

Flesh and Matter: Merleau-Ponty's Late Ontology as a Materialist Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

The ontology developed by Merleau-Ponty in the final stage of his work is centered on the concept of *flesh*, giving this notion its most general scope by complementing the idea of “flesh of the body” with that of a “flesh of the world.” This paper seeks to evaluate the possibility of reading this philosophy of the flesh as a materialist ontology. For this purpose, the possibility is considered of interpreting the concept of flesh as a new figure of matter, despite Merleau-Ponty's claims that seem to preclude this interpretation. In concluding, the paper briefly discusses the potential contribution of this interpretation to approaching certain conceptual problems in contemporary science. It is argued that this approach can help to promote a more productive interchange between Merleau-Ponty's fundamental thought and the philosophy of science.

1. Introduction

Alphonse de Waelhens (1951) referred to Merleau-Ponty's thought as a “philosophy of ambiguity” to characterize the manner in which he tries to avoid the traditional dualities in the history of philosophy. However, this attitude has not always been regarded as a virtue, and has been open to the criticism that Merleau-Ponty can express more successfully the assumptions he rejects than those he actually maintains (Descombes, 1980).

This feature is quite characteristically present in Merleau-Ponty's approach to the concept of *flesh* (Frajoliet, 2003). The objective here is to examine the possibility of partially resolving this ambiguity by approximating the concepts of *flesh* and *matter*. However, this approximation is problematic for two reasons.

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First, Merleau-Ponty devises his philosophy of the flesh as the core of a general ontology seeking to overcome the classical dualities of the metaphysical tradition, including that between matter and soul. Hence, this ontology takes the form of a kind of *monism*, although this interpretation is itself controversial. Any approximation between flesh and matter in the context of a monist philosophy points towards some kind of materialist philosophy and means interpreting Merleau-Ponty's late ontology as materialism: a doctrine that he emphatically criticized and rejected in many reprises. Nonetheless, this is the line of argument intended here, though the paper also questions the types of materialistic thought that can be attributed to him.

The second difficulty is that Merleau-Ponty apparently rejects this approximation straightforwardly. In his often negative attempts at definition, he clearly states that, among other things, «flesh is not matter» (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 139). Thus, it is necessary to establish precisely what Merleau-Ponty rejects with these remarks and show that they do not represent an insurmountable obstacle to the approximation between flesh and matter.

This discussion aims to underscore the potential contribution of Merleau-Ponty to the analysis of the metaphysical foundations of contemporary science. This is a field characterized by a conspicuous gap, left by the vanishing of matter as a scientific concept in the field of physical sciences, a phenomenon referred to by some authors as the “dematerialization of matter” (McMullin, 1963). In the philosophical field, this situation converges with the vanishing of the very idea of *materialism* and its replacement – often uncritically – by the notion of *physicalism*. Of all the manifestations of subordinating philosophical reflection about science in general to a particular epistemology of physical sciences, this replacement is one of the most striking.

Among the classical philosophers of the phenomenological tradition, Merleau-Ponty is certainly the one who most intensely dialogued with the sciences of nature. His attitude towards science, however, was not free from hesitations and ambiguities; these limitations have also been often noted (Carel & Meacham, 2013). Thus, the idea of combining the concepts of flesh and matter also aims to reinforce the basis for an epistemologically productive dialogue between phenomenology and the sciences of nature.

With this aim in mind, this paper is structured as follows. First, the concept of flesh, as presented in the final stage of Merleau-Ponty's work, is briefly described. Special attention is given to articulation of the concepts of “flesh of the body” and “flesh of the world” that enable understanding of Merleau-Ponty's

philosophy of the flesh as the project for a general ontology. Subsequently, several passages are discussed in which Merleau-Ponty seems to reject any approximation between flesh and matter. It is argued that what he thus rejects is a mechanical worldview; correspondingly, when he affirms that flesh is not matter, he only rejects the modern, Cartesian view of matter, both in its fundamental meaning (reduction of matter to extension) and in its consequences (mechanism and atomism). Some of Merleau-Ponty's direct references to the concept of matter are also reviewed, to show that his rejection is always formulated in a specific and qualified form. In the conclusion, the potential contribution of the philosophy of the flesh, thus understood, to contemporary philosophy of the natural sciences is briefly discussed. A characterization of Merleau-Ponty's late ontology as a new materialism is outlined, together with his contribution to the formulation of *a new philosophical concept of matter*.

2. The Flesh of the Body and the Flesh of the World

The concept of flesh arises as a formula through which Merleau-Ponty seeks, first, to revise his own previous approach to the problem of the lived body in opposition to the physical objective body. This concept is more often and systematically employed in his last works, which is also when it receives its final form, including the generalized formulation that contains the idea of a "flesh of the world." This is also when the focus of Merleau-Ponty's reflection more decidedly turns from phenomenology (a question about the proprieties of the appearing) to ontology (a question about the being of the appearing and about being as such).

First, the concept of flesh advances the endeavor to overcome dualism and its consequences that runs throughout Merleau-Ponty's philosophical work. The perseverance in this campaign was due to his awareness that the traditional alternatives to dualism are also unsatisfactory. Hence, from the beginning of his work, he was always focused on rejecting them also, at least in their classical form. This context makes more comprehensible the "neither... nor..." statements that are common in Merleau-Ponty's writing (Descombes, 1980) and that textually reappear with respect to the concept of flesh. The body as flesh is, primarily, the body that perceives, speaks, knows, and relates to others, such as in his classical phenomenological analyses (Merleau-Ponty, 1967; 2005). The notion of flesh takes these analyses further, representing an effort to confront a number of consequences and difficulties inherent in this embodied

view of the subject; however, it also aims to overcome the limitations of this earlier approach, among which the very duality of subject-object is most prominent. It appears that Merleau-Ponty may have ultimately realized that acknowledgement of a subjective pole in the perceptual act, as opposed to the object of perception, perpetuates precisely the kind of doctrine he wanted to eliminate and of which “Cartesian” dualism was but one of many versions. He refers to this doctrine in general as “ontology of the object,” and seeks to replace it with a new doctrine, termed “ontology of the wild being” or “of the brute being,” among other names. The concept of flesh plays a dominant role in elaborating this new ontology.

It is difficult to find a clear definition of “flesh” in the notes and manuscripts left by Merleau-Ponty, but sometimes explanation close to definition is attempted:

Essential: *Theory of the flesh*, of the body as *Empfindbarkeit* and of things as implicated in it. This has nothing in common with a consciousness that would descend into a body-object. It is, on the contrary, the wrapping of a body-object around itself, or rather, a truce of metaphors. It is not a surveying of the body and of the world by a consciousness, but rather is my body as interposed between what is in front of me and what is behind me, my body standing in front of the upright things, in a circuit with the world, an *Einfühlung* with the world, with the things, with the animals, with other bodies (...) made comprehensible by this theory of the flesh. (Merleau-Ponty, 2003, p. 209).

The first notable issue in this passage is that flesh is presented as a “theory,” rather than just an isolated notion or metaphor. Its definition is organized around the idea of *sensibility* (*Empfindbarkeit*) in the double sense that the body is presented as sentient (able to feel) and “things” are understood as sensible in the sense that they can be felt. However, other beings are also potentially sentient: what is felt can include animals or other human bodies. The concept of flesh encompasses all of these senses of sensibility to the point of almost complete identification: this ontology of the flesh is presented as an interrogation of «the being of the sensible» or «the sensible itself» in all its dimensions (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 114). Undoubtedly, there is an embodiment of the subject in the perceptual act. However, this embodiment cannot be understood as a non-corporeal consciousness “descending” into an objective body, i.e., as *incarnation* or the insertion of spirit into the material world (Barbaras, 2002). Merleau-Ponty’s proposed replacement for this dualist

view is not clearly stated here, but only provisionally expressed by a “truce of metaphors”: the body wraps around and folds upon itself and the object. Soul and body are not distinct entities or substances, but *reversible ways of manifestation of the flesh*, different forms of relation of the flesh to itself. Consciousness does not survey the world from above, but is simply the name given by an idealist philosophy to the different ways in which the body can be situated in its relation to the world and act upon this world, in addition to the different possible experiences resulting from this situation. This is not a relation of exteriority, however: the body is “in circuit” with the world and in a relationship of empathy with everything in it. It participates entirely in this universe of perceptual beings. Merleau-Ponty’s argument is that this mode of being of the body *and* the world is made understandable through his “theory of the flesh.”

In a working note from July 1958, an outline definition of the concept of flesh is obliquely attempted, in the context of reflection on the being of the subject. Merleau-Ponty discusses in this note the relationship between the variable and the invariable aspects of being, i.e., between essence (*eidos*) and properties. His argument is that the *eidos* does not imply a static being: on the contrary, being is movement, “passage”, and its invariants can only be apprehended in and through its variations; these transformations are assimilated to his own concept of *divergence* (*écart*). In his own words, the *eidos* must be understood as an «integration of nascent movements, » as process, and defined as «qualitative integration» (Merleau-Ponty, 2007, p. 445). These remarks then provide the occasion to formulate an explicit question about the meaning of the flesh:

But what is the flesh, the body proper of the *eidos*, this gangue across which it appears? This ontological milieu, this field whose presence it always presupposes? Certainly, it is the sensible carnal (...). But it is the carnal having become capable of sheltering, of encircling, of figuring its own invariants (...); and its diacritical systems which formulate, beyond those of the sensible, the operation of those of the sensible, (...) which overflow them by the very impulse that they receive from them as flywheels and as *Urstiftung*(...). Don't conceive them on the basis of the “I think,” on the contrary, conceive the “I think” on the basis of them, i.e., conceive the “I think” of the other at the same time as mine, as the twin of mine (...) (of me as institution over me as constitution). Conceive the “I think” (...) not as a system of thought, but as the institution of Being in... (Merleau-Ponty, 2007, p. 445-6).

The relation of flesh to essence is thus comparable to that of the undifferentiated rock to the ore it contains: flesh is not substance, but an “ontological milieu” in which the passage of being takes place. However, how can flesh be concretely defined? In Merleau-Ponty’s view, as a “sensible carnal”, within a conception of sensibility as a mode of being of the body in the world and a mode of being of the world itself. This is evidenced by metaphors similar to those previously used to express the relationship between body and world now reappearing to express the relationship between flesh and *eidōs*: it “shelters,” “encircles,” and “figures” its own invariants. This invariant structure of being is then characterized as a “diacritical system.” It is not a perennial essence eternally identical to itself, but a certain positional configuration of elements, which define the whole by their reciprocal interactions and define themselves by the place they occupy in the system. The *eidōs* is thus a contingent and situated invariant that provides a sort of counterweight (or “flywheel”) for the process of being, operating as an original foundation (*Urstiftung*) from which this movement takes place. This explains why “I think” cannot be the ultimate foundation of being: it is a function of this system of dynamical relations between the core of being *in general* and its properties. The condition of the other as subject must be conceived in the same terms, since the *relational character* of Merleau-Ponty’s ontology also applies to the problem of the being of the subject: one “I think” can only be defined with respect to another “I think” in an intercorporeal relationship. The world and the other *institute* me as self, and the “I think” of a carnal being can only be the “institution of Being” and not the constitution of a world following the unconditional act of self-constitution of the subject through the *cogito*.

These remarks may facilitate understanding of the *locus classicus* of the definition of flesh in *The Visible and the Invisible*:

What we are calling flesh, this interiorly worked-over mass, has no name in any philosophy. As the formative medium of the object and the subject, it is not the atom of being, the hard in itself that resides in a unique place and moment: one can indeed say of my body that it is not *elsewhere*, but one cannot say that it is *here* or *now* in the sense that objects are; and yet my vision does not soar over them, it is not the being that is wholly knowing, for it has its own inertia (...). We must not think the flesh starting from substances, from body and spirit (...), but we must think it (...) as an element, as the concrete emblem of a general manner of being. (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 147).

This passage follows a previous *negative* characterization of flesh where, among other points, its identification with matter is rejected. Flesh is now described as the “formative medium” in which both subject and object take form. However, it is not an “atom of being,” a mechanically divisible thing in itself whose existence can be reduced to its location in space at a given moment. Merleau-Ponty refers specifically to the body here, but insofar as the flesh is the common medium of both subject and object, these remarks must also apply to the carnal mode of existence of things, as is clarified in the discussion of the notion of flesh of the world below. This carnality of things also prevents the perceptual act from grasping them in an absolute sense, as if hovering over the world: being has its own inertia, its element of *passivity*. Objects cannot be regarded as pure idealities constituted by perceptual consciousness. This explains why flesh cannot be understood starting from the categories of traditional metaphysics, especially those of modern ontology. This is what Merleau-Ponty means when he states, somewhat hyperbolically, that flesh has no name in *any* philosophy, since he immediately afterwards acknowledges that the flesh can be construed by analogy with the pre-Socratic notion of “element,” the first principle from whose transformation and organization the whole cosmos takes shape. Thus, flesh has at least an approximate name in *some* philosophies, which propose making sense of existence in terms of the differentiation of an original “general manner of being.”

Summarizing, flesh can be defined as:

1. *sensibility*: the being's reversible capacity to feel and be felt;
2. the mode of being of corporeality *and* things;
3. a general “stuff” of being that seeks to make less metaphysically mysterious the relationship between its dimensions by describing them as the flesh “enveloping” and “folding,” but without dissolving them in uniformity, since there is always *divergence* between the “folds”;
4. an ontological milieu for the crystallization of essences and the differentiation between subject and object;
5. the centerpiece of a dynamic conception of being as movement and process;
6. a conceptual tool for a critique of idealist views of knowledge and world;
7. a conceptual tool for the critique of a mechanical view of the physical world as pure extension or “simple location” (Whitehead); and

8. in sum, the organizing metaphor of a *qualitative and relational ontology*, which is manifest in the analogical reference to the pre-Socratic concept of element.

These features require that the concept of flesh must not be restricted to reflection on the human mode of being or living corporeality in general: subject *and object*, body *and world, as a whole*, can no longer be approached in terms of the traditional categories of modern metaphysics. The philosophy of the flesh perceived by Merleau-Ponty must then be extended to the totality of being. At first, it gives continuity to previous criticism of an objectivistic view of the body, providing an ontological foundation to the idea of the body as subject and agency; however, it soon encompasses that to which the body must relate to give origin to experience or action. It gives ontological support to the phenomenological view of experience, which refuses to construe it according to the empiricist view, i.e., as the result of a sort of friction between two pre-existing realities (mind and stimuli, for example), whose origin and nature is not questioned. However, the flesh also prevents defining experience in terms of an absolute and unconditioned intentional function of consciousness, which would ultimately dissolve it in a sea of idealities.

The idea of flesh as “the being of the sensible” is, then, the centerpiece of this enterprise, which Merleau-Ponty (1964c) refers to as the “ontological rehabilitation of the sensible.” By its own meaning, this ontological view of sensibility touches upon the indissoluble unity between the flesh of the body and the flesh of the world: if flesh is defined as the “sensible in itself”, it can no longer refer exclusively to the being of the body that feels but rather refers also to the being of that which is felt. Conceiving of the world as flesh thus appears as the ontological condition under which things can be understood as something other than mere objects. If things were so, this whole doctrine could revert to a view of the body as pure subject, reestablishing the transcendental attitude, however “embodied” this subject may be. Merleau-Ponty’s late philosophy cannot be merely ontology of corporeality: to be a true ontology of the “brute being,” it must become a general ontology. This imperative is manifest in how insistently he returns to the idea of a “flesh of the world”:

Consequences for the perceived things: correlations of a carnal subject, rejoined to its movements and to its sensing: interspersed in its internal circuit – they are made of the same stuff as it. The sensible is the flesh of the world, that is, the

meaning in the exterior. The flesh of the body makes us understand the flesh of the world. (Merleau-Ponty, 2003, p. 218)

The body thus functions as a model for conceiving of the general nature of things. Just like the body, the things in the world cannot be regarded as pure objects. Just as the body is a center of agency and meaning-production, things consist in the “meaning in the exterior.” They are somehow active and producers of meaning. However, the difference between the perceiving body and the perceived things cannot be overlooked: in the act of perception, they are separate and distinguishable, even though this distinction is reversible, as in the constantly repeated example of the mutually touching hands that is also used to express the meaning of the concept of flesh. As Merleau-Ponty (1968, p. 144) states, «in its coupling with the flesh of the world, the body contributes more than it receives. » This difference is reaffirmed in a working note called «Flesh of the world – flesh of the body – Being. » The title itself suggests the flesh is an organizing metaphor for a general ontology: the flesh of the world and the flesh of the body together comprise the totality of Being. Merleau-Ponty (*ibid.*, p. 248) insists that, if there is empathy between these two dimensions of the flesh, then «that means that my body is made of the same flesh as the world (...) that this flesh of my body is shared by the world. » However, «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 a pregnancy of possible, *Weltmöglichkeit* (...) that it is therefore absolutely not an object » (*ibid.*, p. 250). These provisos are indispensable to prevent the definition of flesh as the “being of the sensible” becoming understood as some form of panpsychism, representing the world as something that feels and thinks in the same sense as humans (Dillon, 1988).

Body and world, then, must share the same common nature, according to the definition of flesh as “a general manner of being.” This *generality of the flesh* receives an even stronger formulation when the *universality of the flesh* is claimed:

If it [the body] touches them and sees them [the perceived things], this is only because, being of their family, (...) it uses its own being as a means to participate in theirs, because each of the two beings is an archetype for the other, because the body belongs to the order of the things as the world is universal flesh. (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 137)

Perception is, then, a particular way, albeit a privileged one, of participating in the universal being of the flesh. The same idea reappears in the preface to *Signs*: the «openings of our flesh (...) are immediately filled by the universal flesh of the world» (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a, p. 16).

The philosophy of the flesh thus seems to be presented as an openly monist ontology. If there is a “flesh of the world,” the “flesh of the body,” however important it may be, can only be a *dimension* of this universal flesh. The relationship between the flesh of the body and the flesh of the world is a part-whole relationship. A monist interpretation of the flesh, however complex it must be to do justice to the subtleties of Merleau-Ponty’s position, may establish foundations to draw the ultimate consequences from the idea of “flesh of the world” and from his claims for the unity and universality of the flesh.

However, if there is in fact a *monism of the flesh* in Merleau-Ponty work, of what, precisely, is this a monism? In essence, when he states that the body “is made of the same stuff as” the world, what is exactly denoted by the terms “made of” and “stuff”? The idea here is to explore the possibility of interpreting flesh as matter or, more precisely, as *an organizing metaphor for a new philosophical concept of matter*. By its own meaning, the metaphor of the flesh indicates some idea of materiality, and the senses and uses of the notion of flesh seem promising for reformulating the meaning of materiality itself. Moreover, at a certain point, the flesh of the body and the flesh of the world are referred to as a «culmination of materiality» (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 248).

3. The Materiality of the Flesh and the Carnality of Matter

There is, however, an obvious obstacle to this interpretation of flesh as matter: Merleau-Ponty (1968, p. 139) seems to reject it straightforwardly and without ambiguity: «The flesh is not matter, in the sense of corpuscles of being which would add up or continue on one another to form beings. (...) In general, it is not a fact or a sum of facts ‘material’ or ‘spiritual’. (...) The flesh is not matter, is not mind, is not substance. » This rejection is reiterated a few paragraphs below: «Once again, the flesh we are speaking of is not matter» (*ibid.*, p. 146); and again later: «Nature as the other side of man (as flesh – nowise as matter) » (*ibid.*, p. 274). However unequivocal these passages seem to be, it may first be observed that Merleau-Ponty apparently feels the need to explicitly and repeatedly reject an understanding of flesh as matter. This attitude in itself suggests how much the definition of flesh, especially referring to a “flesh of the world,” seems to

indicate some proximity between these two concepts. Moreover, a more detailed analysis reveals how this rejection is carefully qualified: Merleau-Ponty specifies *in what sense* flesh is not matter. What he clearly rejects is a *corpuscular theory of matter* (matter as “corpuscles of being”). This theory is typical of modern scientific and philosophical thinking with its mechanical view of nature, and it partially survives, *mutatis mutandis*, in 19th century atomic theory. According to the corpuscular theory, matter can be indefinitely divided into increasingly smaller parts that always preserve all the general properties of the whole. These properties are ultimately reducible to that of holding a certain location in space. Every property that is not reducible to extension (secondary qualities) is then regarded as subjective and deprived of material reality. Inevitably, these secondary qualities are precisely the sensible properties that Merleau-Ponty seeks to bring to the foreground. “Corpuscles” typically do not organize themselves into complex wholes: they simply group together to form larger entities through a process of mechanical juxtaposition in space. Corpuscular theories of matter are, thus, exemplary historical illustrations of this atomist and mechanical view of totality, according to which “the whole is nothing but the sum of its parts.” This is a view that Merleau-Ponty criticized from his first works, in favor of a structural conception of nature and being as organized totalities. There is nothing particularly new being rejected here: only the good old “Cartesian” view of life and matter. Flesh is thus neither material, nor spiritual; it is neither matter nor mind. It is not substance either; however, given all that has been said, it is possible to argue that he specifically rejects here the modern Cartesian concept of substance, precisely that which makes it possible to metaphysically oppose soul and body. This is one of the reasons why Merleau-Ponty, when referring to the ontological problem of the flesh, often prefers the ordinary-language and metaphysically neutral term “stuff” (“*étouffe*”). A subtle difference can also be observed in how Merleau-Ponty claims the unprecedented character of the flesh here and in the passage previously quoted where flesh was first defined. On that occasion, when specifying “what we are calling flesh”, he said that it had “no name in *any philosophy*”. However, in the sentence immediately before that in which he states that flesh is not matter, he affirms: «one knows there is no name in traditional philosophy to designate it» (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 139). It can be assumed the subsequent rejection constitutes that of a *traditional* concept of matter, i.e., a rejection of what *traditional philosophy* (modern metaphysics) calls matter, but not *of the concept of matter as such*.

Even the cryptic and Heraclitian sentence that closes the last working note in *The Visible and the Invisible* can be read as a qualification of this rejection. It reads: «Worked-over-matter (*matière ouvrée*) – men = *chiasm*» (*ibid.*, p. 275). Merleau-Ponty reaffirms here the critique of the ontological abyss opened by modern thought between humanity and nature. However, some words employed (e.g., “*matière ouvrée*”) are very close to those previously used to characterize the concept of flesh: “flesh, this interiorly worked-over mass” (“*cette masse intérieurement travaillée*”). This suggests that flesh could be defined in terms of this interiorly worked-over matter and no longer as an inert and undifferentiated mass. Flesh would be a dynamically active matter, continuously working-over itself in the production of its own differentiation. This dynamic work by which flesh is defined is an internal work, intrinsic to matter itself. Matter cannot be conceived as exclusively worked-over from the outside by human action or even by animal behavior and metabolism: it must possess this capacity for production and differentiation as an intrinsic potency. Even the spontaneous emergence of life within inorganic matter could be regarded as an exemplary manifestation of this productivity of the flesh. Taking all this into account, Merleau-Ponty’s rejection of *any* approximation between flesh and matter no longer seems so unequivocal. His objective seems to be the rejection of a certain view of matter and the development, albeit incomplete and tentative, of a new perspective, whose distinctive features are summarized in the concept of flesh.

In Merleau-Ponty’s courses on nature, it is noticeable that the rejection of a materialist stance always appears to be carefully qualified, thereby clarifying that he does not reject the idea of matter as such, but only a particular definition thereof. He states of the body, for example: «how do I have a sort of commonality with this *mass of matter*? – Precisely because *it is not a mass of matter* (...) » (Merleau-Ponty, 2003, p. 217). Just as he had previously refused to identify flesh with matter as it is defined by corpuscular theory, he here refuses the materiality of the body and the world, *if matter is understood as nothing but mass*. The concept of mass is crucial for the birth of modern mathematical physics. The definition of mass as a quantity of matter, culminating in Newton’s work, was the first step in the progressive disappearance of matter as a scientific concept. This replacement and the virtual identification between mass and matter made possible an entirely quantitative definition of the concept of matter, becoming then understood as something that occupies space and that can causally and mechanically interact with the entities in the physical world. This is the view of matter that Merleau-Ponty actually seems to reject.

The same kind of restrictive clause can be found in “Man and Adversity,” in which he states that «instinct and the physiological are enveloped in a central demand for absolute possession which could not possibly be the act of a bit of matter [*un morceau de matière*]» (Merleau-Ponty, 1964b, p. 228). It is, once again, a mechanical view of the material world that is criticized here, since in an entity that it is “nothing but the sum of its parts,” each piece preserves all the properties of the whole. The same idea reappears on the following page: «we can no longer speak of the sexual organ taken as a localizable mechanism, or of the body taken as a mass of matter» (*ibid.*, p. 229).

These quotes must be sufficient to indicate that Merleau-Ponty's rejection of approximating flesh and matter is always restricted to a particular view of the latter and, therefore, does not preclude interpreting his ontology of the flesh as a materialist philosophy. Scholarship on Merleau-Ponty usually emphasizes his criticism of materialism (Verissimo & Furlan, 2009). However, some scholars, while referring to his critique of materialism, also specify its sense and restricted scope. Hass (2008), for example, invariably refers to the rejection of a *reductive* materialism as the counterpart of Merleau-Ponty's critique of dualism and idealism. Matthews (2002, p. 58) attributes a materialist stance to Merleau-Ponty, always insisting that this does not amount to regarding human beings as «nothing more than lumps of matter. »

It is also possible to find some approximation between matter and flesh in the literature. Hass (2008, p. 138), for example, acknowledges that Merleau-Ponty uses the term flesh «as an intentional, strategic alternative to the age-old notion of ‘matter’.» In turn, Lingis (1968, p. xli-xlii) places the idea of a “sensible matter” at the core of Merleau-Ponty's argument in *The Visible and the Invisible*; he also he refers to «the very matter or flesh – of the visible» (*ibid.*, p. xlii). In sum, the attribution of an ultimately materialist stance to Merleau-Ponty does not seem especially unthinkable.

4. Conclusion

What is the value of this interpretation? First, approximating flesh and matter is immediately useful for a critical revision of the ontology presupposed, often implicitly, by mainstream contemporary natural science. This ontology is distinguished by the deflation and eventual disappearance of the scientific and epistemological concept of matter as such, referred to by some authors as the “dematerialization of matter” (McMullin, 1963). One of the effects of matter's

disappearance from science is the masking or the neglect of its ontological foundations. Contemporary science is most often silent about these foundational issues, which evidently does not prevent it from practicing an implicit or unconscious metaphysics. Quite representative of this trend is the disuse of the term “*materialism*,” which is increasingly being replaced by “*physicalism*” (Stoljar, 2010). Physicalism may have varied senses and interpretations, but all of them share both the positivistic rejection of metaphysical doctrines and an emphasis upon strong connections with the physical sciences (Crane & Mellor, 1990). In a fundamental sense, physicalism as a doctrine amounts to an ontological “I-do-not-care” (or “being is what physics says it is”), and constitutes the philosophical counterpart of the historical deflation of the scientific meaning and usage of the concept of matter.

Merleau-Ponty’s intensive dialogue with the natural sciences provides important insights to the recovery and renewal in science of the ontological significance of the concept of matter. His notion of a flesh of the world, in particular, actually renders his ontology a general ontology, opening the way for his reflection to also encompass the domain of physicality: a domain that is most often regarded as marking phenomenology’s external boundary. It may be observed, perhaps, that Merleau-Ponty’s view of flesh allows integration of the many senses of matter in phenomenology (Lanfredini, 2016), paving the way for an approach to physicality itself within the phenomenological field.

Indeed, the possibility of thus extending the phenomenological perspective makes Merleau-Ponty’s approach particularly interesting to revision of the explicit or implicit ontological commitments of contemporary science. Barbaras (2002) argues that the impassés and ambiguities of the philosophy of the flesh could be overcome by a philosophy or ontology of life. However, a philosophy of the flesh containing the idea of “flesh of the world” and of “ontology of the brute being” can no longer be merely a philosophy of the organism. It must instead develop a materialist view of life, provided that the concept of matter is deeply revised. Flesh, as such, is not the body of the animate being; it does not necessarily entail the idea of organization. Flesh is, rather, the raw material of the organized being: that which remains and returns to the general domain of being when life ceases. Emphasis on the idea of structure or organization remains an *epistemological* attitude: a stance on the best way of explaining the characteristics of a complex system. A philosophy of the flesh, in turn, is concerned with establishing the *ontological* conditions of possibility for such epistemology. Adapting the language of physicalism, it could be argued that life

supervenes upon the flesh, but this supervenience is only possible because the flesh already has within it the properties that enable the emergence of life. Some of the hypothetical properties of this “universal flesh of the world” were outlined here based on Merleau-Ponty's views: matter as a dynamic system of qualitative self-differentiation; matter as activity and production (including the possibility of meaning-production); matter as a historical-temporal milieu, etc. Starting from this characterization, it may be possible to abandon the conception of life as some form of quantum improbability, and to conceive it instead as *a possibility inscribed in the nature of matter itself*.

Such an ontology may eventually enable the drawing of philosophical implications of scientific views that construe life as a potentiality inherent in matter, as well as the evaluation of the conceptual foundations of these views. Thereby, instead of an almost inexplicable miracle, life becomes an event that is practically inevitable in the course of the evolution of the universe (De Duve, 1995), maybe since its inception (Loeb, 2014). This form of philosophical dialogue with science could also be extended to those approaches attempting to bridge the gap between physical and life sciences, not by simply reducing the latter to the former, but rather presenting their respective object-domains as aspects or dimensions of an integrated, dynamic, and evolutionary system. In Merleau-Ponty's terms, this integration would amount to giving a cosmological scope to the notion of carnality. However, such integration between the physical and the biological evidently requires a substantial revision of views on the nature of physicality itself. It is to this task that this paper has hopefully made some contribution.

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