

# Panpsychism in the first person

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*"(In the existentialist branch of phenomenology), writes a critic, one has turned off the mind. It's just the opposite. It has been put everywhere, because we are not mind and body, we are not a consciousness facing the world, but embodied mind, being-in-the-world" Maurice Merleau-Ponty*

**Abstract:** A central presupposition of science is that objectivity is universal. This does not only create a blindspot in knowledge, but also forces one to ignore it. Several strategies were accordingly adopted to overcome this ignorance, along with the standard divide between continental and analytic philosophy. One of them is *Phenomenology*, with its project of stripping the layers of interpretation by way of a complete suspension of judgment (*epochè*), and evaluating any claim of knowledge from such a basis of "pure consciousness". Another one is *pan-experientialist metaphysics*, that puts back pure experience in the very domain that was deprived of it by the act of objectification. I compare these two approaches, thereby establishing a hierarchy of radicality between avoiding the blindspot from the outset and compensating for it retrospectively.

## 1. Introduction

Pure experience is elusive because it *is* not. It is lying at the permanent blindspot of what there is, for the mere reason that it constitutes the precondition of anything that *is*, namely of anything that may *appear*. Conversely, sharpening perceptual differences, improving the efficiency of technology, increasing the discrimination of phenomena by scientific theories, perpetuates the blindspot of living and knowing. Something, which being no *thing* is all the more easy to forget, remains in

the dead angle of knowledge; and no move forward can *ever*, in *principle*, account for what has been left behind by this very push.

This impossibility clause expresses a limitation of science. But science also has a more positive teaching in store about the issue of lived experience. Indeed, scientific advances progressively squeeze the domain of their own silent lived precondition, thereby avoiding incorrect characterizations. The background premise of perceiving, reasoning, and knowing is found to be no entelechy, no “*élan vital*”, no ghost-like soul, and no spirit; for the task of those speculative entities has been carefully identified by scientific research and ascribed to objective “mechanisms”. Even the words “mind” and “consciousness”, which were supposed to capture the residual enigma left in knowledge by objectification, have been redefined in terms of blind cognitive functions. Mind is understood as a system of information processing that allows problem solving and decision making. As for consciousness, it is torn between its original meaning which includes lived experience, and a more abstract meaning that only encompasses the functions of meta-cognition and synthesis of representations (Block et al. 1999, p. 375).

To sum up, scientific advances are correlated with a lexical retreat. What escapes scientific characterization becomes elusive, because any name which may be given to it, is confiscated and endowed with a cognitive meaning. With no name and no method of handling, “this” is considered (Cohen & Dennett 2011) as “outside the scope of science” (which is correct), and thereby negligible (which is disputable).

The stakes of the search of a name for the elusive background are then high; not, of course, to elaborate a self-contradicting objective science of the pre-objective, but to avoid neglecting the latter. To begin with, the word “consciousness” may have unwanted connotations. Bertrand Russell pointed out that

consciousness is supposed to be *intentional* (to be consciousness of some object), and that it can hardly encompass non-intentional states like pleasure or anxiety. Moreover, consciousness is usually associated with reflectivity, whereas what we are trying to pick out comes prior to any reflection. “Pure experience”, borrowed from William James (1976, p. 117), is a reasonable alternative. Indeed, experience accommodates non-directional tonalities, and it is said to be “pure” in view of its anticipating any conceptual structure or self-realization. So much so that it has been found suitable by the Japanese philosopher and founder of the Kyôtô school, Nishida Kitarô (1990, p. 3), as a valid expression of the deconstructive way of Zen. Yet, the word “experience” (as any other word that purports to refer to what is referring) also has its drawbacks. It suggests that there is a *subject* of experience, be it a “thin”, non-permanent, subject (Strawson 2006, p. 191). The subject-object polarity is still roaming around.

An alternative lexicon has then been suggested by authors who lean towards panpsychism but are reluctant to ascribe elementary entities of the material world the elaborated synthetic, reflective, and self-centered consciousness which is realized in human beings. Accordingly, their alternative vocabulary relies on mass terms rather than on count terms. Whitehead, after Peirce, offered the word “feeling” (Whitehead 1929, p. 236). William Clifford also used this term to designate a kind of subject-free experience (“*sentitur* is all that can be said”); but immediately after, he noticed that a feeling is usually a *complex*, and that we still need a name for its “element” (Clifford 1879, p. 84-85). “Mind stuff” was accordingly retained by Clifford as a denomination of the simple, plain, subject-free “feel” of which the universe is said to be made. Much later, even the mentalistic undertones of the panpsychist vocabulary was found misleading, and names for some sort of “proto-mental” *continuum* were sought. Herbert Feigl (1960) chose the

neutral word “quality”, and Ken Wilber (2000) adopted the fascinating word “depth”, to capture the elusive proto-*psychè*. Even Nishida Kitarô (1958) abandoned the Jamesian expression “*pure experience*” in favor of a more idiosyncratic “*place of absolute nothingness*”, which aims at denoting a process of self-hollowing out that gives room to manifested beings.

At this point, it is clear that:

(i) Science is leaving a gaping hole, which is nothing less than the most glaring evidence.

(ii) Science prevents one from conceiving this hole as some occult entity or property that is formally similar to objective entities and properties, yet (mysteriously) inaccessible to its methods.

If we wish to obtain an exhaustive framework in which to accommodate the seeing as well as the seen, the manifestation as well as the manifest, some dramatic initiative must then be taken.

This kind of initiative can develop along two different directions that were mixed up until now. These two directions were taken, respectively, by analytic philosophy and by continental philosophy. The first approach is tantamount to moving in the same “progressive” direction as scientific research, yet speculating in order to identify a missing property of things. The second approach consists in adopting the opposite direction of “regression” towards the “realm of the mothers of knowledge” (Husserl 1976, p. 174), namely towards the experiential background out of which the world of manifest objects is picked out and constituted. I will document both approaches in succession, starting with a critical exposition of the “progressive” one, which identifies with panpsychist metaphysics, and then defending the “regressive” one, as the most promising in terms of making sense of our being-in-a-world.

## 2. Panpsychism as an *a posteriori* filling in of the blind spot of science

Panpsychist metaphysics starts from a naturalist assumption and two crucial arguments (Skrbina 2005, p. 250). The assumption is that there is only one reality, which is *physical*, and optionally that physical reality consists of interacting particles of matter (Nagel 1979). The two key arguments are: (1) “the phenomenon whose existence is more certain than the existence of anything else (is) experience” (Strawson 2006), and (2) there can be no “emergence” of experience, in view of its radical heterogeneity to any standard physical property. The first argument is usually considered as very powerful. It was expressed as a compelling *deduction* by Descartes (“I think therefore I am”, or “I am thinking therefore I exist.” (Descartes 1985, p. 127)) But these cartesian sentences are deceitful in so far as their syllogistic form is utterly restrictive. Behind their logical pattern, there is an immediate intuitive certainty (Nishida 1990) popping out from the obvious impossibility of *living* their negation. Even Dennett, the archetypal opponent of the thesis of certainty, has retreated from (or at least nuanced) his initial assertion that conscious experience is somehow an illusion (Blackmore 2002). In a metaphysical context, this chief argument turns out to have momentous ontological consequences. Bertrand Russell has expressed it beautifully, in terms that are reminiscent of William Clifford’s construal of mental stuff as a basic constituent of the universe: “Everything that we know of (the world’s) *intrinsic* character is derived from the mental side” (Russell 1992, p. 402). In other terms, we can access the world as it is in itself only by the direct acquaintance offered by lived experience (Griffin 1997); any other kind of knowledge is derivative and subject to doubt. The same conviction was later conveyed by Herbert Feigl (1960), the main proponent of the mind-brain identity theory, who added that, by

contrast with this first-hand, direct, intrinsic, access to what there is, physical science is only concerned by indirect access to observables features and structural knowledge.

Let's come now to the no-emergence argument. This one is more difficult to shield against criticism, but it is reasonably sound. It has gained some credit from Galen Strawson's description of what emergence of unexpected macroscopic features out of the interaction of known microscopic features would require. According to him, "[t]here must be something about X and X alone *in virtue of which* Y emerges, and which is *sufficient* for Y" (Strawson 2006). The emergence of (say) liquidity from an interaction of water molecules is relatively easy to account for, by way of their Van der Waals interactions; but it looks like there is nothing in the physico-chemical description of atoms and molecules "in virtue of which" phenomenal consciousness should arise. This obstacle was obliquely confirmed by a chief proponent of the emergentist thesis: Jaegwon Kim. In his book entitled *Physicalism or something near enough*, the expression "near enough" expresses a challenge to a standard emergentist view of phenomenal consciousness. Indeed, after a reflection in which Kim documents accepted cases of emergent features as "*weakly emergent*" (their emergent status being only *apparent*, due to limitations of our conceptual or perceptive abilities), he concludes that phenomenal consciousness is a *unique* case of *strong* emergence, since it is necessarily unpredictable from the microscopic properties of physical elements (Kim 2005, 2006). *Strong* emergence, here, can be read as a combination of postulated emergence *plus* irreducible ignorance about the "in virtue of which" this should take place. If one is not dogmatic about the postulate, ignorance is what is left.

In this gloomy situation (for emergentism), the panpsychist strategy looks inviting. It amounts to broadening our concept of the physical by adding to it a new kind of property. This new

kind of property purports to be commensurable to what is missing in the physical picture of the world (phenomenal consciousness), yet simple enough to avoid ascribing full-blown conscious minds to every minute physical entity or aggregate of such entities. Since the “psychè” of panpsychism usually encompasses too many advanced features of the human mind, such as reflectivity, self-consciousness, mental processing, complex emotions etc., this word has been replaced by more fundamental terms. The most uncommitted word is “*protopsychism*”, giving rise to the doctrinal denomination “pan-protopsychism”. Another, more precise, one is “experience”, giving rise to “panexperientialism” (Nixon 2010).

But this is only the verbal aspect of a systematic rush towards elementarity. The rush started with Leibniz’ “little perceptions” (Leibniz 1993) of simple monads, which are compared with mathematical differentials, and opposed to the integral “aperception” of high-level monads. The same rush is still developing currently. Attempts at characterizing the elementary spark of phenomenal consciousness have been made by using the standard correspondance between mentality and behavior (Lewtas 2013). The bottom-level experience is then characterized as follows: devoid of structure and intelligence, non-representational, fleeting, transient, repetitive, first-order (as opposed to the second-order thoughts of reflectivity), patchy, homogeneous, yet *sentient*. A (non-trivial) task is to understand how this raw material can be added up, or “integrated”, into a full consciousness: this is the well-known “combination problem” (Seager 1995), which remains a stumbling block of panpsychism.

This being granted, one perceives a strong tension spread across the network of panpsychist doctrines. On the one hand, the basis and starting point of this family of doctrines is first-person experience, and on the other hand, the stance of this (as of any other) speculative metaphysics is objectifying, external,

spectator-like. Even though its concept can be stretched beyond recognition, nature is understood by the culturally dominant view as a horizon of description for objective science, whereas sentience is a concept isolated from the direct acquaintance of our own pre-objective experience. Panpsychism here looks like a baroque combination of idealism and physicalism, which turns out not to be viable in the long run.

The dilemmas of panpsychism are in fact quite acute. To begin with, the choice of taking first-person experience as a starting point is not consistently pursued. At first sight, the sought consistency is achieved by the demand of an ontological continuity in nature (Whitehead 1967) in terms of elementary experiences instead of physical properties. In the same way as the materialist requires that the manifest universe be made of physical entities and properties up to the highest level of organization, the panpsychist claims that it (also) consists in “feelings” or elementary experiences down to the lowest level of organization. But actually, this is a pretence, because unlike in materialism, the ontological continuity of panpsychism does not go together with existential continuity. The ontological continuity reached by materialism arises from constant adoption of the existential stance of intentional directedness and search for objectification of phenomena. True, a massive feature (the experiential *non-thing*) is forgotten or neglected as a consequence of this goal-oriented stance of materialism, but this is the price to be paid for methodological unity and efficiency. By contrast, the ontological continuity of panpsychism (experience all the way down the ladder of an objectified nature) relies on adopting *two* incompatible stances: (i) the receptive and reflective stance needed to realize that the basis of inquiry is indeed lived experience, and (ii) the intentional directedness needed to pinpoint the elements of nature to which experiential properties are ascribed.

A host of difficulties derives from this existential stretching which underpins panpsychism. As mentioned previously, many panpsychists claim to be physicalists, or at least objectivists. But they are bound not to endorse all the consequences of a picture of the objective world derived from physics. This half-way position was beautifully and synthetically expressed by Galen Strawson: a panpsychist is likely to be a physicalist, but not a *physicS-alist*. In other terms, despite her overt commitment to philosophical physicalism, a panpsychist philosopher cannot restrict her ontology to the observable objective properties of actual physics, since she is precisely trying to complete her representation of nature with “feelings”, “depths” or elementary experiences.

One consequence of this unstable position is that physics is only used as a vague inspiration for various plausible narratives about the objective world. Let me give two examples. A mereologically inclined panpsychist may take advantage of a mereologic view of objectified nature to prop up her doctrine. She may establish a one-one correspondence between her atoms of sentience and the elementary particles of high-energy physics, trying to figure out what it is like to be such a particle (Lewtas 2013). By contrast, a holistically inclined variety of panpsychist is likely to prefer the field-theoretic representation of quantum physics (or even classical electromagnetism), thus connecting the power of synthesis of consciousness with the continuum of a field. These two varieties of panpsychists then hold antipodal representations of the world, borrowed from various domains of physics chosen for their analogy to a given function of consciousness. But they also share a common mistake. Both of them seem to ignore that no such representation is to be taken at face value, as a picture of nature-as-it-is-in-itself, but rather as a picture-*like* tool for orienting predictions and actions (Bitbol 1996; Van Fraassen 2010). In other terms, the majority of panpsychist physicalists adopt

alternately a naïve attitude towards physics, by adhering to the dubious ontological claims of its popularizers, and a distant attitude towards the sound epistemological lessons that can be drawn from it.

Another unwelcome consequence of the panpsychists' combination of physicalism and distance with respect to physics, is that they must define the "physical" *in abstracto*. A widespread proposition of this sort is borrowed from Neurath's well-known characterization of physicalism (Neurath 1983): this doctrine is concerned by phenomena *located and extended in space-time*. Panpsychism is then defined as the position that holds that (i) "the universe is spatio-temporal in its fundamental nature" (Strawson 2006), and (ii) spatio-temporally located elements are endowed with protopsychical qualities. Space-time here seems to be given the status of a repository of those "external" entities and qualities whose "interiority" is protopsychical. This may be acceptable from the standpoint of an intentional/objectivistic stance, but not from the standpoint of the receptive/reflective stance. In the latter stance, even the spatial oppositions of internal and external, right or left, higher or lower, are supposed to arise from the structure (Ruyer 2012) and/or activity of the knower. This conflict of two opposite conceptions of space is no novelty. It was already vivid at the beginning of the eighteenth century, when orthodox Newtonians defended an absolutistic version of space, whereas Leibniz considered that space expresses the system of relations of (sentient) monads. And the same conflict was brought to completion by Kant, who contrasted a transcendental realist and a transcendental idealist conception of space-time as "*a priori* forms of sensibility". Thus, even the minimal, *non-physicS*-alist, expression of physicalism is at odds with the allegedly experiential starting point of panpsychism. As Erwin Schrödinger cogently pointed out, once lived experience has been left aside in order to elaborate an objective picture of the

world, “[i]f one tries to put it in or on, as a child puts colour on his uncoloured painting copies, it will not fit. For anything that is made to enter this world model willy-nilly takes the form of scientific assertion of facts; and as such it becomes wrong” (Schrödinger 1986, p. 148)

To recapitulate, panpsychists have so much focused on recovering an ontological continuity in nature without forgetting its experiential feature, that they have shattered their own existential continuity in doing so, thus generating a host of difficulties and conceptual conflicts. Borrowing bits and pieces from physicalism and attempting to bring them to completion by adding a first-person-like ingredient turns out to be a deadlock.

### **3. Phenomenology as *a priori* fullness**

From this point on, the way is open to a completely different strategy that would not only *accommodate* the glaring fact of lived experience, but that would stick to it consistently throughout. This strategy is phenomenology, which is a descendent of *transcendental idealism*. But the alternative strategy is no caricatural or metaphysical version of idealism. Instead of claiming that consciousness is all there is, it contents itself with advocating a receptive/reflective stance and making sense of everything else (including science) from the standpoint of that stance. Husserl’s phenomenology is no theoretical idealism, but rather an attempt at describing faithfully the experiential soil of practical life (Husserl 2007, p. 48). This strategy is no doctrinal assertion about the *nature of Being* (say ideal, as opposed to spatio-temporal), but the uncompromising adoption of a *way of being*.

Let us further realize at this point that the epistemological lessons of modern physics (especially quantum physics) are perfectly consonant with the basic stance of phenomenology. Indeed, from the standpoint of a reflective stance, it is natural to

understand theories in terms of the mental and performative conditions for acting *in* the world, rather than in terms of what they capture of the nature *of* an allegedly independent world. Along with this approach, physical theories are not concerned with *representing* the world as it is in itself, but rather with expressing the structure of a wide class of adaptative transformations. Kant thus showed that the structural core of Newtonian mechanics can be derived from the general preconditions of objective knowledge of spatio-temporal objects called material bodies (Kant 2004). Far from having an empirical origin and a representational status, this structure is provided in advance by the project of objectifying a fraction of what is presented to us in sensible experience. A similar strategy can be adopted to understand reflectively, rather than representationally, the structure of quantum theory (Bitbol 1998, 2011).

Adopting the phenomenological stance then has momentous consequences for the *premises* of the problem of consciousness. Firstly, the starting point of inquiry in experience is not only confirmed by phenomenology but also stabilized and explored. Secondly, from a phenomenological standpoint, no reason is left for sanctifying the “physical” of physicalism. For a phenomenologist, if “physical” is taken to mean “observable in space-time”, adopting a physicalist doctrine is tantamount to turn incorrectly the spatio-temporal objects of perceptive attention and intentional directedness into intrinsically existing beings. And, if “physical” means falling into the domain of validity of physics, or being encompassed by the concepts of a physical theory, it becomes even more obvious to a phenomenologist that no ontological status can be granted to it. Indeed, from a phenomenological standpoint, those concepts are nothing more than byproducts of an enactive (Varela et al. 1992) process of sense making applied to what appears. The basic slogan of panpsychism is thus completely overturned.

According to panpsychists, *there is more to the physical (namely to nature) than what a physics of observable objective properties can tell us* ; and only in this “more” can the nucleus of lived evidence be accommodated. By contrast, along with a phenomenological approach, the said “more” does not come after, but *before* any observation and any theorizing has occurred. Antecedently to what appears, there is appearance; antecedently to things that can be shown, there is the showing; antecedently to present items, there is presence.

Many difficulties of panpsychism are automatically dispelled by adopting the phenomenological stance. Firstly, phenomenology is not underpinned by a couple of mutually exclusive positions or attitudes (the reflective and the objectifying) ; it rather understands the need and meaning of each approach, including the objectifying one, from the standpoint of its receptive/reflective attitude taken as a reference. Secondly, phenomenology is not concerned with the “combination problem” of panpsychism, namely the problem of building a whole of synthetic experience out of a plurality of elements of experience dispersed in the world. It bypasses this problem not, of course, because it relies on a holistic physical representation, but because it bases its enquiry on a *gestalt*-like starting point: the present, global, embodied experience of the researcher. The typical question of phenomenology is not “how does the whole of experience arises from protoexperiential sparks?”, but rather “how can one describe by means of discontinuous words a present integrated experience?”. Thirdly, the method of phenomenology for accessing the most elementary forms of experience is neither rational nor observational, but lived. Unlike panpsychism, phenomenology does not rely on the “behavior” of physical objects, to figure out indirectly what it might be like to have a simple transient experience. Instead, it uses a direct method of access that digs through our cumulative kind of experience, stripping it layer

after layer of its perceptive or intellectual fabrications, and trying to reach beneath it a deeper layer of pure presence. This method is called the *epochè* (suspension of judgment and attentional focusing), and it is assisted by successive “reductions” of what appears to *strata* of less and less elaborated structures of appearance. The method can be radicalized by meditation, culminating with the ability to see *any* present object or mental activity as a naked presence (this is the realization of “suchness”, *Tathatā* in Sanskrit). Fourthly, the ontological issue is not skipped by phenomenology but rather transformed beyond recognition. Instead of adopting a distantiated ontology of observable objects (as the in natural sciences), or a panpsychist extension of this distantiated ontology (that encompasses *conceivable* atoms of experience), phenomenology adumbrates an ontology of immersion, of connivance, of acquaintance. Phenomenology, in its mature form, looks for an “oblique ontology” of intertwining (Saint Aubert 2006), or, as Merleau-Ponty writes, an “endo-ontology” (Merleau-Ponty 1964, p. 279). This is an ontology expressed *from* the innermost recesses of the process of being, rather than an ontology *of* the external contemplation of beings.

A (may be too) simple theoretical tool offered by Husserl to make sense of the regressive path that goes from elaborated consciousness to elementary experience, is the distinctions he made between: the (sensory) matter and the (pre-conceptual) form of experience; the *hylè* and the *morphè*; the noesis (flux of lived experience) and the noema (structure of the intentional object). One may then oppose: (i) the non-intentional hyletic and noetic components of consciousness that represent what is left after experience has been stripped of its interpretative layers, and (ii) the noematic intentional structures that have to be bracketed, neutralized in order to make the former component appear. But this immemorial separation between matter and form is undermined when Husserl points out that

even the interpretative layer made of intentional acts and noematic structures, partakes of what is the case in pure experience: “What is lived includes in its real (*reell*) composition not only the hyletic moments (colours, sensory sounds), but also the apprehensions which animate them” (Husserl 1950, p. 339).

Michel Henry took advantage of the latter reflection to disrupt Husserl’s hylemorphism. According to him (Henry 1990), any experience, be it the experience of an “external” object, or the experience of abstract forms, or the experience of one’s own mental acts, ultimately is an experience of the *self-affection of one’s flesh*. Russell’s examples of pleasure and pain are taken as paradigmatic, and even intentionality, even the assumption of transcendence of natural objects, must be rooted in the immanent impression that the flesh of the living being is making on itself. In other terms, even the *morphè* is experienced as *hylè*; even the perception of a patch of colour on some “outer” object is underpinned by a self-perception of the perceiver. Intentional consciousness is borne by non-intentional experience, and therefore the deepest layer of the archeological stratification of consciousness is nothing else than a naked self-sensitivity.

*Original* can only mean this: what comes in itself before any intentionality and independently of it, before the space of a gaze, before the “outside oneself” of which intentionality is only a name; what comes [...] before the world, out of the world, foreign to any conceivable “world”, *a-cosmic*. (Henry 2000, p. 82)

In other terms, what comes before intentionality, and before the belief in a world, is the non-directional impression of being embodied, the silent voice of the body whose psychological name is “cenesthesia”. But once again, unlike the naturalistic

program, which would account for the latter impression in terms of natural objects in the human body, the phenomenological program adopts a diametrically opposite stance. It starts from the deepest layer of what we are, and then justifies the belief in a natural world as a consequence of the differentiation of such primeval experience.

This phenomenological program was radicalized in Merleau-Ponty's posthumous book, *The Visible and the Invisible*. According to Merleau-Ponty, "we can accept a world ... only after having witnessed its arising from our experience of raw Being, which is like the umbilical cord of our knowledge, and our source of meaning" (Merleau-Ponty 1964, p. 209). The first move must be to identify the characteristics of the "experience of raw Being". In order to do so, Merleau-Ponty does not rely on discursive thought, but on tacit "thought-experiments", which are in fact *experiential* experiments. Let me give two explicit examples of those experiential experiments, as close as possible to everyday life. The first one is to be performed by opening our eyes and weakening progressively the tension towards identifying a variety of objects in the visible environment. If we do that, we cease to see ourselves as a bodily object in front of other objects, and we realize something even more stunning than Ernst Mach's well-known "self-portrait". We perceive distinctly that the seeing emerges from the midst of what is seen, from a sort of hole of transparency which breaks through its dense impenetrability, and that this density is boundless, extending far beyond our skin. The second experiential experiment is done with our eyes shut. It consists in rubbing a cloth or a smooth stone, concentrating the attention on the sensation that arises from this contact, and suspending judgments about objects. Then, what is felt is an undifferentiated mass of sensation in an atmosphere of reversibility: one can hardly say if what is felt is the friction of the hand on the cloth, or the caress of the cloth on the hand, for

there is no contrast between the two feelings.

The discursive expression of what is experienced in such occurrences could be called radical *situatedness*. Indeed, in view of this kind of experiential experiments, we are not onlookers of a nature given out there, but rather intimately intermingled with it. We are not point-like spectators of what is manifest, but a field of experiences which merges with what appears in a certain region of it. From a theoretical standpoint, this immediately gives rise to what has been called an *endo-ontology*, an ontology of the participant *in* being, rather than an ontology of the observer *of* beings. Here, Being is not presented before me as an object of sight, but my vision arises from the middle of Being. “Vision is the tool which allows me to be absent to myself, and to contemplate from within the fission of Being.” (Merleau-Ponty 1985)

From an experiential standpoint, the way is open to realizing what is usually neglected due to educational prejudice, namely our true complicity with a nature which has too hastily been isolated from us, as if it could be reduced to an object of perception and thought. But as soon as we have settled in this state of coincidence, what do we perceive exactly, or, more exactly, what is perceived through us? Merleau-Ponty answers this question with a single word: our *flesh*. We perceive our flesh not as something separate, but as a self-perceived perceiver. The flesh is that strange being endowed with reversibility, since it is jointly perceived and self-perceiving. The archetypal case of a two-faced kind of perception is the sense of touch, which, unlike distantiated vision, is synchronously appearance of what is touched and self-revelation of the touching in its carnal thickness. Besides, the sense of touch has also a less organical way of revealing the twofold nature of the flesh, in so far as one can perceive by means of one part of one’s own body (say the left hand) the softness and resistance of some other part (say the right hand).

Here, one is no longer dealing with the fusion of standard perception and intrinsic self-perception, but with a duality of status and functions (*toucher* and *touched*) realized by one and the same body. This second, milder, case of reversibility is also realized by vision, since the flesh is both *seen* as this (human) visible body, and *seeing* from a certain hollow location of this body in the middle of the head.

This description of our own situation is almost trivial. But dazzling triviality is the subject matter of phenomenology. Phenomenology is this unique discipline that sharpens our sensitivity to trivial yet primeval facts of experience which are usually ignored due to our exclusive fascination for objects.

From this point on, Merleau-Ponty turned triviality into a thrilling epics of being. He invited us to let go any ready-made objectified analysis of the world, especially its division into bodies (mine and yours, living and inert etc.). He recommended to become fully receptive to experience as it is, with its unbounded, massive, opaque style of appearing, instead of perceiving it through the glasses of our adult educated system of distinctions. As soon as this is done, the outcome is stunning. Even the identification of the flesh to *this* precise body is bound to melt, since the process of self-definition and positing boundaries between bodies has been voluntarily suspended. The whole surrounding world is then perceived as an extension of “my” flesh, and it thereby becomes *the flesh of the world, the world as flesh*. “Where should we locate the boundary between the body and the world”, Merleau-Ponty asks, “since the world *is* flesh?” (Merleau-Ponty 1964, p. 182) There are no such things as “me”, “you”, and the world, but a single canvas wherefrom various self-individualizing centers of sensitivity emerge, and which leaves patches of elementarity and half-obscurity between these centers (Barbaras 1993, p. 304). The role of constituting objectivity, which had been entrusted to the transcendental *ego* by Husserl is further extended to whatever

has the status of a flesh by Merleau-Ponty. But since the flesh is boundless, any division between the constituer of objectivity and the constituted objects is meaningless. Just as the flesh is self-perceiving, the world *qua* flesh is self-objectifying.

### **Conclusion**

We can see at this point some similarities and a huge gap between panpsychism and Merleau-Ponty's boundless phenomenology of the world-flesh. In both cases, any difference of nature between mental and mindless, sentient and inert beings is denied. In both cases, experience suffuses what there is. This point of convergence is so deep and so striking that one is surprised to find a recent historian of panpsychism declaring that there is no equivalent of a panpsychist tendency to be seen anywhere in phenomenology (Skrbina 2005). But it is also true that panpsychist approaches and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology use so deeply antagonistic methodologies, that the former similarity can easily be overridden. Panpsychist metaphysics starts its inquiry with the centers of meaning of an adult activity and objective knowledge; and it sticks on them sparklets of experience whose content is imagined by a behaviorist extrapolation. In other terms, panpsychism takes the ordered *cosmos* of reason and science for granted, and painfully adds to it what looks absent in it. By contrast, phenomenology is a strategy of extreme deconstruction of the *cosmos* of reason and science, not because it ignores it but because it purports to reach its fountainhead. Such fountainhead can be exhumed below the strata of perceptive and scientific interpretations, and it turns out to be an unelaborate embodied experience of self-sensitivity. Then, as soon as this embodied experience is brought to (its own) light, it appears that there is, and can be, nothing else. The usual distinction between experience and its worldly objects relaxes, and what remains is only a world of

experience. To sum up, the difference is between gluing bits of experience onto an allegedly given “external” world, and (re)discovering the world *qua* experience, neither external nor internal.

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