

From Flesh to Cultural Flesh: Toward a Phenomenology of Intercultural Understanding

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Abstract:

While the late Merleau-Ponty's concept of flesh (*la chair*) has received a positive appraisal by some contemporary French phenomenologists such as Lévinas, some others are more skeptical (such as Derrida and Deleuze), or even severely critical (such as Renaud Barbaras, 1955-). The present paper begins by a review of Barbaras' criticism of Merleau-Ponty's ontology of the flesh. It will defend the merits of the concept of flesh by highlighting its potential to overcome traditional metaphysical dualism and to reverse the negligence of passivity by classical idealism, as well as to provide the basic ontological condition for the activity of dialogue. On the basis of the Merleau-Pontian notion of "flesh" (肌膚存在), the present author proposes the concept of "cultural flesh" (文化肌膚) as the one of the essential conditions of possibility of intercultural understanding. He will also assign a new task to phenomenology: to establish a phenomenology of intercultural understanding. This is part of the further development of the work undertaken in his recent book *Phenomenology and Intercultural Understanding. Toward a New Cultural Flesh* (Springer: Contributions to Phenomenology, 2016).

Introduction

One of the new trends of development of phenomenology in France is the phenomenology of life. Its main representative is Renaud Barbaras (1955-).¹ While he is on the way to formulate his phenomenology of life, Barbaras has expressed some severe criticisms on Merleau-Ponty's ontology of the flesh (*ontologie de la chair*). To Barbaras, the Merleau-Pontian concept of flesh is ambiguous, and the ontology built on this concept is committed to the dilemma of either falling back into traditional ontological dualism or phenomenological idealism. The object of this essay is not an exposition of Barbaras' phenomenology of life, but rather a review of his criticism of Merleau-Ponty's late ontology developed around the very concept of flesh. It will not only defend Merleau-Ponty's concept of flesh against Barbaras' criticisms, but also try to propose a way out from the supposed dilemma of Merleau-Ponty's ontology of the flesh. Through these discussions the present author will propose the concept of cultural flesh (*la chair culturelle*, 「文化肌膚」 in Chinese) forged by himself as one of the essential conditions of possibility of intercultural understanding. The concept of cultural flesh points toward a new task in phenomenology: to establish a phenomenology of intercultural understanding.

1. Merleau-Ponty's Concept of Flesh: the Impasse between Ontological Duality and Metaphysical Monism?

Renaud Barbaras is one of the leading scholars of the revival of Merleau-Ponty studies in France since the 1990s. However, Barbaras never showed a whole-scale positive reception of Merleau-Ponty's corpus. Rather, he has adopted a critical attitude toward Merleau-Ponty's philosophical development from the very beginning. In his first important work on Merleau-Ponty, *De l'être du phénomène. Sur l'ontologie de Merleau-*

¹ The first work which has launched Renaud Barbaras onto the scene of contemporary French phenomenology is *De l'être du phénomène. Sur l'ontologie de Merleau-Ponty* (Grenoble: Jérôme Millon 1991, 2001; *The Being of the Phenomenon: Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, Eng. trans. Ted Todadvine and Leonard Lawlor, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004). After publishing several books on the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, Barbaras has turned to the study of the phenomenology of the Czech philosopher Jan Patočka (1907-1977). Upon receiving important inspirations from the phenomenology of movement of Patočka, Barbaras has developed a phenomenology of life by integrating critically ingredients from Husserl's phenomenology of consciousness, Heidegger's phenomenology of Dasein, and Merleau-Ponty's ontology of the flesh. Barbaras' phenomenology of life can be seen in his books *Vie et intentionnalité. Recherches phénoménologiques* (2003), *Introduction à une phénoménologie de la vie* (2008), *La vie lacunaire* (2011).

Ponty (first edition 1991), Barbaras declares that Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* is a complete failure.² This is because to Barbaras, the Merleau-Ponty at this stage was still imprisoned by the phenomenological idealism of Edmund Husserl. This is shown through Merleau-Ponty's adoption of the Husserlian language of perceptual consciousness (la conscience perceptive) which gives privilege to consciousness in the whole philosophical architectonic of *Phenomenology of Perception*. To Barbaras, this is the sign that Merleau-Ponty's whole train of thoughts in his great work of 1945 is still unable to escape from the shadow of the idealist Husserl, philosopher of consciousness par excellence.

According to Barbaras, Merleau-Ponty's rupture with Husserl's phenomenological idealism is achieved only in his later works. It was not until the proposal of the ontology of the flesh by means of the novel concept of flesh, thematized in the unfinished work *Le visible et l'invisible (The Visible and the Invisible)* published posthumously in 1964, that the late Merleau-Ponty was able to overcome the traditional metaphysical opposition between idealism and materialism by means of overcoming the opposition between mind and matter, as well as the opposition between subject and object. By the concept of flesh, being a conceptual innovation which leads us back to the pre-objective and primordial order of being, the late Merleau-Ponty is able to sketch a viable phenomenological ontology as a departure from Husserl's phenomenological idealism.

However, in a later article entitled "The Ambiguity of the Flesh" (2002),³ Barbaras judges that even Merleau-Ponty's concept of flesh is problematical. To Barbaras, the late Merleau-Ponty has for sure given up the perspective of phenomenological

² Renaud Barbaras, *L'être du phénomène. Sur l'ontologie de Merleau-Ponty* (Grenoble: Jérôme Million, 1991), pp. 51–58.

³ Renaud Barbaras, "The Ambiguity of the Flesh", in *Merleau-Ponty: figures et fonds de la chair, Chiasmi International, nouvelle série* no. 4, ed. R. Barbaras, M. Carbone et L. Lawlor (Paris: Vrin, 2002), pp. 19–26; French version: "L'ambiguïté de la chair. Merleau-Ponty entre philosophie transcendantale et ontologie de la vie", in *Merleau-Ponty aux frontières de l'invisible (Les Cahiers de Chiasmi International, no. 1)*, ed. M. Cariou, R. Barbaras, and E. Bimbenet (Milano: Associazione Culturale Mimesis, 2003), pp. 183–189. Cf. the critical evaluation of Merleau-Ponty's concept of flesh in Kwok-ying Lau, "The Flesh: from Ontological Employment to Intercultural Employment", in *Phenomenology and Intercultural Understanding: Toward a New Cultural Flesh*, series "Contributions to Phenomenology" (Dordrecht: Springer, 2016), Ch. 10, pp. 173-191.

idealism à la Husserlienne by replacing the primacy of perceptual consciousness with the concept of flesh as the ontological concept in touch with the order of primordial being, and proceeds to explicate the possibility of seeing and vision in general from the visible or visibility. However, this is an ontological road which proceeds from the opposite direction of phenomenological idealism. Instead of explaining the exterior by the interior, Merleau-Ponty's new ontology tries to explain the interior from the exterior. In this way, it cannot account for the ontological difference between organic being and materiality. To Barbaras, the late Merleau-Ponty has apparently overcome the traditional metaphysical dualism of the opposition between mind and matter as well as that between subject and object, but the price to pay for is the imprisonment in the deadlock of metaphysical monism. Either traditional ontological dualism or metaphysical monism: it is impossible to find a third way out. Such is Barbaras' pessimistic conclusion on the late Merleau-Ponty's ontological project.

In his first systemic work on phenomenology of life, *Introduction à une phénoménologie de la vie* (2008), Barbaras readdresses his overall evaluation of the achievements and insufficiencies of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological ontology. This is presented in the section "La vie incarnée", Chapter II, First Part of the book.⁴ Here Barbaras reiterates his criticism of *Phenomenology of Perception*. Though this work of 1945 has engraved the name of Merleau-Ponty on the monument of phenomenological movement in France, to Barbaras it is in retrograde in terms of theoretical achievement in comparison to *The Structure of Behavior*, the first book of Merleau-Ponty completed in 1939 but first published only in 1942. Barbaras explains that though the body-proper (*le corps propre*) is the central descriptive theme of *Phenomenology of Perception*, this central theme is understood from the perspective of perception as perceptual consciousness. But the phenomenological study of perception is commanded by a more general question of the relation between consciousness and nature, which is in fact a questioning of the meaning of being of consciousness itself. Thus the study of perceptual consciousness is only a partial work within the study of the meaning of being of the whole corporeal life or carnal life (*la vie corporelle* or *la vie incarnée*). By giving

⁴ Renaud Barbaras, *Introduction à une phénoménologie de la vie* (Paris : Librairie J. Vrin, 2008), pp. 66-85.

privilege to perceptual consciousness, a phenomenology of perception can by no means grasp the entire carnal life in its phenomenological and ontological essence; it has rather placed the study of carnal life within the limited domain of perceptual consciousness. Thus a phenomenology of perception, however successful as it may be, results in missing the more global ontological perspective necessary for a comprehensive understanding of the meaning of being of the incarnate life.⁵ On the contrary, in *The Structure of Behavior*, which declares at the outset that “our goal is to understand the relations of consciousness and nature: organic, psychological or even social”,⁶ Merleau-Ponty maintains the ontological priority of life and its global character; the latter has not, however, been reduced to the more limited domain of perceptual consciousness.

Barbaras points out the change of perspective in Merleau-Ponty after 1945, year of publication of *Phenomenology of Perception*. Realizing that the latter work is imprisoned in the language of opposition between consciousness and object, the later Merleau-Ponty is driven progressively onto the road of ontology of the flesh formulated in *The Visible and the Invisible*. To Barbaras, the novelty of the latter work is to understand the subject from the ontological height of the sense of being of the subject; and the flesh is the very concept forged to grasp this very meaning of being of the subject. The flesh is ontologically speaking a carnal existence which belongs to the world. The ontological character of flesh is being-in-the-world, it is thus not the perceptual consciousness in opposition to the world, nor the transcendental consciousness as the origin of the world and thus overhanging above the world at its margin. This ontological character as an intra-worldly being of the flesh renders it possible to see and to sense as the seer and sentient from its character as a visible and a sensible. Barbaras quotes Merleau-Ponty in pointing out the origin of the capacity of the carnal subject from its intra-worldliness:

“For if the body is a thing among things, it is so in a stronger and deeper sense than they: in the sense that, we said, it *is of them*, and this means that it detaches

⁵ R. Barbaras, *Introduction à une phénoménologie de la vie*, pp. 67-68.

⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *La structure du comportement* (Paris : Presses Universitaires de France, 2^e ed. 1949), p. 1 ; *The Structure of Behavior*, Eng. Trans. Alden L. Fisher (Boston : Beacon Press, 1963), p. 3.

itself upon them ... It is not simply a thing *seen* in fact ... it is visible by right, it falls under a vision that is both ineluctable and deferred.”⁷

In this case, the body should no longer be understood in the language of the object, i.e. merely as a corporeal thing, but as flesh. Because it is its fleshy character which renders possible the revelation of other things through seeing, touching, hearing, and sensing; in other words, a world is revealed. Again Barbaras explains this with Merleau-Ponty’s own words:

“The thickness of the body, far from rivaling that of the world, is on the contrary the sole means I have to go unto the heart of things, by making myself a world and by making flesh.”⁸

Thus the flesh is the transcendental determination of the ontological character of carnal existence. In virtue of the sensible character of the flesh as a worldly being, it can sense the world and other beings of the world, including other fleshy beings. In this way the world can be revealed to the subject in such a way that the carnal subject can perceive the world. In distinction to *Phenomenology of Perception* which confers the power of revelation to the perceptual consciousness, Barbaras thinks that there is a reversal of perspective in *The Visible and the Invisible*: it is the sensible which renders possible the sentient.⁹ This means that the sensible has replaced the sentient as the constitutive origin of activity and meaning. Expressed in a somewhat paradoxical manner: this amounts to affirming that passivity is the origin of activity.

If it is the sensible which renders possible the sentient and not the other way round, the privilege given to the subjective pole over the objective pole, and that given to activity over passivity in traditional idealism is reversed. The key to this reversal is the character of reversibility of the flesh. Merleau-Ponty is inspired by the meticulous

⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l'invisible* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), p. 181 ; *The Visible and Invisible*, Eng. Trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), p. 137. The first of part of this passage is quoted by Barbaras in *Introduction à une phénoménologie de la vie*, p. 77.

⁸ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l'invisible*, p. 178 ; *The Visible and Invisible*, p. 135. This passage is quoted by Barbaras in *Introduction à une phénoménologie de la vie*, p. 78.

⁹ R. Barbaras, *Introduction à une phénoménologie de la vie*, pp. 76-78.

descriptions by Husserl of the phenomenon of double sensation of touching in *Ideas II*.¹⁰ When I use my left hand to touch my right hand, my left hand is at the same time being touched by my right hand; thus the touching hand is able to touch only on condition that it is at the same time being touched.

The phenomenon of touching can be seen from two perspectives. From the structural perspective, it is the being touched which renders possible the touching. From the genetic perspective, it is the being touched which becomes or transforms itself into touching. The being touched and the touching tend toward a coincidence. But this coincidence is only partial; it will never be complete, otherwise we can never distinguish between the being touched and the touching. In other words, there will never be a complete coincidence between the being touched and the touching; there is always a difference between them. Merleau-Ponty calls this difference “*écart*”.¹¹

Écart is a distancing. But it is not a pure distance. It is a distance which establishes a relation. It maintains the being touched and the touching in a relation of proximity in distance. *Écart* is one of the essential conditions of appearance of the world. I have a world in so far as things in the world are open to me as flesh (*ma chair*), such that they appear to me as the perceptual subject.

But how is it possible for the things to be open to me? In virtue of the character of being-in-the-world of myself as flesh: my promiscuous existence with things of the world renders that I am being touched by the world and things of the world. Only being so I can touch and perceive the world and things of the world, and thus the world appears to me. The discovery of the ontological character of reversibility of the flesh brings about the

¹⁰ Edmund Husserl, *Ideen zu einer Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie, Zweites Buch, Phänomenologische Untersuchungen zur Konstitution, Husserliana IV*, ed. Marly Biemel (The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1952) (hereafter *Ideen II*), §36, pp. 144-147; *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, Second Book, Studies in the Phenomenology of Constitution*, Eng. Trans. R. Rojcewicz and A. Schuwer (Dordrecht/Boston/London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989) (hereafter *Ideas II*), pp. 152-154.

¹¹ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l'invisible*, p. 194; *The Visible and Invisible*, p. 148. The English version, which translates “*écart*” by “spreads”, is unlikely to transmit the ontological sense Merleau-Ponty gives to this term.

reversal of the traditional mode of understanding of the constitutive origin of meaning and activity: it is the sensible or sensibility in general, a form of passivity, which is at the origin of activity. This discovery is the key to Merleau-Ponty's departure from phenomenological idealism.

However, if I as flesh belongs to the world in such a way that it is my being touched which renders possible my capacity to touch, and further to perceive the world, the world is also a power of touching or a power of generation of sensibility in general. In other words, the world has also the ontological character of flesh. That is why Merleau-Ponty proposes, side by side my flesh as the corporeal subject, the concept of flesh of the world (*la chair du monde*). This is the concept of flesh in general. It is the foundation of my flesh as a particular mode of flesh. It is also the ultimate origin of reversibility as ontological character of flesh in general.

Why does Merleau-Ponty double the concept of my flesh with that of flesh of the world? This is because he wants to avoid the idealist tendency of Husserl to always reconduct the constitutive origin of the meaning of being and ontological status of the world back to the subject (be it the carnal subject). Husserl's idealist tendency appears not only in *Ideas I*, but also in the *Crisis*, in which the constitutive origin of the pre-given life-world is to be searched for in the transcendental subject. On the contrary, in Merleau-Ponty's ontology of the flesh, the carnal subject as flesh—my flesh—is never in opposition to the world. It is neither the constitutive origin of the meaning and validity of being of the world. Rather, the carnal subject and the world are both flesh. In addition, since the carnal subject—my flesh—is being in the world, its capacity to touch and to sense in general derives from its being sensed (*l'être senti*). It does not possess any absolute privilege in relation to the world. Its privileged position is seen only with reference to other types of inner-worldly being, which appear to the carnal subject. Thus the doubling of the flesh—my flesh and the flesh of the world—is designed to avoid the idealist position in the manner of Husserl's transcendental phenomenology.

But the doubling of my flesh as carnal subject and the flesh of the world in Merleau-Ponty will lead to the following questions.

1) What is the difference between the two types of flesh? What is the precise difference between the carnal subject as flesh and other types of inner-worldly being?

2) If the proposal of the concept of flesh signifies that the constitutive origin of meaning is no more to be searched from a pure intelligible being or from a being in the form of pure idea in the top-down manner, but rather from a sensible being in the bottom-up way, why not merely the flesh of the world is sufficient to explicate the genesis of meaning? Why it still needs the carnal subject as flesh to open the phenomenal field? In other words, why Merleau-Ponty does not confer to the flesh of the world the function of being the ultimate constitutive source of meaning? Barbaras thinks that Merleau-Ponty hesitates in front of this question, or even retreats from his former position. Barbaras quotes the following working notes of Merleau-Ponty attached to *The Visible and the Invisible*:

“The flesh of the world is not self-sensing (*se sentir*) as is my flesh-----It is sensible and not sentient-----I call it flesh, nonetheless ... in order to say that it is the *pregnancy* of possibles, *Weltmöglichkeit*.”¹²

According to Barbaras, Merleau-Ponty, by supplanting of the concept of flesh of the world onto that of my flesh, aims at conferring to the former the most radical and ultimate ontological status. This will enable him to avoid the problem of ontological duality. However, the note quoted above shows that Merleau-Ponty denies that the flesh of the world is a sentient. Thus the flesh of the world cannot fulfill the function of ultimate constitution of meaning. The problem of ontological duality reappears, and cannot be unified by a unitary concept. Thus to Barbaras, Merleau-Ponty's ontology of the flesh falls short of its final completion:

¹² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l'invisible*, p. 304; *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 250; R. Barbaras, *Introduction à une phénoménologie de la vie*, p. 82.

“We discover suddenly that the univocity of the flesh covers an irreducible equivocity: the flesh is necessarily my flesh, and it is thus only by analogy or by metaphor that we can speak of flesh in relation to the world in its visibility. In this case, Merleau-Ponty is exposed to another danger which he wants to avoid: that of idealism.”¹³

It seems that Barbaras’s critical analysis of the concepts of flesh and flesh of the world hits on some blind spots of Merleau-Ponty’s ontological project. It reveals that Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of the flesh is built on the following dilemma. To avoid phenomenological idealism in the manner of Husserl, we have to avoid giving any priority to the subject or consciousness. In this case we can neither give the carnal subject (my flesh) any privileged ontological status. However, this will drive us into a metaphysical monism, which denies or neglects any form of ontological difference. If, on the other hand, we admit that there is difference not only between the carnal subject and other inner-worldly beings, but also between my flesh and the flesh of the world, we will fall back onto ontological duality and phenomenological idealism à la Husserlienne.

2. The Carnal Subject as Flesh is an Expressive Subject and not a Purely Intelligible Being as “I Think”

However, if we look further into Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of the flesh, we will see that it is neither a metaphysical monism nor a traditional metaphysical dualism. For sure, my flesh as carnal subject cannot be reduced to the flesh of the world; yet these two are not in diametrical opposition to another. The flesh of the world fulfills the role of ontological foundation of the phenomenal field in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of flesh, which is not a phenomenology of pure consciousness in the manner of Husserl of *Ideas I*. My flesh and the flesh of the world share a certain common character, namely that of being an agent or even a power of affectivity. But there is a certain difference between them. My flesh as a carnal subject is not any one of the beings-in-the-world; it is a flesh which exhibits a certain subjective character, and is thus different from any other

¹³ R. Barbaras, *Introduction à une phénoménologie de la vie*, p. 82.

being-in-the-world which appears in the phenomenal field. My flesh as carnal subject is the structural member of the phenomenal field; it is the phenomenal body which is distinct from the objective body.¹⁴ The objective body is susceptible to be determined by physiological laws and understood according to the mechanistic mode of comprehension. This is not the case of the phenomenal body. The phenomenal body is an incarnated consciousness which plays the role of the subjective pole in the structure of the phenomenal field to which all phenomenal objects are given.

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, five whole chapters of Part One are devoted to detailed descriptions and analyses of the different ontological dimensions of the phenomenal body and its difference with the objective body. These phenomenological descriptions begin by the thematization of the carnal subject as an affective subject. They advance progressively to the subject of orientation, which inaugurates the existential spatiality, and to the subject of sexuality as well as to the speaking subject as the expressive subject.¹⁵

There is an ineffaceable ontological difference between the carnal subject as a structural component of the phenomenal field and all other objective beings. It is to the carnal subject that all objective beings appear; their respective roles are not interchangeable, except that the phenomenal body can also appear as the objective body to another phenomenal body. This ontological difference is the origin of the ontological duality which appears in the phenomenal field. The phenomenal duality derived from the ontological difference which appears within the structure of the phenomenal field belongs to the state of affairs of the structural invariant of phenomenality. It is difficult for anyone who maintains a phenomenological attitude to give up this phenomenal duality essential to the structural components of the phenomenal field. The ontological duality derived

¹⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la Perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), p. 123; *Phenomenology of Perception*, Eng. Trans. Donald A. Landes (London & New York: Routledge, 2012), p. 108.

¹⁵ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la Perception*, pp. 106-232; *Phenomenology of Perception*, pp. 92-205. C.f. also Claude Romano, "Après la chair", *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy – Revue de la philosophie française et de langue française*, Vol. XXL, No. 2 (2013), pp. 1-29.

from the structural duality of the phenomenal field is the result of the respect of the phenomenal duality. It is not the return to any form of traditional metaphysical dualism.

The latter, such as the metaphysical dualism of mind and body in Descartes, is composed of two metaphysical substances which are not only heterogeneous, but also in opposition to one another and mutually independent, or even mutually exclusive from one another without any possibility of communication. Thus the phenomenological and ontological duality derived from Merleau-Ponty's ontology of the flesh has nothing in common with such kind of metaphysical dualism of independent and mutually exclusive substances.

In Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological ontology, the carnal subject as my flesh does not share the characteristics of the Husserlian transcendental consciousness which is a pure intelligible thinking subject who remains at the margin of the world after the operation of the transcendental reduction. Rather, my flesh is first of all a sensible subject of expression. This subject of expression engages itself in the world through its carnal existence or even fleshy existence. Being affected by the world and things of the world, the desire to express of this fleshy existence is stimulated, or even provoked, and thus shows itself as a subject of expression.

The expressive subject is neither independent of the world nor in opposition to the world; it is rather more or less in active complicity with the world. However, its expressive function or capacity can be exercised only under the condition that it is situated in the world. On the other hand, the world and the flesh of the world must rely on the expressive subject in order to be seen: their "being-seen" (*l'Être-vu*) is a function of the expressive activity of the carnal affective subject. The opening of the phenomenal field relies precisely on the "being-seen" of the world and the flesh of the world. In the same thinking note published in *The Visible and the Invisible* quoted above, Merleau-Ponty writes that the flesh of the world is not a self-identical being in-itself (*l'Être en-soi*), "but the Being that also contains its negation, its *percipi*".¹⁶ This negative or negational

¹⁶ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l'invisible*, p. 304 ; *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 251.

element within the flesh and this internal écart of the flesh is the key to the being-seen, being-open and being expressed of the world.

Early on in *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty has already pointed out, basing on clinical studies of pathological human behaviors, that the carnal subject is first of all an expressive subject. It is shown through the inauguration of an expressive space. Merleau-Ponty writes:

“the body is eminently an expressive space ... But our body is not merely one expressive space among all others ... Our body, rather, is the origin of all the others, it is the very movement of expression, it projects significations on the outside by giving them a place and sees to it that they begin to exist as things, beneath our hands and before our eyes.”¹⁷

Expressive activities are activities transmitting meaning by means of facial expression, bodily gesture, speech or linguistic sign, or different modes of combination of all these. Through phenomenological descriptions of speech at the nascent state (*la parole à l'état naissant*), Merleau-Ponty rejects the two diametrically opposed modes of understanding of the formation of linguistic meaning.¹⁸ On the one hand, Merleau-Ponty has shown that the signifying activity of the speaking subject is different from what linguistic structuralism believes, namely that the speaking subject plays no constitutive role in the essential structure of meaning formation of linguistic activity. On the other hand, Merleau-Ponty has shown that the activity of formation of linguistic meaning is not what philosophy of transcendental subjectivity pretends to be, namely that transcendental subjectivity is the only constitutive of origin of linguistic meaning, which adds a unitary

¹⁷ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la Perception*, p. 171 ; *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 147. Even Husserl has pointed out in the appendices of *Ideas II* and the *Crisis* that the activity of the carnal subject is expressive activity. *C.f.* Husserl, *Ideen II*, §62, p. 288 ; *Ideas II*, p. 301; *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie*, Husserliana VI, hrsg. Walter Biemel (The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1954), Beilage XXII, pp. 479-480; *The Crisis of European sciences and transcendental phenomenology*, Eng. Trans. David Carr (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970) does not include the translation of this appendix. *C.f.* the excellent commentary of Pierre Rodrigo in *L'intentionnalité créatrice. Problèmes de phénoménologie et d'esthétique* (Paris : Librairie J. Vrin, 2009), pp. 34-50.

¹⁸ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la Perception*, pp. 203-232 ; *Phenomenology of Perception*, pp. 179-205.

meaning from the outside or from the above to a mass of linguistic signs otherwise totally insignificant. In the case of linguistic structuralism, the thoughts transmitted by the linguistic signs are entirely independent of the speaking subject. In the case of philosophy of transcendental subjectivity, the thoughts embedded in the linguistic signs are entirely inputs from the transcendental subject which is the pure thinking subject. In both cases, the speaking subject has no role to play.

Merleau-Ponty's genetic phenomenology of speech act shows the contrary: the meanings transmitted by linguistic activity is not dictated by a purely intellectual meditating thought which is well formulated prior to linguistic expression. The speaking subject always has to look for the most appropriate words and sentences to express what she or he wants to say for the first time. That is why it is a common phenomenon that the speaking subject hesitates or corrects herself after speaking out the first words or even a complete sentence. This shows that meaning formation is a matter of encounter between the speaking subject as expressive subject and language or linguistic sign as medium of linguistic expression. The relation between the speaking subject and the language used is not a pure instrumental relation. It is never a relation of master and slave in which the speaking subject is the absolute Master who gives order to the slave, and this latter merely executes it in a top-down manner. No. The relation between the speaking subject and the language used is a relation of reciprocity and intertwinement; in short, a relation of complicity.

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological account of the genesis of meaning in living speech is a mode of understanding which no more relies on the opposition between the in-itself (*l'en soi*) (the speaking voice and the linguistic sign are in itself deprived of any signification) and for-itself (*pour soi*) (it is the thinking subject or the mind which inputs a well-formulated thought onto the speaking voice and the linguistic sign).

Merleau-Ponty's genetic phenomenology of the living speech has important implications with regard to the understanding of the relation between the subject of expression and the sensible world in which she is situated. The way through which the

meaning of the sensible world and of the sensible objects revealed to the carnal subject is not in the manner of Kantian pure categories which provide a unitary form from the outside and from the above onto the otherwise completely insignificant sense data. The meaning revealed to the sensible subject is the result of the encounter between the sensible carnal subject and the sensible world and the things there in. In this encounter the sensible carnal subject is affected by the world and its things. Being affected and motivated by the desire of expression, the sensible carnal subject expresses the pregnant meaning (*le sens pregnant*) of the world and things in the world sensed.

In *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty undertakes very detailed descriptions and analyses of the various aspects of the incarnate subject as subject of expression, including speech and language, sexuality, artistic creation, etc. The condition of possibility of this great variety of expressive activities resides precisely in that both the incarnate sensible subject and the sensible world are flesh. They are both a certain power of affectivity. There is a *logos* which underlies the sensible world and the sensible objects. They affect me as the incarnate subject. Being affected, I communicate with them through my flesh, and can thus express the meaning generated in me through this relation of affectivity. The flesh of the world, as the concept which renders comprehensible the ontological character of the sensible world, is able to explicate that the sensible world is a power of affectivity. The flesh of the world has thus acquired an important ontological status side by side my flesh. However, my carnal existence, in its character as my flesh, is, other than a power of affectivity, also a power of expression. It is an ontological character the world and other objects of the world are deprived of. Thus the relatively privileged ontological position attributed to my flesh as expressive subject can be justified.

To understand the incarnate subject as the subject of expression and not as the intellectualist constitutive subject nor the pure thinking I: this mode of subjectivity is not that of transcendental idealism of the Husserlian nor the Kantian type. This is because the expressive subject as carnal existence engages herself in the world from the outset. She lets herself be invested by language which is not of her own creation, and lets language to take part in the process of formation of the self. Linguistic activity as expressive activity

is never a purely intelligible activity; it is expressive and communicative activity which must be enacted through the living body as carnal existence. All linguistic activity presupposes and begins by language acquisition. But language acquisition can never be exercised by the solipsistic I; it must be deployed, pursued and completed in company with other speaking subjects who are carnal existence themselves. That is why the expressive subject can never be the *solus ipse*. The *solus ipse* is the result of the thinking experiment of the reflective subject, as has been clearly shown by Hume, who has momentarily forgotten that in order to be a reflective subject, she must first of all be an expressive subject.

If the ontology of the flesh recognizes the priority of the expressive subject on the reflective subject, that the latter is founded on the former, by the same token it necessarily breaks down the theoretical framework of transcendental idealism or intellectualism. If our understanding of the theoretical position of Merleau-Ponty's ontology of the flesh is correct, it can avoid the criticism of Barbaras, who presents Merleau-Ponty's ontology of the flesh as a theory which can never escape from the dilemma between the phenomenological idealism of Husserl the transcendentalist and traditional metaphysical dualism. The fact that my flesh is the expressive subject in Merleau-Ponty's ontology of the flesh renders that the latter is neither an idealist philosophy of transcendental consciousness, nor a traditional dualism of metaphysical substances. However, it maintains the ontological duality between the incarnate subject as my flesh and other objects of the world. My flesh and the flesh of the world share a common ontological status as both are a power of affectivity; but there is still difference among them: my flesh is an expressive subject whereas the flesh of the world is not. What is important is my flesh is affected by the world and objects of the world. The relation among them is a relation of complicity and not exclusivity, as is the relation between the two metaphysical substances in traditional metaphysical dualism such as the Cartesian mind and matter.

3. Reversibility in Touching, Seeing, Hearing, and Dialogue

One of the most important theoretical contributions of Merleau-Ponty's concept of flesh consists of the following: it provides a mode of comprehension of the genesis of meaning which is bottom-up and not top-down. The genesis of the sentient from the sensible, of the seeing from the visible, of the touching from the being-touched, of the hearing from the audible is a mode of understanding of the genesis of activity from passivity. This is incomprehensible from traditional idealism and traditional materialism. The key to the passage from the sensible to the sentient is the movement of reflexivity.¹⁹ The late Merleau-Ponty uses the term reversibility to theorize this movement of reflexivity.²⁰

Already in *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty has proposed the concept of corporeal schema (*le schéma corporel*), being some sort of know-how at the pre-reflective level which fulfills the function of providing inter-sensorial unity, i.e. the unity among different sense organs of the living body. Thus the five senses of our living body do not operate independently of one another; they rather operate conjointly to form a system of equivalence in which information is transmitted from one sense to the others such that the different senses can cooperate in view of accomplishing different bodily tasks.²¹ But at this stage of Merleau-Ponty's philosophical development, the theory of reflexivity of different senses and hence the doctrine of reversibility have not yet come forth. It is not until *The Visible and the Invisible* that the theory of reversibility is announced: Merleau-Ponty says that vision can feel the palpation of the things.²² This means that there is reversibility between vision and tactility: "there is ... crossing-over of the visible in the tangible and of the tangible in the visible".²³

¹⁹ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l'invisible*, p. 190 ; *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 144.

²⁰ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l'invisible*, p. 188-189 ; *The Visible and the Invisible*, pp. 142-144.

²¹ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la Perception*, pp. 115-116 ; *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 102. *C.f.*, Patrice Leconte, "l'entre-expression charnelle: Pour une lecture du *Visible et l'invisible*", *Bulletin d'analyse phénoménologique*, Vol. 5, no. 4, 2005, pp. 1-30.

²² Other than tactile palpation (palpation tactile), Merleau-Ponty says there is the "palpating with the look" ("le palpant du regard"), *Le visible et l'invisible*, pp. 175, 173; *The Visible and the Invisible*, pp. 133, 131.

²³ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l'invisible*, p. 177 ; *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 134.

In the very important article “The Philosopher and His Shadow” (1959),²⁴ Merleau-Ponty discusses in details Husserl’s phenomenological descriptions of the phenomenon of double sensation of the being-touched and the touching in *Ideas II*. He regards the being-touched touching as the prototype of reversibility. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, the study of reversibility is still guided by the reversibility of the sense of tactility. But in the last publication during his life-time, *L’oeil et l’esprit* (1961), translated as “Eye and Mind”, Merleau-Ponty, through analysis of works of painting, but also from the self-declaration of painters (such as Paul Klee), points out that it is possible for the visible to be transformed into the seeing. This implies that being-seen (être-vu) and the visible is the condition of possibility of seeing. Thus there is also reflexivity and reversibility in vision itself.

Is Merleau-Ponty the first one to have discovered that being-seen is the condition of possibility of seeing? If this is the phenomenon of reversibility in the sense of vision, then, to my knowledge, Jean-Paul Sartre was probably the first philosopher to have discovered it, though the author of *Being and Nothingness* does not push further his analysis in the direction of a theory of reversibility.

It is well-known that in *Being and Nothingness*, there is the famous description of the phenomenon of shame. Sartre discusses shame in the context of the look and the relation between the self and the Other. Sartre thematizes the feeling of shame arisen when someone who engages himself in the act of peeping is being discovered. To Sartre, our feeling of shame arises when we hear the noise of footsteps behind us while we are absorbed by our own act of peeping. When we hear the noise of footsteps coming from behind, we immediately are aware that we are being seen, even though we do not need to turn around to see who is seeing us at our back. Sartre says: “I see *myself* because *somebody* sees me.”²⁵ This means that to Sartre the being-seen is the premise of seeing. Here Sartre intends originally to describe the dialectic of the self and the Other. But at the same token, his descriptions reveal the dialectic of the being-seen and the seeing.

²⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Le philosophe et son ombre”, in *Signes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), pp. 201-228, in particular pp. 209-217 ; “The Philosopher and His Shadow”, in *Signs*, Eng. trans. Richard McCleary (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), pp. 159-181, in particular pp. 166-172.

²⁵ Sartre, Jean-Paul. *L’être et le néant* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943; Collection TEL, 1980), p 306; *Being and Nothingness*, Eng. Trans. Hazel E. Barnes (London & New York: Routledge Classics, 2003), p. 284.

But in fact, the daily experience of mirror image is already a good example illustrating the being-seen as the condition of possibility of seeing. In the mirror image of myself, what I see is my image being seen. There is never any pure seeing; the seeing must be actualized by the being-seen. Thus the visible is the condition of possibility of seeing.

As to the reversibility between the sense of hearing and speaking, it is first seen in the example of language acquisition mentioned above. The acquisition of the capacity of speaking is realized through the capacity of hearing. Clinical studies show that people born deaf cannot speak, because they are deprived of the capacity to hear. According to the witness of many music composers and players of musical instruments, they first hear a musical melody before they can write it down by musical notation or play it out with their musical instrument. Hearing is a sense of passivity; it is a passive capacity. This is a paradoxical expression! Yet it is the precondition of speaking, singing, and musical performance. In other words, there is reversibility between hearing and speaking.

From the reversibility between speaking and hearing, we understand that speaking is never purely a relation of oneself to herself. Speaking is never an activity of self-affection. The activity of speaking always involves an Other in order that the speaker can hear. Even in a monologue, the speaker has to split herself into two and posit another self in order to hear herself speaking. Thus, not only speaking implies necessarily hearing, to hear also implies being heard. When we respond to a voice or a speech, it is only by being ascertained of being heard that we are sure that we are responding. Thus the speaking subject is first of all a hearing subject. But she is also a subject being heard. She is a being who can hear that she is being heard (*un s'entendre-entendu*. In French “entendre” means at the same time to hear and to understand.). Understood in this way, it is only in dialogue that speaking is possible, in which meaning is instituted. In consequence, dialogue is the original phenomenon of the institution of meaning. A space of meaning is instituted and open in dialogue.

Since it is only in dialogue that one can hear oneself speaking, voice becomes speech which carries itself with meaning and expresses meaning only through dialogue. Dialogue takes place not only between two speaking subjects, but also within a single speaking subject who engages herself in a dialogue with her ownself. In the dialogue with oneself, one splits herself into a self and another self who hears herself and respond to herself. Without dialogue, voice is meaningless sound, and not meaningful speech. Understood in this manner, it is only in dialogue that meaning is instituted, and that thinking as intelligible activity can be expressed.

4. From Reversibility to Cultural Flesh and Intercultural Understanding

Reversibility as the ontological character of flesh and its phenomenal manifestation has immense implications for the philosophical investigation into the conditions of possibility of intercultural understanding. If speech in the true sense of the term, which involves the institution of meaning, must be realized in the dialogue with the other, thoughts in the sense of theories or doctrines are realized under similar conditions. If the speech and thought of an individual has to be heard by another in the dialogue with Others in order to actualize its meaning, the thoughts or doctrines born in a culture also have to be heard and understood by another culture in order to be established. In other words, without being heard, discussed, criticized and received by other cultures, in short, without being understood by cultural alterity, the objectivity, validity and truthfulness of thoughts and doctrines of a certain culture cannot be established. In short, cultural alterity plays an essential role in the establishment of the objectivity, validity and truth of any theory generated in any single culture.

However, how can the thoughts and doctrines of my culture of origin be heard and understood by other cultures? We should first of all hear the voice of another culture and undertake intercultural communication. But how to proceed intercultural communication? How to promote understanding among different cultures? How to hear voices from cultural alterity? In my book *Phenomenology and Intercultural Understanding: Toward a New Cultural Flesh* (Springer, 2016), I forge the concept

“cultural flesh” as a conceptual tool and try to understand the conditions of possibility of intercultural understanding.

What is cultural flesh? It is a concept inspired by the Merleau-Pontian concept of flesh. If my activity of perception is not operated by a pure mind but conducted with the complicity of my carnal existence, i.e., my flesh, the cultural perception of cultural alterity is likewise not accomplished by a pure intellectual thinker without the participation of the incarnate subject. The exercise of cultural perception on other cultures needs the participation of the whole cultural flesh. It is an activity which cannot be accomplished merely by a purely intellectualist cultural consciousness cut off from its carnal existence.

Why intercultural understanding in philosophy is so difficult? Philosophical thinking understood from the perspective of idealism, intellectualism or transcendentalism is activity of pure intelligible nature. It neglects the reversibility between hearing and speaking which is essential to the activity of meaning institution presupposed by philosophical thinking. The movement of reversibility between hearing and speaking is carried out between two or more carnal subjects and not by disincarnated and purely intelligible beings. Since philosophical thinking presupposes linguistic activity, while linguistic activity presupposes in turn hearing and speaking, the latter in turn are based on my carnal existence as flesh, in consequence philosophical thinking and philosophical dialogue presuppose my flesh. Flesh is the ontological basis of philosophical reflection and dialogue.

Thus, in order to undertake intercultural philosophical dialogue and to promote intercultural understanding in philosophy, we must strengthen our cultural perception with regard to cultural otherness. The secret lies in strengthening our cultural flesh in view of strengthening our cultural sensitivity and cultural sensibility toward other cultures. To achieve this, we must not approach the issue from the merely pure intellectual aspect. On the contrary, we must also approach the problem from the sensible aspects, such as learning the language of other cultures, knowing the history and listening

to the stories of cultural alterity, undertaking activity of appreciation of the art-works, literature, poetry, music and painting of other cultures in order to enhance our cultural sensitivity and sensibility toward cultural otherness.

In order to strengthen our cultural sensitivity and cultural sensibility toward other cultures, we can think of undergoing a surgical operation of replacing our original cultural body by a new cultural body. To change the entire cultural body of our own and replace it by an entirely new one is very difficult, even impossible, but also uncommendable, because in so doing we draw ourselves further away from the task of intercultural understanding. To strengthen our sensitivity and sensibility toward cultural alterity, we must cultivate a new cultural flesh on the basis of our cultural flesh of origin. The key to intercultural understanding is, on the basis of one's own cultural perception and cultural sensitivity, open oneself to the affectivity of cultural otherness, learn to feel and experience what other culture is specific in order to understand cultural otherness. All this is possible on the basis of a new cultural flesh.

If we follow Merleau-Ponty's line of thought that my flesh is first of all a subject of expression, the concept of cultural flesh has another significance for intercultural understanding: cultural flesh is on the one hand the power of affectivity with regard to activities and forms of cultural manifestation of cultural otherness. On the other hand, cultural flesh is the expressive power inseparable from its being affectedness. Activity of expression is not limited to that of intellectual ideas of philosophy, but includes also expressive activities shown through the various aspects of the flesh. The late Merleau-Ponty has proposed the notion of "sensible ideas".²⁶ Examples of sensible ideas can be found in the kind of existence which is mid-way between a pure image and a pure idea, such as image-ideas in literary work and poetry, and in particular in the form of musical melody. These are existence accessible not to the pure thinking mind, but to the cultural flesh. Intercultural understanding has to be undertaken not only through pure intelligible ideas, but also by way of sensible ideas such as those expressed through literature and poetry, art works such as music, painting, sculpture, drama, and even architecture.

²⁶ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l'invisible*, pp. 195-204 ; *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 149-155.

My proposal of the concept of cultural flesh intends to rectify our hitherto idealist or intellectualist conception of the nature of intercultural understanding. With the concept of cultural flesh, intercultural understanding is no more understood as the mere assimilation or refutation of pure intellectualist ideas, but also as the need and the desire of expression of our cultural flesh after being affected by cultural otherness. Activity of expression is activity of the expressive subject stimulated by the desire to express. Intercultural understanding is the expression of the desire of other cultures or cultural otherness. Cultural flesh, as the expressive being who expresses her desire of cultural otherness according to her desire of expression after being affected by other cultures, is thus the basic ontological condition which renders possible and enhances intercultural understanding.

Conclusion

In this paper I have defended the late Merleau-Ponty's concept of flesh against Renaud Barbaras' criticism. I have proposed to understand Merleau-Ponty's concept of "my flesh" as the carnal subject of expression instead of an idealist concept of disincarnated consciousness. In this way, the concept of flesh can avoid the impasse of either falling back onto an idealist phenomenology or embedded in traditional metaphysical dualism, while it succeeds in maintaining the structural duality of phenomenality without reductionism. On the basis of this, I have proposed the concept of "cultural flesh" as one of the basic conditions of possibility of intercultural understanding. The invention of this term serves to rectify our hitherto idealist or intellectualist conception of the nature of intercultural understanding. Intercultural understanding is the expression of the desire of other cultures or cultural alterity. Cultural flesh, as the expressive being who expresses her desire of cultural otherness according to her desire of expression after being affected by other cultures, is thus the basic ontological condition which renders possible and enhances intercultural understanding.

If the concept of cultural flesh proposed above can contribute to a better comprehension of the nature of intercultural understanding, a new task of

phenomenology is born: to undertake intercultural understanding by cultivating a new cultural flesh.