

## HUMAN AND POSTHUMAN. A MERLEAU-PONTIAN PERSPECTIVE

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**Abstract.** This article discusses the concepts of humanism and posthumanism from a Merleau-Pontian perspective. The *Phenomenology of Perception* contains a humanistic point of view, since the world and other beings are seen from an egological and human perspective. Merleau Ponty's later works, instead, show a posthuman point of view, because of the notion of "flesh": my body is made of the same stuff of the other bodies, so that they constitute a common being. Taking inspiration from this concept and from the notions of reversibility and divergence, it is argued that Merleau-Ponty suggests a new way to conceive humanism.

**Key words:** human, posthuman, Merleau-Ponty, body, flesh

## ЧЕЛОВЕЧЕСКОЕ И ПОСТЧЕЛОВЕЧЕСКОЕ. ПЕРСПЕКТИВА МЕРЛО-ПОНТИ

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**Аннотация.** В статье обсуждаются концепты гуманизма и постгуманизма с позиции Мерло-Понти. «Феноменология восприятия» предполагает гуманистическую точку зрения, поскольку мир и другие существа рассматриваются с эгологической и человеческой перспективы. Поздние работы Мерло-Понти, напротив, демонстрируют постчеловеческое видение, так как содержат понятие «вспышки»: мое тело сделано из тех же вещей, что и другие тела, и поэтому составляют единое бытие. Утверждается, что, вдохновляясь данным концептом и отталкиваясь от понятий обратимости и дивергенции, Мерло-Понти предлагает новый способ понимания гуманизма.

**Ключевые слова:** человек, постчеловек, Мерло-Понти, тело, вспышка

## Introduction

In this article I will focus on the relation between human and posthuman. In order to define what they mean, I will refer to the body, through which we approach the world. Starting from an egological perspective, which begins with my body as a *Nullpunkt* [8, § 18, p. 61–62], phenomenology interprets humanism as a view of the world through the perspective of the I. The latter refers to the others through the modality of transcendental intersubjectivity [6, § 59, p. 136], on which ethics, culture and society are grounded. In this way, humanism takes a privileged look on the outer world. However, this perspective is put into crisis by posthumanism, which questions the primacy of humans and their separation from other beings [4, p. 7–20]. I will take inspiration from posthumanism, opening to a new foundation of humanism. The latter is approached from a Merleau-Pontian point of view, according to which human body constitutes subjectivity. However, in his later writings, the author theorizes the body as the flesh of the world [11, p. 144], pointing out the connection between ourselves and what surrounds us, other bodies and objects. Being a new humanist means to find the ambiguities of our boundaries and to focus on the contact between human and non-human bodies, which are different, but made of the same “stuff”.

### 1. Merleau-Ponty as a humanist

Husserlian phenomenology is a form of humanism. It is an egology, since the human I is at the center of every process. After the phenomenological *epoché*, which parenthesizes the belief in the existence of an outer world, I am aware that everything is here for me [7, § 27, p. 51]. There is a “phenomenological residuum” [Ibid., § 33, p. 65], a pure sphere of consciousness, the transcendental I, an egological structure founding the empirical egos. This structure is not empty, but has a content, the *cogitationes* [6, § 14, p. 31], which constitute pure life and depend on our being in the world. According to Heidegger, phenomenological reduction refers to our “being thrown” (*geworfen*) [5, § 39, p. 175]. This concerns the individual as such, as a unity of body, soul, and spirit, as situated in the world [Ibid., § 79, p. 387].

In order to deepen this point, I will refer to Husserl's idea of body: it is both a physical body (*Körper*) and a living body (*Leib*) [7, § 33]. The latter includes the former, however it is not a thing among things, but is bond to the soul [Ibid., §§ 35–42]. Sensations located in my limbs, on my head, etc. do not belong to the material body, but to my body. The *Leib* is the center of my perceptions, a center of reference and orientation, which puts me in relation to everything else [Ibid., § 18, p. 61–62].

Merleau-Ponty, referring to Husserl's *Nullpunkt*, states that my body is “my point of view upon the world” [10, p. 73] and, according to a phenomenological perspective, reality is what appears to my body, since “I am my body” [Ibid., p. 151]. Merleau-Ponty is a humanist, since he thinks that reality is conceived only through the human body. This does not concern an isolated subject:

*The phenomenological world is not pure being, but rather the sense that shines forth at the intersection of my experiences and at the intersection of my experiences with those of others through a sort of gearing into each other. The phenomenological world is thus inseparable from subjectivity and intersubjectivity [Ibid., p. lxxxiv].*

The phenomenological world comes out from the intersection of experiences, from my interiorization of the other person's experience and his or her interiorization of mine. It is a cultural world, a human world. Phenomenology is constituted on relations [3, p. 571–573], since every object is seen from a subjective and intersubjective point of view: my relation to the object is constituted through a common perspective. The starting point of these experiences is consequently human.

## 2. Merleau-Ponty as a posthumanist

Even if the *Phenomenology of Perception* supports humanism, it contains insights on posthumanism, which takes shape in Merleau-Ponty's later works [1, p. 189]. First, there is a detachment from Husserl's pure consciousness: “the body is the vehicle of being in the world and, for a living being, having a body means being united with a definite milieu, merging with certain projects, and being perpetually engaged therein” [10, p. 84]. Expressions such as “being united,” “merging,” “engaged” refer to the strict bond between the body and the world where it is located and acts.

This view is reinforced by the concept of ambiguity [10, p. 87], which could be considered as a key to a posthumanistic reading. First, subjectivity is opaque to its self-intuition, since it cannot shape a clear thought, without expressing it [Ibid., p. 182]. Secondly, the subject and the object are not always distinguished. The boundary between the *Leib* and the *Körper* may sometimes seem blurred. According to Husserl, it happens when I try to feel my body: if I touch my left hand with my right hand, the former should be the object and the latter the subject, but the touched hand perceives its being touched and feels itself as touching, whereas the touching hand is perceived as touched [6, § 44, p. 97]. The *Leib* turns into *Körper* and vice versa. Merleau-Ponty also refers to the ambiguity of the relation between the body and the soul: they have two different functions, but the one cannot be distinguished from the other [10, p. 517].

Ambiguity and being in the world are deepened in *The Visible and the Invisible*. Here the author does not translate *Leib* with “phenomenal body” or “one’s own body,” but with “flesh” (*chair*). The latter is not only my body, but “the body,” not just an expression of subjectivity, but also of objectivity: there are no specific boundaries of the flesh, which becomes the “flesh of the world” [11, p. 144]. The flesh is a chiasm, an intertwining between touching and touched, sentient and sensible, subject and object: there is a reversibility between the two terms [Ibid., p. 139]. This chiasmatic way of thinking wipes out the dualism between subject and object and gives way to a common ontological ground bringing polarities together. The expressions “being united,” “merging,” and “engaged” now gain a new sense.

How does it refer to posthumanism? According to the first principle of Pepperell’s *Posthuman Manifesto*, “humans are no longer the most important things in the universe” [12, n. 1]. Posthumanism opposes human perspective as a privileged one and sees other perspectives (belonging to animals, environment, AI, etc.) as equally important [9, p. 375–376], opening to a flat ontology. Since every kind of body is flesh and the flesh belongs to the world, every being is made of the same stuff: ontologically speaking, humans are not higher than animals, plants, or inanimate objects.

According to the second principle of the *Manifesto*, “All technological progress of human society is geared towards the transformation

of the human species as we currently know it” [12, n. 2]. The flesh is seen in relation to hybridation: technological development, especially after the digital revolution, has gone further, bringing to devices (such as smartphones), extending our way to interact. These devices, which are now external, could be part of our bodies in the future, leading to a “hybrid intentionality” [13, p. 391]. Merleau-Ponty’s concept of *chair* helps us understand that such a hybridation is possible, since devices could be considered as extensions of our bodies, not as separate beings.

### 3. Merleau-Ponty as a new humanist

In his *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty thinks in a dualistic way: I am my body, the subject which approaches objects humanly. However, ambiguity undermines this rigid division. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, this concept is deepened through the idea of flesh, of a body which is not opposed to the world, the soul, and other beings, but is in a relation of reversibility with them. The author also mentions “divergence” [11, p. 272]: the chiasm contains an intertwining between elements which are not the same. Their relation to one another allows reversibility, but not annihilation. Both elements have the same ontological value: they are equal, but not coincident. This concept becomes understandable thanks to Deleuze: “Being is the same for all these modalities, but these modalities are not the same. It is ‘equal’ for all, but they themselves are not equal” [2, p. 45]. What Deleuze writes about univocity, can be said about Merleau-Ponty’s flesh: it is a common concept of body, but single bodies are different from one another. My body is made of the same stuff of your body and we all participate to the body of the world, but my body does not coincide with yours.

Interpreting the late Merleau-Ponty, human beings are not ontologically different than other beings. I am not better than a horse, a tree, or a river. However, I am not a horse, a tree, or a river. Something similar could be said about hybridation: a digital prosthesis could be a part of me and I could interact through it, but I am not a digital prosthesis. I am something else, I am human.

My position is that humanism may exist without anthropocentrism, a humanism which could be more human than before, which is not afraid

to meet other perspectives and other bodies, to reconfigure itself through them. This kind of humanism could have ethical consequences, just as taking care of other beings and of our own bodies, without making them machines. The motto “stay human” assumes a new meaning through this new perspective, inspired by Merleau-Ponty’s suggestions.

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