that meaning comes into being.

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<sup>4</sup> Merleau-Ponty affirms that there is an “unthought” in Husserl and defines it, citing Heidegger as that which, through an author’s work, and only through it, comes to us as that which has never yet been thought of (Merleau-Ponty, 1960a, 202).



As we have highlighted (López Saénz, 2022b), this movement affects both existence and the phenomenology that reflects upon it, the phenomenology which has understood the intertwined movement between the natural and the transcendental, between the given and the horizon which is not given. This is how Merleau-Ponty conceives being-at-a-distance which is necessary to reflect and which, as for Husserl, is neither a content of consciousness nor the correlate of an act, but rather a deep existential movement of transcendence which is my very being as “the simultaneous contact with my own being and with the world’s being” (Merleau-Ponty, 1972, 432). This ontological contact is the native abode of all rationality. Therefore, Merleau-Ponty identifies the *cogito* with the involvement in the world. The *cogito* acquires the sense of existential experience and it must be an effort to apprehend it in its movement. This is how Merleau-Ponty continues the movement of phenomenology without forgetting the unreflective and the question of origins and the pre-reflective. By counting on them, the *cogito* does not produce a reflection of *survol*, but a re-flection or a turning in on itself of the fabric of relations which is existence. To put this re-flection into practice, he develops phenomenological intentionality.

In *The Structure of Behavior* he already considers perceptual intentionality, not as a logical relation, but as a lived relation of the “adumbrations’ to the ‘things’ which they present, of the perspectives to the ideal significations which are intended through them” (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, 237). A few years later, he will reactivate total intentionality (Fink) which is beyond the intentionality of the act and includes the latent intentionality of life as well as operating intentionality (Husserl)<sup>5</sup>. The operating intentionality makes possible both the reappréhension of the total intention of existence and the understanding of the phenomenology of genesis (Merleau-Ponty, 1972, XIII). In contrast with the intentionality of representation, this is “a deeper intentionality, which others have called existence” (Merleau-Ponty, 1972, 141).

Operating intentionality arises from the pre-reflexive background of acts and from the incessant movement of existence toward the world and others. It is not consciousness that “moves” towards things, but existence itself is movement, and this is not a metaphor; rather, as Poirée says, Merleau-Ponty chooses a “lexicon that is not that of consciousness, but that of existence” in order to oppose dichotomies (Poirée, 1999, 63). For this reason, the operating intentionality can be considered “existential,” since it founds the fundamental structure of temporality (*Zeitigung*), and given that it is the “*Urstiftung* of a point of time” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, 227, 173), a structure that is also part of the body, constantly propelling it beyond its present. Such is the move-

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<sup>5</sup> Regarding this, see: (López Saénz, 2017).

ment of intentional life, that beneath the intentionality of the act, “we must recognize an ‘operating’ intentionality (*fungierende Intentionalität*) which makes the former possible” (Merleau-Ponty, 1972, 509) and which does not objectify that to which it is directed, but instead is opened up to its object.

Like other phenomenologists of existence (Sartre, 1947), Merleau-Ponty considers intentionality to be Husserl’s most important discovery, because it makes it possible to overcome both the sensualism and the intellectualism that preceded him and that still threaten to establish themselves today in our understanding of existence. Three years after the publication of his *Phénoménologie de la perception*, he claimed that the work arose from a question he had been asking himself for 10 years: “how to get out of idealism without falling back into the naiveté of realism?” (Merleau-Ponty, 1997, 66). He responds by “continuing” phenomenology, understood as a dynamic and descriptive method of existence, but above all as “the philosophy itself” (Merleau-Ponty, 1952, 246), because phenomenology is neither constructivism nor materialism; its concerns are with phenomena. In an analogous way, Levinas thinks that Husserlian phenomenology rejoins the great currents of Western idealism at the same time that it takes the main intuitions that give value to contemporary realism (Levinas, 1998, 48), since it simultaneously contemplates exteriority and interiority thanks, firstly, to the intentionality towards the exterior and interior world and, secondly, to the reduction, which, “has made possible the discovery of the intentional implications on the basis on which the abstract object regains a concrete meaning” (Levinas, 1998, 110). From the Levinasian point of view, the reduction allows us to understand that the movement back to ourselves is as if it were divided by the inverse movement towards the outside.

Now, if for Husserl that movement was the life of the transcendental ego, Merleau-Ponty believes that in so doing he reduces life to the thought of living when in reality their order is reversed: first one lives and then one thinks. The concrete unity of existence is not the result of constitutive operations that dissociate the form and content of existence with the “purpose only of extracting the content, of turning it into an object for the “thought of” (Merleau-Ponty, 2003, 33). He considers illusory this distinction of form and content. Both idealism, which prioritizes the former, and empiricism, which favors the latter, lose the rich unity of meaning.

Merleau-Ponty opposes a passivity that operates in all our acts to the constituent self and its full activity. Therefore, he defends a subject that is not a constituent, but rather an instituting and instituted subject. To understand this, it is necessary to take into account that the French phenomenologist translates as “institution” the Husserlian term *Stiftung* which, in *The Origin of Geometry*, designated the task of history. Merleau-Ponty interprets *Stiftung* as the relationship between matter and form or as a relationship of

*Fundierung*<sup>6</sup>: form integrates within itself the content until the latter finally appears as a mere mode of form itself. But conversely, content remains in the nature of a radical contingency (Merleau-Ponty, 1972, 451). Hence, Merleau-Ponty restores the dialectic of form and content as reciprocal action (Merleau-Ponty, 1972, 147). Several years later, he would define *Stiftung* as “those events of an experience which endow the experience with durable dimensions, in relation to which a whole series of other experiences will make sense, will form a thinkable evolution or a history” (Merleau-Ponty, 2003, 124). The institution establishes dimensions and these are characterized by a plurality of relationships woven in different directions (Merleau-Ponty, 2003, 25).

The French phenomenologist realizes that there is not a constituting subject and an object constituted by consciousness, but a subject which institutes and is instituted by history. It institutes meanings that reveal it and make it explicit. An analogy can be drawn between the relation essence-existence: the latter “is not an order of facts (like ‘psychic facts’) capable of being reduced to others or to which they can reduce themselves, but the ambiguous *milieu* of their communication” (Merleau-Ponty, 1972, 194). The French phenomenologist also sheds light on another of the misunderstandings of phenomenology: the Husserlian essentialism as radically opposed to existentialism. On the one hand, Husserl’s essences are nothing without the individual; on the other hand, essences are destined to bring back all the living relationships of experience. When Husserl assures that every transcendental reduction is necessarily eidetic,

...it is clear that the essence is here not the end, but a means, that our effective involvement in the world is precisely what has to be understood [...] The need to go through essences does not mean that philosophy takes them as its object, but, on the contrary, that our existence is too tightly held in the world to be able to know itself as such at the moment of its involvement, and that it requires the field of ideality in order to know and conquer its facticity. (Merleau-Ponty, 1972, 9)

### 3. MERLEAU-PONTY’S EXISTENTIAL PHENOMENOLOGY

It has been said that, in the Merleau-Pontian texts of 1945, existence functions “in the form of a fully operating concept, rather than as a vague tribute to the spirit of time” (Bimbenet, 2004, 104), that is to say, to existentialism<sup>7</sup>. We must add that

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<sup>6</sup> Merleau-Ponty interprets genetically the Husserlian *Fundierung* as a two-way relationship in which the founding term—time, the unreflective, the fact, language, perception—is primary in the sense that the founded is given as a determination or explicitation of the founding, which prevents the latter from reabsorbing the former, and the founding only is made manifest through the founded.

<sup>7</sup> In a letter to D. Mahnke, Husserl similarly considers existential philosophy as an all-dominating fashion (Heffernan, 2022, 6).

*Phenomenology of Perception* thematizes the multiple dimensions of existence from the phenomenological standpoint. Its author preferred to speak of the “philosophy of existence” and not of existentialism, because the latter was associated too much with Sartre (Sartre, 1959, 247), while Merleau-Ponty wanted to go to the origins of the question of existence in Kierkegaard, Husserl, Heidegger, Marcel and Bergson. Unlike the latter, however, he distinguishes existence both from the life of consciousness and from the *élan vital*. Nor did he consider existence to manifest itself in privileged experiences such as anguish, boredom, nausea, etc., but rather as the horizon from which each “figure” stands out to undertake that active becoming that is existence (Merleau-Ponty, 1966, 76).

He defines phenomenological or existential philosophy as “the task, not of explaining the world or of discovering its ‘conditions of possibility,’ but rather of expressing an experience of the world, a contact with the world which precedes all thought *about* the world” (Merleau-Ponty, 1996, 36). He characterizes the philosophy of existence by its themes, mainly by “incarnation” (rather than “situation”). He illustrates it with the distinction—coming from Marcel—between existing things and objects: the former are given *leibhaftig* (in flesh and blood), as in perceptive intuition (Merleau-Ponty, 1959, 254). In addition, existentialists inherited from Marcel a way of philosophizing about “mysteries” or problems with which they were engaged, which Wrathall has called “existential phenomena” (Wrathall, 2006, 32).

For Merleau-Ponty, “existence” means, primarily, the experience of the lived body and of its motor intentionality, or an

...intentionality that ties together the stages of my exploration, the aspects of the thing, and the two series to each other is neither the mental subject’s connecting activity nor the ideal connections of the object. It is the transition that as carnal subject I effect from one phase of movement to another. (Merleau-Ponty, 1960a, 211)

This motor intentionality is the principal mode of the operating intentionality to which we have referred, and which we have termed “existential,” due to the fact that it is the root of that exploratory movement that is existence and existence “is constituted in the apprehension which my body takes upon it; it is not first of all a meaning for the understanding, but a structure accessible to inspection by the body” (Merleau-Ponty, 1972, 369). The relation between the motor intentionality which anticipates objectives and movement is not measured by representations, but is direct and immediate.

The body incarnates and performs existence. “Neither body nor *existence* can be considered as the original of the human being, since they presuppose each other, and the body is stabilized or generalized existence, and existence a perpetual incarnation”

(Merleau-Ponty, 1972, 166). The lived body belongs to the order of the phenomenal, to the order of the in-itself-for-itself. Hence, it is the basis of subjectivity and, at the same time, the power of world, because it updates existence and integrates mundane space and time into corporeal space and time. The centrality that the subjective-objective body occupies in the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty derives from his interest in *Gestalt* psychology, as well as in Goldstein's research into the structure of the organism. Both interests will be strengthened by his studies of the Husserlian manuscripts from *Ideen II* and *III*, and *Die Krisis*. They made such an impact on him that, a year before he died, he wondered if he had ever Husserl; he replied that he was always interested in his studies of the body and that, since Husserl dedicated himself to them, he began to speak in another language (Merleau-Ponty, 1960b, 9).

From his perspective, Husserl is one of the philosophers who have examined the body in greatest depth: as an organ of the "I can," as a capacity of sensing and being sensed, as subject-object, as the zero point of spatial-temporal orientation, and, finally, as relation with the other (Merleau-Ponty, 1995, 106–108), although all these aspects of the body act globally and dynamically. Like him, and in dialogue with the sciences of his time, Merleau-Ponty conceives of the body as a sensory-motor organ, since it is the being which is capable of moving itself. Perception is correlated with this movement by which the body transcends itself towards the world, without ever losing sight of it, since, as in Husserl, the body is the center of orientation (Husserl, 1952, 124) and the foundation of spiritual activities.

The unity of the body and consciousness is manifested in any lived experience, as revealing unity that there is no interiority without exteriority, and vice versa. Likewise, the body is not defined in opposition to the spirit, but is conceived as spiritualized, while the spirit only has incarnated meaning. In other words, the body is *esprit captif* (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, 294)<sup>8</sup>, a natural structure which has been stabilized in existence by virtue of a double movement composed, first, by a spiritualization or sublimation of the body and, later, by the incarnation of the spirit in all the activities. This dynamic explains that the humanity of the human being merges into his corporeity (Merleau-Ponty, 1995, 269, 277), but the body is not just a level of materiality. It is the subject of pre-personal existence, while the self is the subject of personal existence. However, both are united in their genesis: the one is not annulled by the development of the other, but rather the two are intermittent in their coexistence: thus, for instance, the diminution of the intensity of personal life—due to illness, or of acute

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<sup>8</sup> Husserl also understands the lived body as the embodiment of the soul (*Verkörperung der Seelen*) (Husserl, 1976b, 220).

pain—makes the pre-personal life stand out; in contrast, my conscious actions seem to blur my organism.

Beyond the matter-spirit opposition, the core of Merleau-Ponty's concern from his first works is the movement by which the corporeal being transcends its mere materiality to attain a significant existence and, conversely, the fact that all meaning is rooted in bodily life. The body is not, therefore, passive matter, but a knowledge of the world and my relationships with it that has settled into habits, skills and customs established through their repeated exercise. This knowledge proceeds from the inside out and vice versa; it is not a particular case of knowledge, but a certain bodily wisdom as well as the "base of a *praxis*" (Merleau-Ponty, 2011, 141). Our bodily experience of movement is furthermore the expression of sense, and even a praktognosia, given that "my body has its world or understands its world, without having to make use of representations" (Merleau-Ponty, 1972, 164). After centuries of representative philosophies of existence,

everything changes when a phenomenological or existential philosophy assigns itself the task, not of explaining the world or of discovering its "conditions of possibility," but rather of formulating an experience of the world, a contact with it which precedes all *thought* about the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1996, 36)

and theoretical-practical and axiological contact is made possible by the body.

Like Claudel, Merleau-Ponty seems to consider that matter and spirit are two realities in movement and that this is found everywhere where there is variation of existence (Claudel, 1984, 65). Sense (*sens*) is the real artificer of existence, and time is the "sense of life" (Claudel, 1984, 48). With the term *sens* Claudel refers to that of a water course, to the meaning of a phrase, to that of a material, of smell. This is how Merleau-Ponty also understands it and it is this sense that allows us to understand the movement of existence.

There is no need to intellectually synthesize this existence; its meaning does not come from some synthesis of identification, but from the background of fundamental passivity (my body, the horizon, the field) from which all activity and all figure stands out (figural movement) and which demonstrates that all sense is "pregnant." There is, as such, passivity within activity. Furthermore, not all synthesis is actively produced by consciousness, but the passive temporal synthesis invades all sense and all act: "the spacial synthesis and the synthesis of the object are founded on this unfolding of time" (Merleau-Ponty, 1972, 276).

As paradoxical as it may seem, the same interrelationship takes place in movement, since this is not a mere change of place, but, as Gestalt teaches, perception itself



and, as Merleau-Ponty asserts, following the lead of Husserl, I would have no notion of movement if I did not inhabit my body and the Earth, which are the ground of all rest and motion (Merleau-Ponty, 1972, 491).

Movement and bodily actions are at the origin of thought and reflection, and not as a level to be overcome by other higher ones, but as modes of re-flection which is neither merely visual nor solely intellectual, but, as we have seen a transition from the unreflective to the reflective that has repercussions on knowledge and on the subjective-objective being. It is not a question of a full adequacy between two dimensions, i.e., between thought and reality or between the sensing and the sensed in the case of *Sentir*, which is not the grasping of objects, but a global apprehension (perceptive, affective, etc.). Husserl himself considers that the body exercises a kind of reflection on itself (Husserl, 1973, 128) that does not convert what it grasps into an object, but also captures it as a subject. The partial coincidence between the reflecting and the reflected takes place in the *untouchable*, observes Merleau-Ponty in a note of 1960 (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, 307); this *untouchable* is the true negative, which is not consciousness, but

an Other, a hollow (*creux*), like the *de facto* invisible (my eyes for me) which is produced in vision, or the *de jure* invisible which excludes that I may see myself in movement, because *Wahrnehmen* and *sich beweiben* emerge from one another. A sort of reflection by Ec-stasy. (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, 292)

Merleau-Pontian descriptions inspired by Husserl—of the touching-touched, the seeing-visible are not only decisive for thinking about the sensible being and for transcending dualisms, but they also speak to us of a bodily reflection that owes more to movement than to an intellectual operation. Its agent is not strictly the body, but rather the invisible schema. The body schema is ontologized in the last notes of the philosopher, becoming a mixture of the transcendent with the phenomenal. The movement, in turn, becomes a disclosive of being (Merleau-Ponty, 2011, 173) particularly of our being-in-the-world.

The movement that goes from experience to its expression (López Sáenz, 2015) is that of a committed subject and the trace of a behavior. This movement unfolds expressively and “expression” is defined as the “appearance of an existence” (Merleau-Ponty, 2011, 183). Hence, existence is and manifests itself in movement and the perception of movement as expressive—as *reprise expresse* and *concentration du sens* (Merleau-Ponty, 2011, 66)—coincides with the experience of existential significance. Thus, meaning and expression owe as much to consciousness as to movement, indeed “we are conscious because we are mobile and we are mobile because we are conscious”



(Merleau-Ponty, 1968, 17). This implies, as Merleau-Ponty himself recognizes, that consciousness is conceived as that which resides within mobility and vice versa. To tell the truth, consciousness and movement are two abstract aspects of existence. As we have seen, there is only embodied consciousness and consciousness carries out its intentionality thanks to the corporeal power to significantly frequent the world and even to carry out motor syntheses (integration of movements and actions), since synthesis is the result and not a condition of possibility of the movement of knowledge.

The body schema is the agent of these motor syntheses and, in general, of the syntheses of my relations with the world and with others. They are the ones that generate senses that are not only meanings, but also directions. Since the body already produces them through its gestures and its expressive movements of existence, we can say that this is what is expressed by the body. Expression is not only the externalizing function of something, but the movement towards the interior and towards the exterior that is existence.

The French phenomenologist refers to the body in 1945 as bodily mediation between the moving object and its background (Merleau-Ponty, 1972, 322). In 1953, he says that the body mediates between my “indivision” and the division of the world in order to configure a body spatiality that unites them and guarantees the continuity of movement as well as motor syntheses (Merleau-Ponty, 2011, 60). Conceived from the body, the movement of existence is no longer understood spatially, nor as a series of past, present and future moments, but in an affective and intentional way, because existence is neither a set of positions nor determinations, but a modulation in the relations between them facilitated by certain gaps that are not only empty, but also disappropriations of the ego and passive intervals that are part of the activity, that is, of existing. This is, as we have seen, activity, but not only theoretical or pragmatic, but above all practical, affective and as attentive to intelligence as to sensitivity.

I do not exist as consciousness or as a pure appearance, but thanks to the fact that I have a visible world and body that have invisible sides. Similarly, existence is “a self-presence that is an absence from oneself” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, 303). Emptiness is therefore necessary to establish relationships; it is part of existence and not only as a lack, but as a hollow that allows movement and transformation. With this emptiness, Merleau-Ponty defies the Sartrean analysis into being (existence as consciousness) and nothing (existence as a thing) (López Sáenz, 2022c). In recent investigations, we have shown that Zambrano agrees with Merleau-Ponty on this point<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> This is what I stated in my presentation, “El vacío que crea en pintura. Zambrano y el budismo” (VI Congreso Ibero-Americano de Filosofía, “Verdad, Justicia, Libertad,” Perspectivas plurales desde la filosofía”, 27-1-2023, Universidad de Oporto, Portugal). See also the “creative nothingness”

#### 4. THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF SENSING AND BEING SENSED

In a previous book, I described striking similarities between both philosophers, particularly between their phenomenologies of sensing (López Sáenz, 2013). Not only does Zambrano know phenomenology thanks to Ortega's teaching, but also through her own readings and reflections. In her exile in Paris, she met Sartre, Beauvoir and Camus. In a letter to Ferrater Mora, she claimed to have attended a Merleau-Ponty lecture in Paris in 1957 (Zambrano, 2022b, 147), but never quotes him. He agrees, however, with Merleau-Ponty that philosophy has to think unthoughts and "hidden clarities" (Zambrano, 2007, 107). It would seem that it she who says: "phenomenology's task is to reveal the mystery of the world and of reason" (Merleau-Ponty, 1972, XVI), i.e., the dark logos (Zambrano) or the invisible (Merleau-Ponty), even the logos of the aesthetic world (Husserl).

She values the discontinuous phenomenological conception of the clarity (Zambrano, 2019b, 45) and praises Husserl's return "to the things themselves" as well as his search for truth thanks to the intentionality of consciousness (Zambrano, 2007, 103), but she feels closer to Kierkegaard and Unamuno (Zambrano, 2003), as well as to Ortega's vital reason, that she conceives in movement and as living, creative and poetic reason, which is an eminently mediating reason.

Both thinkers link life with reason and experience with the revealing expression of its meaning<sup>10</sup>. They consider that experience is prior to the *methode* and it is sedimented in the course of life. As we have seen studying Merleau-Ponty, experience is made possible by the body. For Zambrano, "experience" is to realize that we inhabit our bodies that support pre-existence (Zambrano, 2022a, 856) from which existence and personal life are generated. The Zambranian person is realized by transcending, projecting and coexisting in history, since individuals cannot exist in isolation.

Similarly, for Merleau-Ponty, coexistence and inter-corporeity are not reduced to a sum of intentions towards the same objects, but neither do they exhaust the incessant movement of relationships that we establish with others in the world. What is specific about the field of existence and sense is not so much that it guarantees objectivity as that it incessantly re-institutes the field of communicative relations and interactions. Unlike the Husserlian appresentation of the other ego through his/her body, Merleau-Ponty asserts that we have an immediate and direct experience of the other subjects in co-

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(Zambrano, 2019a, 252). The feeling of nothingness appears in the originary sensing, in the entrails (Zambrano, 1991, 165).

<sup>10</sup> Zambrano says that a true experience is the one that reveals meaning (Zambrano, 1939, 295), although is undeniable that all revelation occurs throughout history and expression.

existence. Therefore, the problem of the other disappears, because he/she is, like me, a subject who institutes me at the same time that he/she is instituted by me.

In his later works, Merleau-Ponty studies these questions in relation to that other existential phenomenon: that of my relationships with others and, therefore, with history and freedom (Merleau-Ponty, 1959, 256). He considers subjectivities as different opennesses, as diverse stages which belong to the stage of Being (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, 317). He ontologizes the field as a whole of vertical or carnal Being. He refers as the *vertical* to what Sartre calls “existence,” but for Sartre immediately becomes the operation of the for-itself. Therefore, intercorporeity or *Ineinander* (of the others in us and of us in them) “must be carried out within the perspective of ontology” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, 222). This implies the understanding of intercorporeity as flesh (*chair*): the key concept of the Merleau-Pontian new ontology.

It is my contention that “flesh” can be considered as an operative concept (Fink, 1976, 203)<sup>11</sup> in Merleau-Ponty’s thought as well as in the history of philosophy; i.e., flesh operates in the concept of *physis*, in that of element or *arche*. In fact, Merleau-Ponty introduces the concept of *chair* to erase the traces of positivity that could still remain in the “body,” in front of which, the flesh is life in movement that originates that sensitive re-flexivity to which we have become referred. Like Zambrano, freedom is possibility of movement and reversibility<sup>12</sup>.

Flesh is not substance, but the circularity between the interior and the exterior that inhabits the body (Merleau-Ponty, 1960b, 9) and surrounds us everywhere. Nevertheless, the flesh of the world is not self-sensing (*se sentir*) as is my flesh; it is sensible and not sentient (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, 304). In contrast, the flesh of the body is one and the other, but it is only an event of the flesh, which is the universal matrix of relationships. Flesh is generativity, like the *physis*; it is not, however, opposed to the *logos*, but culminates in it. For this reason, although the flesh of the world cannot sense, it is part of the “movement that touches and movement that is touched” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, 310). This movement is not an act of consciousness.

Zambrano says something similar about life: we feel it as it passes through the channel that it excavates, and whereby a truth is revealed (Zambrano, 2008, 23) to “living reason,” which is “a reason in motion, a reason that moves like life” (Zambrano, 2006, 132). Living reason is not limited to conceptualizing life, but is done with it and, as *poiesis*, it is generative.

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<sup>11</sup> Fink affirms that Husserl uses certain concepts such as “phenomenon,” “epoche,” “constitution,” etc. in an operative way and to open questions. They all represent problems that remain “open” and that have an ontological scope. These operational concepts are neither purely intellectual nor empirical.

<sup>12</sup> On this subject in both philosophers, see: (López Sáenz, 2013, 137–167).

As far as movement is concerned, neither is it something that is perceived in a purely subjective way, i.e., from the touching towards a touched object, but rather it can be experienced as the touchable or what could be touched, as virtuality and open possibility. This implies that the flesh of the world belongs to the actual objective order and to the virtual order, that is, it is not only the set of things, but also includes the sedimented and potential meanings as well as the complementary process of sense-bestowing and sense-receiving. It is consciousness that bestows sense, but embodied consciousness is not that of the epistemological subject, but rather that which installs us in the world before we have knowledge of it.

Accordingly, Zambrano says that the root of existence is the *sentir originario* (originary sensing) and that the existent is the human being who feels he exists (Zambrano, 2007, 160). As for Merleau-Ponty, “originary sensing consists in sensing oneself; sensing oneself directly or sensing oneself alluded to in all sensing” (Zambrano, 2019b, 92). This reflexivity is necessary to feel and to know about feeling. Inherited knowledge is not enough to achieve it. That is why there is philosophy: we need to think (act) in order to decipher the sensing. A knowledge about the soul is, then, essential (Zambrano, 2008, 24).

Merleau-Ponty’s ultimate goal is to underline the ontological relationship of the world with consciousness and with the body within the flesh, this being “the formative medium of the object and the subject” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, 193). As such, flesh is an ontogenetic movement that goes through all the levels of reality in order to apprehend its articulations. Even reason participates in this movement of the flesh and its polymorphism: “Reason too is *in* this horizon—promiscuity with Being and the world” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, 292). Consequently, this phenomenology of existence requires “an enlarged reason (*raison élargie*), which remains the task of our age” (Merleau-Ponty, 1960a, 154), a reason that embraces emotions, affections, feelings, sensuality. We could call it “existential reason” because it goes beyond intellectual reflection and beyond a reflection opposite to the sensible. It is true that existence is neither completely rational nor irrational, but that movement of constant exchange between fate and reason. Hence, Merleau-Ponty affirms that existential philosophy arises in the moment in which reason recognizes both its power and its limits and, therefore, this philosophy would not be a new movement, but rather “it is in the order of the day for more than a century” (Merleau-Ponty, 1997, 67). Zambrano, likewise, conceives her poetic reason as a reason wider than rationalist reason, a reason capable of penetrating the depths.

Existential phenomenology makes this “experience of rationality” when it thinks about the emergence of the thought of life. Guided by this reason, philosophy

becomes a “radical” questioning even of itself and of its history. It does not pretend to have the last word, but it is a call to the responsibility of reason that demands its constant self-criticism and that continues to explore the multiple dimensions of existence that we have outlined here.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The phenomenology of existence was started by Husserl and continued by a good number of scholars who did not avoid thinking about the problems of their time. We have wanted to point out that 20<sup>th</sup> century Spanish philosophy, exemplified by that of Zambrano, has received the influence of phenomenology and has put it into practice from her own situation. Further we have shown that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century phenomenology still constitutes a fruitful way of critical and self-critical thought to describe lived experiences, and even to develop a non-dualist new ontology. In Zambrano there is also a fundamental ontological concern as well as an opposition to dichotomies. A topic for future research could be the relationships between Merleau-Pontian flesh and entrails, which are for Zambrano the seat of sensing.

Unlike other phenomenologies of existence, Merleau-Ponty's did not seek to reverse Husserl's foundation of ontology in phenomenology; rather, he sought in phenomenology an answer to the existential situation and its pre-reflective origins. Inspired by Husserl, he understood the body as zero point of all orientations and relations. He developed the *fungierende Intentionalität* as bodily and motor intentionality. He soon realized that he continued to conceive of the body as a visible object with an invisible side, while he wanted to delve into the carnal existence that links the objective and subjective dimensions of existence.

Hence, in his latest works, he transcends the esthesiology of the body towards the ontology of the flesh (of the body and of the world). The flesh of the world means that “world” is not only the set of things, but also includes the consciousness that is inscribed in it. Embodying the world, and being embodied-in-the-world, the French phenomenologist affirms the ontological continuity as a transition “synthesis” between the active and passive, subjective and objective dimensions of existence in co-existence. Both dimensions are also fundamental for Zambrano, who in her text “Nostalgia for the Earth” (1933), exhorts us to recover the gravity and expression of that sensible world (Zambrano, 2019a, 173), of the human contact with the earth and of its sustaining passivity. The earth enables all movement and rest, like the Husserlian Earth-*Boden*. Reason extended to this generative movement enjoys the same prerogatives as Zambranian poetic reason. In 1937 she names it to characterize the “marrow”

of Machado's poetry and describes it as a "reason of love integrating the rich substance of the world" (Zambrano, 1989, 68–69).

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