

# FREUDIANISM PHILOSOPHIE AND GESTALT ACCORDING MERLEAU-PONTY

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**Abstract:** In this article I present and discuss a reading hypothesis, according to which, with the purpose of thinking about the genesis of meaning in the lived experience without needing, for that, to resort to the reflexive transparency expedient ensured by the idea of a pure self, Merleau-Ponty promotes a shift in the way of employing the Gestalt notion, which starts to be read from the unconscious drive Freudian theory. Interpreted from psychoanalysis, however, Gestalt's notion would no longer address the lived from a descriptive point of view and would assume a dynamic point of view, which Merleau-Ponty (1964a, p. 165) will call ontological, which, in turn, it will influence the Merleau-Ponty appropriation of psychoanalysis. Beyond anthropology, psychoanalysis, as a gestalt (or ontological) reading of the way the lived is articulated, would become a form of philosophy (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1964a, p. 323), the presentation of Being as a process of differentiation between incarnated signifiers, which would configure a "primary symbolism". And my greatest interest, with this hypothesis, is to measure to what extent, with this approaching strategy between gestalt and psychoanalytic operators, Merleau-Ponty manages to solve a problem that he himself faced in his way of understanding how it is possible to have singularity in a context of production of spontaneous and generic meanings wholes. This means asking: in what sense the notion of gestalt whole clarifies what is the intimacy that, for example, psychoanalysis believes it can hear from the people?

**Keywords:** Gestalt, unconscious, drive of life, death drive, expression.

**Resumo:** No presente artigo eu apresento e discuto uma hipótese de leitura, segundo a qual, com o propósito de pensar a gênese do sentido na experiência vivida sem precisar, para tanto, recorrer ao expediente da transparência reflexiva assegurada pela ideia de um eu puro, Merleau-Ponty promove um deslocamento no modo de emprego da noção de Gestalt, a qual passa a ser lida a partir da teoria freudiana do inconsciente pulsional. Interpretada a partir da psicanálise, entretanto, a noção de Gestalt deixaria de abordar o vivido desde um ponto de vista descritivo e assumiria um ponto de vista dinâmico, que Merleau-Ponty (1964 a, p. 165) denominará de ontológico, o qual, a sua vez, terá efeito sobre a própria apropriação merleau-pontyana da psicanálise. Mais além da antropologia, a psicanálise, enquanto leitura gestáltica (ou ontológica) do modo como se articulam os vividos, tornar-se-ia uma forma de filosofia (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1964a, p. 323), a apresentação do Ser enquanto um processo de diferenciação entre significantes encarnados, os quais configurariam um "simbolismo primordial". E meu interesse maior, com essa hipótese, é dimensionar até que ponto, com essa estratégia de aproximação entre operadores gestálticos e psicanalíticos, Merleau-Ponty dá conta de resolver um problema que ele próprio enfrentou em sua forma de compreender como é possível haver singularidade num contexto de produção de todos de sentido espontâneos e genéricos. Tal significa perguntar: em que sentido a noção

de todo gestáltico esclarece o que seja intimidade que, por exemplo, a psicanálise julga poder ouvir de cada qual?

**Palavras-chave:** Gestalt, inconsciente, pulsão de vida, pulsão de morte, expressão.

## Introduction

The reading I want to share here seeks to demonstrate in what terms, in Merleau-Ponty's work (1964a, p. 314-315), the Gestalt notion is often used as a synonym for the autonomy of the lived to express themselves as "whole" of meaning. Despite being precarious, ambiguous, and unfinished wholes, the lived – interpreted from the Gestalt notion and, in this way, gradually displaced from the condition of intentional acts of consciousness to the condition of incarnated signifiers – would themselves be spontaneous totalities, such as those that Freud recognized to be in force in the dream field, as an effect of the autonomy of unconscious symbolism to manifest itself in a phantasmatic way. Hence – according to my reading – the equivalence that Merleau-Ponty seeks to recognize between the Gestalt notion and the spontaneity with which Freud characterizes, if not the dynamism of the symbolic unconscious, at least the transferential link between the analyst and his analysand<sup>1</sup>. With this strategy, Merleau-Ponty would avoid subordinating the lived – and the meaning articulated in it – to natural laws or to representations of a transparent self. Interpreted from psychoanalysis, however, Gestalt's notion would no longer address the lived from a descriptive point of view and would assume a dynamic point of view, which Merleau-Ponty (1964a, p. 165) will call ontological, which, in turn, it will influence the Merleau-Ponty appropriation of psychoanalysis itself. Beyond anthropology, psychoanalysis, as a gestalt (or ontological) reading of the way the lived is articulated, would become a form of philosophy (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1964a, p. 323), the presentation of Being

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<sup>1</sup> The perception that Merleau-Ponty seeks to understand the genesis of meaning from a reading that brings psychoanalysis closer to the Gestalt notion and vice versa is also pointed out by Garcia-Roza (1986, p. 67). Inspired by Merleau-Ponty, Garcia-Roza himself seeks to establish a presentation of the unconscious drive based on the way *Gestalttheorie* psychologists think of Gestalt, namely, as a dynamic of figure and background. In this sense, Garcia-Roza (1986, p. 71) says that "(o)n the drive field made up of figure and ground, which is background for being silent, invisible, and formless, is called the death drive; while the figure, for being differentiated, for presenting a form, is called the life drive". Garcia-Roza (1986, p. 67), however, considers that "(a) notion of figure and background does not belong, however, to the same register as the concept of drive. The latter is a dynamic concept, while the figure-background is a descriptive notion". Therefore, he will say that "(what) I intend is not to explain the drive through the figure-background differential, but to articulate the two concepts in such a way that this articulation allows us to understand the distinction between the life drive and the death drive" (GARCIA-ROZA, 1986, p. 67).

as a process of differentiation between incarnated signifiers, which would configure a “primary symbolism”, such as that described by Freud regarding the unconscious drive, after all, “(...) what Freud most interestingly brought, – not the idea of a secondly, “I think” that it would be what we are unaware of, – but the idea of a symbolism that is primordial (...)” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2000, p. 69-70). Now, but in what sense are the signifiers ‘Gestalt’ and the ‘unconscious drive’ comparable? In what sense, according to Merleau-Ponty, is the symbolism claimed by Freud for the unconscious structured in a gestalt way?

The answer to these questions requires me to take the route of Merleau-Ponty’s use of the notions of ‘Gestalt’ and ‘unconscious drive’. As I propose to show, in the first moment of his work, in which he was most critical of psychoanalysis, Merleau-Ponty (1945, p. 620-621) refers to Gestalt as an autonomous temporal structure, which, despite being inspired by the phenomenological theory of the “immanent experience of time by consciousness embodied in experience”, it is opposed to phenomenological theses that profess the primacy of the pure “I”, which, according to Husserl (1986, p. 76-77) must be achievable by reducing the lived experiences of the embodied consciousness to categorial acts, as if the clarification of the meaning of the lived depended on them.

In the sequence, in a second moment of his work, already further away from phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty (1960b, p. 283) reviews his initial criticisms of psychoanalysis and deepens his understanding of what a Gestalt is based on Freud. That is, Merleau-Ponty recognizes in Freudian psychoanalysis, especially in his hypothesis about the autonomy of the unconscious to produce symbolic articulations independently of consciousness, a form of presentation of the Gestalt notion, which emphasizes what would explain connectivity – always precarious – of the elements involved in a gestalt whole, precisely, their mutual expressiveness, as if each element expressed, which mark, the absence of what it is not, from which the symbolic character of the connection they would share would be inferred. Gestalt is a whole of meaning, but it articulates itself in a spontaneous or unconscious way, which is to say, simultaneously broken (death drive) and to be done (life drive).

But, if the meaning is the open whole and to be done that expresses itself in the relations of differentiation between incarnated signifiers, which would dispense with the rulership of a transparent self for itself, what distinguishes, in this whole, the generic and the singular? Is there not, as Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. 409) will state when assessing the risks of his own strategy, a bad ambiguity between the intimate and the generic? Doesn’t

Merleau-Ponty find here the difficulty that he himself pointed out in relation to psychoanalysis in explaining how the unconscious – which is said for each person – can be shared in the interpretation, in the analysis of symptomatic resistances and repetitions? In what sense does the notion of gestalt whole clarify what singularity, for example, psychoanalysis thinks it can hear from the patients?

### **Gestalt as intentionality without “I” and the primacy of the body**

If the Gestalt notion is the formal operator that Merleau-Ponty used – since his first texts – to think about the genesis and dynamics of meaning in the lived experience, without having to resort to the notion of transparency of the “I”; phenomenology, as a philosophical methodology, is notably the main interlocutor of the Merleau-Ponty philosophical project. First, for historical reasons. After all, phenomenology formalizes the theoretical bases from which, for example, the *Gestalttheorie* psychologists – so appreciated by Merleau-Ponty – will formulate an empirical presentation of the Gestalt notion to think about, among other topics, the experience of perception. As explained in a note to the third chapter of the introduction to the work *Phénoménologie de la perception*, for Merleau-Ponty (1945, p. 620-621):

The “psychology of form” practiced a kind of reflection of which Husserl’s phenomenology provides the theory. (...) Although it is not about making history, let us indicate that the kinship between *Gestalttheorie* and Phenomenology is also attested by external evidence. It is not by chance that Köhler presents as the objective of psychology a “phenomenological description” (...); that Koffka, a former student of Husserl, relates to this influence the guiding ideas of his psychology, and seeks to show that the criticism of psychologism is not directed against *Gestalttheorie* (...).

But, outstandingly, phenomenology is for Merleau-Ponty a great interlocutor because its founder – the mathematician Edmund Husserl (1895-1938) – admitted that what the *Gestalttheorie* psychologists call Gestalt refers to an intentionality of a special kind, that is, “*eine Intentionalität eigener Art*” (HUSSERL, 1994, Appendix IX, p. 118), in which the meaning of the experience does not depend on being referred to a transparent “I” that would

represent it in a clear and distinct way<sup>2</sup>. It is something like an operative intentionality (HUSSERL, 1994, p. 80-82). This does not mean that, for Husserl (2012, p. 124), the gestalt meaning, formulated in terms of an operative intentionality, was clear and distinct. Now what is this operant domain – which Merleau-Ponty, in the wake of the *Gestalttheorie* psychologists, relates to the notion of Gestalt? To what extent does operant intentionality not depend on referring to the “I”?

According to Merleau-Ponty (1945, p. X), phenomenology – as a discipline – is a reading that seeks to portray experiences (in a broad sense) as intentional processes. For phenomenology, however, intentionality does not have to do with the “intentions” that a person would formulate in their “supposed” mental interiority (HUSSERL, 1962, p. 152-3). When I say, for example, that “I intend to return to Mexico and Spain”, the intention behind this statement is the temporal correlation between the material “reality” of the written sentence, read or uttered at that moment, and the “inactuality” of the visit aimed, be it a reference (*Bedeutung*) to the past or a reference to the future, both virtual from the point of view of the act that aims at them<sup>3</sup>. Intentionality, therefore, is only a method to describe the temporal correlation between the material actuality of an act of consciousness and the inactuality of the modes of manifestation of everything that is external to this act, for example, the next acts, the previous acts, the acts of another consciousness or the inactuality of the world, whether it be presented in a mythical, historical or virtual way, as a past or future phenomenon (HUSSERL, 1976, p. 171). Hence the definition that the intentionality referred to in Husserlian phenomenology is the capacity that acts of consciousness (perceptive, reminiscent, imaginary, cognitive...) have to unite – with what is material and present in each act – a

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<sup>2</sup> Merleau-Ponty is not the only one who thinks that one can recognize, in Husserl, a presentation of the notion of noema (or intentional object aimed at by acts) as a unit formulated in a gestalt way. After all, the noema would be able to show its unity or totality independently of a unifying action exerted by the act. This is also the position of Aron Gurwitsch (2010, p. 149). Other commentators, however, disagree with the position of Merleau-Ponty and Gurwitsch. This is the case of Drummond (1990, p. 63-71). According to this author, even though it is plausible that there are, yes, relationships between phenomenology and Gestalt, to the point that many scholars claim that there is mutual influence between these fields, it is also true that Husserl was very resistant to the appropriation of phenomenology and the notions of its method outside the context in which they were developed.

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Derrida, in his thesis on Husserl, clarifies in what sense the intentional use of the notion of reference could be understood. According to Derrida (1994, p. 26), “we could translate *bedeuten* by meaning [vouloir-dire in French], at the same time, in the sense that a speaking subject, “expressing himself”, as Husserl says, “about something”, that is, and not the sense in which an expression means, and ensuring that *Bedeutung* is always ‘what’ someone or a discourse ‘means’: always a sense of discourse, a discursive content”.

temporal dimension and, in this sense, inactual or absent, for example, a habitual orientation or a project (HUSSERL, 2012, p. 140). But, in what sense, then, does the notion of intentionality explain what it is the Gestalt?

The spontaneity in the organization of perceptual experiences – and what psychologists call Gestalt – can indeed be explained from the theory of intentionality. In this, at least, Husserl (1985a; p. 152) agrees with the *Gestalttheorie* psychologists. However, the intentionality that applies to the spontaneity of the lived is that operated by the conscience when the authorship of intentional acts is not in question, only the temporal presentation modes of the world aimed at by the acts (HUSSERL, 1994, Appendix IX, p. 118). It is, therefore, a merely “operative” intentionality, in which the unity of acts and correlates is only “intuited”, but not reflexively indicated, as in the case of acts through which the conscience aims at itself. By the way, the acts through which the conscience longs for itself are called by Husserl (1985b, p. 476) as categorial (in the sense of the Greek word “category” – *katégoréo* – which means the act of denouncing or accusing someone, in this case, “me” as self or “I think”). The categorial acts position the “authorship” of the acts of a conscience. They reflect – in the acts already produced – the presence of the “I”, which, in the opinion of Husserl (1976, p. 271-2), corresponds to the unity between the acts of a conscience and what they aim at. Now, in operative (or gestalt) intentionality, acts are not categorials, they do not aim at the “I” that would give them unity. It is an intentionality without “I”, formulated by merely operative acts, in which the “I” is only intuited.

Therefore, despite admitting the occurrence of an intentionality that would not seek to elucidate the “I”, Husserl (1952, p. 88) warns that this type of intentional experience has a limit. It fails to make its own structure explicit, the intentional format that defines it, which is the unity between acts and correlates (HUSSERL, 1952, p. 214-215). This is why, very often, gestalt intentional experiences give way to what Husserl (1976, p. 81) calls a natural or naive attitude in theorizing about what lived experiences are, as if – according to the example mentioned above – the “Mexico” or “Spain” where I wanted to go existed as independent entities from the act that proposed them as destinations for my trip. In the above example, “Mexico” and “Spain” are not realities in themselves. From the point of view of experience, which is what phenomenology is interested in clarifying (HUSSERL, 1952, p. 374-375), they are correlated with an act of consciousness (volitive). Or even, “Mexico” and “Spain” are just the inactuality desired by “my” act. For this reason, to discern the “naive theses about the world” of what – including them – operates as an

intentional structure, Husserl (2012, p. 174-175) will propose the phenomenological task of reducing intentional experiences gestalts to the lived condition of the “I”. Only then can the intentional structure of the lived can be shown clearly and distinctly. Therefore Husserl (1952, p. 157) recommends that the gestalt intentional experiences be reduced to term, re-presented in terms of a formal analytic (also called transcendental), which can clarify the intentional aspects involved in the production of meaning, most especially, the correlation between temporal profiles and acts of consciousness. And what this transcendental reduction precisely delivers as clarification about meaning – lived primarily in an operative or gestalt way – is called “I”.

Now, for Merleau-Ponty it is not true that, on an operant or gestalt level, the absence of transparency is a difficulty that would need to be neutralized by a reduction to formal terms (transcendental reduction). On the contrary, meaning, as it is spontaneously articulated at the level of “operative intentionality (*fungierende intentionality*) appears in our desires, our evaluations, and our landscape more clearly than it does in objective knowledge. Operative intentionality is the one that provides the text that our various forms of knowledge attempt to translate into a precise language.” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1945, p. xxxii) To put it simply, at the operant level, meaning is enough. The form as time is articulated around acts of conscience, it does not need to be formally clarified; it does not need to be diluted through the analysis of the “I” that would supposedly ensure the unity of acts and their correlates. Even because, in the operative field, it is not necessary to presence – albeit hidden – of an “I.” In the operant or gestalt field – which Merleau-Ponty also calls the “phenomenal field” – the correlation between acts and correlates is ensured by the true protagonist of intentional life, precisely the body. “My whole body”, says Merleau-Ponty (1945, p. 114), “is not for me a gathering of organs juxtaposed in space. I have it in undivided possession and know the position of each of my members by a bodily scheme in which they are all involved)” and whose meaning is “eminently temporal” (1945, p. 277). Or, still, “(to have) a body is to possess a universal assembly, one typical of all perceptual developments and all intersensory correspondences beyond the segment of the world that we actually perceive” (1945, p. 377). Hence, in this first stage of Merleau-Ponty’s thinking, the body is the equivalent of gestalt intentionality, its matrix, the one in which, for the first time, time is not just the movement or passage of matter, but the place of a convergence that makes “a past and a future exist for a present”. Or, still, the body is the spontaneity of a contact that ties “together a present, a past and a future” (1945, p. 276).

This means to say that the secret of the intentional structure is not in an “I” that categorial acts would define, but in the body as a spontaneously gestalt structure, since the body “secrets time or, rather, becomes this place of nature in that, for the first time, events, instead of pushing each other into being, project around the present a double horizon of past and future and receive a historical orientation” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1945, p. 276-7). It is true that the gestalt structure delivered by the body is not clear and distinct. It is rather a structure that is incomplete, ambiguous, and unfinished. Which, certainly, cannot establish a concept of science guided by the idea of transparency. But it can come up with an idea of science as a movement to retake itself. After all, it is precisely ambiguity and incompleteness that allow something to always be taken up in another time and in another place, as an attempt at continuity. Now, for Merleau-Ponty, psychoanalysis is an example of this new way of thinking not only about science, but the link between science and each person’s life. As can be seen in the section entitled ‘The Character of Psychoanalysis as an Empirical Science’, from the article *Two Encyclopedia Entries*, Freud (2006, p. 269) clarifies that:

Psychoanalysis is not, like philosophies, a system that starts from a few sharply defined basic concepts, which seeks to apprehend the whole universe with their help, and then, once complete, has no place for new discoveries or better understandings. Rather, it sticks to the facts of its field of study, seeks to solve the problems closest to observation, probes the way forward with the help of experience, is always incomplete and always ready to correct or modify its theories.

Not only because of the way Freud reports and rethinks what he discovers at every moment, but, especially, because he does not expect from what he investigates something like its unity and coherence, Freud allows the unique life of patients to leave the condition of illustration of a theory already formulated for the condition of producing nucleus of a meaning always to be understood, open to criticism and retaking.

### **Gestalt intentionality and the phenomenological unconscious**

Can psychoanalysis be claimed as a phenomenological presentation of gestalt intentionality? After all, like Edmund Husserl and the phenomenologists of the following generations, not even Merleau-Ponty proposed to investigate “beings” as belonging to a “certain region of the



natural world". This is the task of the natural sciences, whose naivety the phenomenologist would seek to neutralize, leading the scientist to ask himself: what is the participation of the lived experience in the understanding of what the "being" I seek to investigate is? In other words, for Merleau-Ponty – as well as for phenomenologists in general – it was important to describe the experience from which "possible objects" could be "intentioned". Or it was important to understand the "context" first, in the "form" from which a totality (possible or real) could "appear": Gestalt. Hence, for almost all phenomenologists, the concept of the unconscious did not represent a phenomenological theme. At best, it would be a "natural object" that, like all others, would first need to be phenomenologically clarified. Against which Merleau-Ponty would react, surprising his partners, for his critical adherence to the psychoanalytic "motive". "Phenomenology and psychoanalysis are not parallel; better: both address the same latency" states Merleau-Ponty (1960b, p. 283). This is because, "despite the various 'transformations' that this 'Proteanotion' went through, despite the 'diversity of their ways of using', despite 'the contradictions it entails', the notion of the unconscious does not describe a certain 'region of the natural world', or the faculty that would represent that region" (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1960a, p. 291). Rather, the notion of the unconscious describes the structure that phenomenology has tried to bring to light with the notion of operative intentionality – and which it prefers to call gestalt.

The unconscious evokes, at first sight, the place of a dynamic of drives, of which only the result will be given to us. And yet, the unconscious cannot be a "third person" process, as it is it who chooses, what of us will be admitted into official existence, which avoids the situations we resist and which is therefore not, a not knowing, but, rather, a recognized knowledge, not formulated, that we do not want to assume. In approximate language, Freud is about to discover what others have best called ambiguous perception. It is by working in this sense that a marital status will be found for this consciousness that rubs against its objects, removes them at the moment it puts them on, takes them into account as a blind person to obstacles, more than not recognizing them, not he wants to know them, he ignores them while he knows them, he knows them while he ignores them and that underlies our acts and expressed knowledge. Merleau-Ponty, 1960a, p. 291).

In fact, as inventoried by Ayouch (2012b), Merleau-Ponty's interest in Freud's work is visible and notorious in the entire work of the philosopher's

productions. Although imprecise, I can find references from Merleau-Ponty to Freud in the thesis *La structure du comportement* (1942). They also return in a reflection on the ‘body’ and another on ‘freedom’ presented in the work *Phénoménologie de la perception* (1945), as well as in the text “*Le doute de Cézanne*” (1964c), when it takes a new look at what is creativity in Leonardo da Vinci. I also find reflections by Merleau-Ponty on psychoanalysis in the articles *L’homme et l’adversité* (1960b), *Le philosophe et la sociologie* (1960c) and *Partout et nulle part* (1960d). Furthermore, psychoanalysis is explicitly discussed in the preface to work by Angelo Hesnard, in which Merleau-Ponty (2000c, p. 279) proposes to reformulate psychoanalysis in terms of a “better philosophy”, as well as in the work notes of *Le visible et l’invisible* (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1964a), many of which have not yet been published (MERLEAU-PONTY, *Inédit*).

I also find numerous references from Merleau-Ponty (1989) to Freud in the classes given by the philosopher at the *Sorbonne* between 1949 and 1952, or, henceforth, in courses at the *Collège de France*, between 1952 and 1960 – especially in course entitled “*Le problème de la passivité: le sommeil, l’inconscient, la mémoire*”, in which Merleau-Ponty (1968c, p. 50) refers to the Freudian unconscious as a “primordial symbolism”. Progressively, Merleau-Ponty (1996a) deals with Freud in courses given between 1960 and 1961, namely in “*Le concept de nature. Nature et logos: le corps humain*” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1996b) and “*La Philosophie aujourd’hui*” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1996c).

And it is especially in courses, notably those taught between 1949 and 1952 at the *Sorbonne*, that Merleau-Ponty lets us know his main motive regarding psychoanalysis. As he had already done in his first works, when he resorted to new sciences – such as behaviorism, *Gestalttheorie* and psychoanalysis itself – to think about meaning beyond what is established in the domain of subjective representations and natural laws; from 1949 onwards, due to a reinterpretation of psychoanalysis from linguistics and the social sciences, Merleau-Ponty understood that the psychoanalytic notion of the unconscious brought in its formulation something that could expand the way he himself had thought, until then, the notion of gestalt intentionality. It is about the notion of drive, from which Freud thinks the genesis of the autonomous symbolism that characterizes the unconscious. After all, just like the Husserlian notion of intentionality (according to BENOIST, 2001, p. 27), the Freudian notion of drive is also literally associated with the Brentanian theory of psychic phenomena. More than that, the Freudian theory, regarding the genesis of the drives, absorbs the gestalt format attributed by Brentano to

psychic phenomena<sup>4</sup>. But it does not allow this format to dominate the metapsychological constructions produced from the theory of drives. Which leads Merleau-Ponty to reproduce against Freud some of the criticisms that he had already directed against the Husserlian theory of intentionality.

Freud attended – together with the mathematician Edmund Husserl – the disciplines of the philosopher Franz Brentano between the semesters of 1874 and 1876. It was important to Freud to rescue from the philosopher the idea that psychic phenomena could be defined as “representatives” of a provisional and partial unity, without a defined object, on the border between the somatic and the mental, between the individual and the social. And if it is true that Brentano’s thesis – according to which psychic phenomena form spontaneously without being limited to mental faculties or anatomophysiological needs – allowed Husserl to conceive the idea of an operative intentionality, which his psychologist students called *Gestalt*; it is also true that this same thesis allowed Freud (1974a) to conceive of another source for symptoms intractable to psychology and psychiatry, for example, to hysterical symptoms. What would this origin be? Precisely the unconscious system triggered by the drives. But what is the unconscious system triggered by the drives?

I will start by rescuing the Freudian understanding of what a drive is (FREUD, 1977, p. 415). According to the founder of psychoanalysis and to whom (FREUD, 1976g, p. 119) “the theory of drives is, so to speak, our mythology”, it is not impossible that the experiences of primitive satisfaction or dissatisfaction – to which I cannot find a mental representation already established in language and which I cannot suppress by means of a preexisting biological function either – remain associated with random verbal representations on the threshold of the mental and somatic, constituting with them spontaneous wholes (FREUD, 1976g, p. 119). These are, in the wake of Brentano, psychic phenomena, which Freud (1974e, p. 170) preferred to call “drives”. In Freud’s words (1976g, p. 142), “if we now devote ourselves to considering mental life from a biological point of view, a ‘drive’ will appear to us as a concept situated on the boundary between the mental and the somatic, such as the psychic representative of the stimuli that originate within the organism and reach the mind, as a measure of demand made to the mind to

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<sup>4</sup> “We, finally, underline as a distinguishing feature that, despite all their multiplicity, we perceive psychic phenomena always as unity (*Gestalt*), while physical phenomena, perceived at the same time, all appear to us in a different way, as partial phenomena of a single phenomenon” (our translation). (BRENTANO, 2008, p. 102).

work as a result of its connection with the body". Now, in what sense do drives trigger an unconscious system?

First, it should be noted that the drives consist of primitive and indeterminate verbal representations impregnated with physical tension, which is why, a posteriori and for the benefit of the discharge of this tension, they need to be destroyed, which is to say, forgotten or "repressed" (FREUD, 1974e, p. 170) in their verbal consistencies. But what is repressed does not simply disappear. If it is true that the physical tension is discharged, if it is true that the verbal aspect is forgotten, the representatives – which correspond to the material form of the verbal representations and to which, later, supported by Saussure (1972, p. 26) and Lacan (1998a, p. 513-516), Merleau-Ponty (1969, p.30) will call them signifiers – they remain as language residue, trait, carnal language. Such residues, in turn, would reveal themselves invested with an autonomy to combine freely, without the rule of an "I" or the laws of nature. What would drive them would be just a "sexual" energy – in the sense of partial or deficient – resulting from the repression of semantic values and what Freud called libido (1976f, p. 308). The libido would lead the language residues to make random "connections". Here is in what sense the combinatorics triggered by language residues was considered by Freud as a system "without" the rulership of a conscience or, simply, unconscious. These are symbolic arrangements, in which "wholes" merely phantasmatic, or, simply, psychic phantasms are produced (1976b, p. 206). However, unconscious language residues – beyond spontaneously combining themselves in the form of psychic phantasms – bring out their own condition of residue, reviving (or repeating) the very repression of which they were victims. This repetition, in turn, triggers, together with the created phantasm, an effect of anguish, as if they themselves could be repressed. Whence, then, Freud (1972a, p. 594) goes to say that it is not unthinkable that these same phantasms develop a reaction of "defense", a psychic defense, which will mobilize even the mental life and the biological life of the bodies in which the unconscious language residues are inscribed. Now, "symptom" is the name of this defense carried out by phantasms (supported in the mental and biological life of the bodies). Understand – in the experience of clinical listening to the symptoms of patients – the effects and forms of psychic defense engendered from the phantasms that remained from the repression of the drives; here is the most elementary program of metapsychological reflections formulated by Freud (1976b, p. 262).

In Merleau-Ponty's assessment, however, despite operating with the idea of spontaneity characteristic of gestalt wholes thought from Brentano

onwards, Freud's metapsychological constructions (to explain the idea of psychic defense and symptom) failed to incorporate the present gestalt style in the way Freud himself understood the notion of drive. Instead, they sought to describe psychic defenses from principles inspired by the natural sciences, as if every psychic defense were the specific effect of a conflict between a phantom whole (life drive) and the risk of repetition of what gave rise to it, namely, the drive repression (death drive), whether operated by social morality or by the simple unconscious repetition of a repressed residue. The singularity of listening to the symptomatic productions of patients – believes Merleau-Ponty – was subordinated to the uniformity of a metapsychology based on the idea that the conflicts between the drives (of life and death) are invested with a universal regularity, which, once detected, it could favor the dissolution of symptoms. As he already stated in *Structure du comportement* (1942, p. 192),

what we would like to ask, without questioning the role Freud pointed out to the erotic infrastructure and social regulations, is whether the very conflicts he talks about, the psychological mechanisms he described, the formation of complexes, repression, regression, resistance, transference, compensation, sublimation truly required the system of causal notions by which Freud interprets them, and which transforms the discoveries of psychoanalysis into a metaphysical theory of human existence.

For Merleau-Ponty, it would have been better if Freud admitted that psychic defenses or symptoms are also gestalt formations, which involve, in addition to the conflict of drives, modes of creation that owe their uniqueness to the type of bond established, for example, between the patient and the psychoanalyst, beyond the unconscious psyche that I could recognize for each of them. In this regard, says Merleau-Ponty (1945, p. 519),

(t)he psychoanalytic treatment does not cure by causing an awareness of the past, but in the first place connecting the patient to his doctor through new relationships of existence. It is not about giving scientific assent to psychoanalytic interpretation and discovering a notional sense of the past, it is about reliving it as meaning this or that, and the patient only comes to this by seeing his past in the perspective of its coexistence with the doctor.

That is, reaffirming his intuition that our existence already manifests a meaning even before recognizing itself as “I” (which is opposed to Husserlian phenomenology), but without giving in to the temptation to reduce this

meaning to the effect of a conflict that could be historically or metapsychologically determined (which distinguishes him from a certain way of understanding Freud), Merleau-Ponty can admit the success of psychoanalysis, because he recognizes in it the clinical re-establishment of the primacy of coexistence, which is another way that Merleau-Ponty has to refer to the formal implication that defines Gestalt as a form of operative intentionality.

In fact, the description of the unconscious drive as a coexistence evoked in the clinical experience – supported by the analyst and his analysand – brings another important consequence, according to which there would not be a radical difference between the perceptual life, as described by the phenomenology of the body, and the unconscious life interpreted by psychoanalysis. In other words, just as perceptive life is a form of gestalt intentionality operated between the body and the temporality of the world, the unconscious psyche is a gestalt symbolism taken up in the coexistence between the analysand and the analyst. Perception as intentionality and unconscious as coexistence are two different ways, in two familiar fields of talking about the same: Gestalt.

Therefore, says Merleau-Ponty (1960b, p. 9), “the agreement of phenomenology and psychoanalysis should not be understood as if ‘phenomenon’ clearly said what psychoanalysis said in a confused way. It is, on the contrary, through what it implies or unveils up to its limit – through its latent content or its unconscious – that phenomenology is in line with psychoanalysis”. Therefore, the meaning of this understanding would have to be delimited, which Merleau-Ponty (1960a, p. 70-1) preferred to call “ambiguous perception”, and which is nothing but the “osmosis between life the anonymous body and the official life of the person”, which the concept of the unconscious would designate and which, according to Merleau-Ponty (1960a, p. 291) is “the great discovery of Freud”.

### **The cogito problem: the bad ambiguity**

Merleau-Ponty’s reading of psychoanalysis at this moment, bringing it closer to phenomenology, emphasizes the understanding that the unconscious, as a spontaneous activity of repressed language, takes place in the coexistence relations between the analyst and the analysand, on the border between the individual and the social. Or which is the same thing, the unconscious, as a dialectic without synthesis of the drive psyche, is a gestalt intentionality lived as coexistence. But, if this is so, in what sense can the

unconscious drive still claim the prerogative of dealing with a symbolic (or psychic) activity that manifests itself not only in a particular way, but in a singular way on an individual body? Wouldn't there be a kind of erasure here between what is singular and what is collective? Does the singular not dissolve in the coexistence of individuals? In general, could the same not be said regarding the gestalt intentionality played by the body? Would the individuality of the body not disappear in the generality of mundane time?

It is to solve this problem that Merleau-Ponty will resort to an expedient, which, however, represented an even greater difficulty, insofar as he re-edited what precisely Merleau-Ponty had refused in phenomenology, namely, the ideal of transparency ensured by the "I". Merleau-Ponty will obviously not speak of pure "I". He will try to safeguard the singularity of the body, admitting to it a kind of tacit cogito, which would coexist on the margins of the coexistence experienced by the body as gestalt intentionality.

In fact, Merleau-Ponty's rereading of the phenomenological and psychoanalytic projects, as if I could recognize the same motive in both, proved to be problematic. Although I could admit, as a common feature between phenomenology and psychoanalysis, the existence of a gestalt intentionality, which spontaneously realized, in the world of coexistence, the particularity of a perceptive and symbolic body, this does not mean that coexistence would succeed in ensuring the uniqueness of each experience. The renunciation of the transparent "I" – in favor of the "ambiguous and unfinished" protagonism of the body in its simultaneously conscious and unconscious insertion in the temporal manifestations of things and words – brought an additional difficulty. After all, in what sense can the body be singular – which is to say, hold a unique way of feeling, in which an unparalleled unconscious is inscribed – if the gestalt form in which it experiences this feeling, and this unconscious is totally generalized? How can there be singularity in an intentionality realized as coexistence?

This is what will lead Merleau-Ponty to claim, at the operant or gestalt level, a cogito kind of himself, albeit tacit. Even having refused to subordinate the articulated sense at an operative level to the categorial operations that would seek to dilute the "I" as the protagonist of the sense, since, according to the *Phénoménologie de la perception* (1945), the body would already be in charge of ensuring the unity of acts and correlates, Merleau-Ponty admits that, alternatively, in the opposite of its own gestalt intentional experiences, the body would "understand" its own singularity or loneliness, as if it were experiencing a cogito of itself. Which is the same as stating that, in some sense, Merleau-Ponty could not resist the temptation to keep, only in the heart, at

least on the periphery of gestalt intentionality, a place for the Enlightenment ideal that sustains all “egology”: the coincidence of oneself with oneself and what Merleau-Ponty called the tacit cogito. In other words, on the periphery of gestalt intentionality, in this temporal way of articulating past and future around material actuality, the body would experience a kind of coincidence with itself.

It is true that, in the case of Merleau-Ponty, this coincidence would be only partial, established from the corner of an eye, as a tacit cogito never actually realized. Still, it is a singularity that detaches itself from everything else. Which means to say that the body would comprise, on one hand, a generic and spontaneous intentionality, which brings together in each perceptive act the past of the world, the finitude of bodies and the expressive possibilities. On other hand, the body would sustain an external and incommunicable singularity, which would be my cogito, although never fully apprehended. But how can the body be simultaneously inserted into and excluded from the temporal world, what singular absolute? A paradox that Merleau-Ponty could not at that moment clarify. In addition to not satisfactorily answering the question concerning the simultaneously singular and collective nature of the experience of contact between the analyst and his analysand, the notion of tacit cogito brought a supplementary problem, which is to clarify in what sense the body can be reached immediately, without going through the world of coexistence in which it is inserted. Which led him to affirm, in his candidacy for the *Collège de France*, in 1951, “that ‘the study of perception’ could not answer these questions. Such a study could only teach us a ‘bad ambiguity’, the mixture of finitude and universality, of interiority and exteriority” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1962, p. 409)

In fact, the strategy of ensuring, in the field of lived experience, a place for the idea of transparency (albeit tacit) cast doubts on the Merleau-Ponty’s intent to recognize, in gestalt intentionality, a sense that would suffice, a whole which would not need to be accompanied by an articulating nucleus and which Husserl called “I”. In what sense would the body find itself out of context, at the end of acts that, in turn, would not seek it? Now, still according to the text of candidacy for the *Collège du France*, if the formulas of the *Phénoménologie de la perception* fail to describe the link between my participation in the world of perception and my singularity, if not rescuing the resource of a contact almost-immediate body with you; if the descriptions above contain a bad ambiguity, this is due to the fact that, in such descriptions, Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. 405) privileges a topological approach. He seeks to describe gestalt intentionality as if it belonged to a place, as if it were contained in a domain,



which, for this reason, would be excluded from the very dynamics it would contain. Consequently, any dynamic discussion of the correlation between acts and temporal correlates would once again be dissociated from an analysis of singularity, as if the singulars, as their own body, should promote a dynamic that, however, would not include them. Or – which seems more problematic, insofar as it repeats an expedient that phenomenology itself censored in the narrative of the natural sciences – dynamic relations are subordinated to a topological theory, as if intentional processes should “belong” to entities, especially the body – and not the other way around. To put it simply, in the *Phénoménologie de la perception*, it is as if the “field” belonged to the gestalt intentionality of the body; and not the “body” in the field of gestalt intentionality.

### **Gestalt is not in one place, but it is a dynamic of expression**

Well, says Merleau-Ponty in 1952, in the text he submitted to the *Collège de France*, if it is true that the topological study of gestalt intentionality (articulated by the body itself) preserves a “bad ambiguity”, if it is true that the search for the “place” of gestalt intentionality implies an “indefinable” domain between the individual and the coexisting; it is also true that the studies carried out in the *Phénoménologie de la perception*, in the 1945, already outlined an exemplary phenomenon, in which ambiguity is not a problem, but a new way of thinking about meaning and, by extension, gestalt intentionality. It is the phenomenon of expression. According to Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. 409), “there is, in the phenomenon of expression, a ‘good ambiguity’, that is, a spontaneity that accomplishes what seemed impossible, considering the separate elements, which brings together in a single fabric the plurality of monads, the past and the present, nature and culture”. But what is, for Merleau-Ponty, the phenomenon of expression?

The notion of expression has always fulfilled, in the work of Merleau-Ponty, an extremely relevant function (MÜLLER, 2001). In fact, it is the “formal operator” or “matrix model” with which Merleau-Ponty sought to establish a reading of the theory of gestalt intentionality, without having to assume the existence of a synthetic element – such as the “I” – that would ensure the unity between acts and temporal correlates. And it was from Gottlob W. Leibniz (1646-1716) – already in the 1940s and more significantly in the 1950s – that Merleau-Ponty took the notion of expression as if it could designate the link between the self and the alter, between the body and the world, as well as between the analysand and the analyst, without this implying

reducing one to the other, nor admitting a synthesis in a third party, which would bring back a metaphysical thesis, be it described as a God or as a regulating principle. After all, for Leibniz (1978, p. 32), to express is to manifest, in a negative way with each signifier used, the whole to which that signifier belongs, without this whole needing to be explained, shown, represented. According to Leibniz's terminology, to express is to manifest, in a negative way with each monad, the other monads from which the monad in question differs and with which it acquires particularity. Hence, everyone – when differentiating itself – necessarily expresses the totality to which it belongs or from which it differentiates.

For Merleau-Ponty, however, Leibniz himself did not know how to see the scope of the notion that he introduced, coming to retroact in favor of a regulatory principle, which would impose itself on the monads as a guarantee of their ontotheological harmony. This means to say that, if Leibniz was right in stating that the various perspectives of our experience kept among themselves (and towards the perspectives of others) a relationship of familiarity, without, however, losing their particularity; if – to signify this familiarity – the concept of expression was well employed there; this did not imply that the delimitation of this concept (as a property attributed by God to each substance, and according to a law of harmony formulated by this same God) should be admitted as appropriate. On the contrary, it should be refuted, since, by reestablishing the figure of an interior principle in which the meaning would be as if anticipated, this delimitation has lost everything that the concept of expression could bring to the problem of relationship between particularity and diversity.

For this reason, Merleau-Ponty decided to take the concept of expression from Leibniz, introducing changes in it that would free him from the monadological ontotheology. In this sense, instead of speaking of expression as “a particular representation of an in-itself”, Merleau-Ponty would speak of expression as a manifestation of a phenomenon in its raw state, which is to say, in process of differentiation, as if he himself were taking shape from the others. Or “(the) expression of the universe in us is certainly not the harmony between our monad and the others, the presence in it of the ideas of all things – but what we see in perception, taking such and such instead of explain it”. In this sense, “separated from the substantialist and ontotheological elaboration that L. [Leibniz] makes them go through, the notions of expressive relation and perspective distinction should be fully preserved and resumed in another terminology: brute Being” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1964a, p. 276).

That is, the expression would be the ambiguous form according to which each part, whether it was a physical, vital, or symbolic phenomenon, even if it differed from the other phenomena, it would also be linked to them, not because it coincided with them, but because, to differentiate from them, would maintain a relative proximity that favors comparison, or, more precisely, differentiation in relation to them. In this sense, in each individual part, the other parts would be “expressed” as a parameter. Hence a negative bond between the parties in the process of differentiation, which Merleau-Ponty calls “non-coincident division”, as if each evoked, in a brute or undetermined way, the others. It is, in fact, a generalization of the “figure and background” relationship characteristic of the gestalt intentionality proposed by the *Gestalttheorie* psychologists from what they interpreted by Husserl, but now used not as a property of consciousness, or even of the body – as before Merleau-Ponty himself had suggested. If the figure rests on the background from which it stands out, if the background is always on the horizon of the figure that I fix, it is because both express themselves mutually where they differ. Hence it follows that the expression is not owned by anything or anyone. Or, still, the expression is not contained in a container, but it is the gestalt form of the experience, now understood as a brute Being, which unfolds as the parts that compose it differ and, for that very reason, keep it as a relative, merely negative, background of comparability.

Now, used in this way, the notion of expression would inaugurate a new position that abandons phenomenology and all the attempts that Merleau-Ponty himself established in the sense of still flirting with the idea of transparency in his philosophy. Expression is not the outward manifestation of something immanent, nor is it someone’s faculty or a body’s ability. It is, rather, the remarkable fact that, in seeking to particularize itself, each movement or gesture necessarily summons the presence of what it differs from, confessing the non-coincident and non-transparent indivisibility between them. Abandoning the idea of intentionality, but preserving what was gestalt in it, precisely the notion of expression, Merleau-Ponty (1964a, p. 276) would carry out the intention of breaking with the ideal of transparency typical of the Cartesian tradition and its ontologies of representation, without, however, reprinting it in relativism.

It is important here to clarify that this Being of undividedness, called by Merleau-Ponty of brute Being, would not be something “in itself” that would exist independently of the experiences that revealed it. On the contrary, it would be a totality relative to the parts of our experiences, whether they were perceptual or symbolic. Likewise, it would not be the unfolding of a latent

power, to which I tacitly brought it. Each phenomenon would be the very differentiation of the parts and, in this sense, the realization of the Being of undividedness, the realization of the ontological movement that makes one part something distinct from another and, therefore, related to each other. Hence it follows that the Being of undividedness is not a “*topos*”, it is not a place. It is a process, a genealogy, the foundation of parts that would not form an “in-itself”, but a community that I would reach in the experience of differentiation. He would be the “same” in which there would be no identity or coincidence, but alterity of “alterity, difference of difference” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1964a, p. 317). It would not be, as Lefort (1961, p. 280) believes, a movement of continuous differentiation, in which the parts would separate infinitely, like uninterrupted dehiscence. Rather, it would be the realization of a zone of coherence or implication, in which, despite being different, the parts would remain relative, since otherwise they would not be able to differentiate. This is what happens – according to the illustration proposed by Merleau-Ponty – with the sexual chromatids resulting from the chiasma (or from the reversibility of their genetic materials which occurred in the phase known by biology as ‘meiosis II prophase’). The chromatids resulting from the chiasma bear – each and partially – aspects of the other chromatids from which they differentiated, which is why they express each other without identifying themselves.

Here, indeed, is the figuration that will back up Merleau-Ponty’s late formulations (1964a, p. 315) and that will lead him to think of Gestalt beyond phenomenology, which means, in this case, without phenomenology. Gestalt will no longer be understood as an intentional correlation between acts of body awareness and temporal profiles. Gestalt will now be understood as the process of reversibility, that is, the mutual implication or expression shared by the parties involved in the experience – and in which these same parts differ from each other, such as in chiasma. Between the parts of the experience there are multiple “possibilities” of chiasma, a sort of formal implication (*Gestalthaft*), but never coincidence.

In what sense are these multiple chiasmata no more than one: not in the sense of synthesis, of the originally synthetic unity, but always in the sense of *Uebertragung* [transference or transposition], of the imbrication, of the irradiation of being (...): even not in the sense of ideality or real identity. The same in the structural sense: same member, same *Gestalthaft*, same in the sense of opening another dimension of the “same” being (...): hence in total a world that is neither one

nor 2 in the objective sense – which is pre-individual, generality – (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1964a, p. 314-15).

Understood as a formal implication between the parts of the experience, the notion of Gestalt was elevated by Merleau-Ponty to the condition of formal operator of an ontology of differentiation, which will include physical, vital, and symbolic processes, whether these latter patterns are already consolidated as institutions (visible) or spontaneous processes (unconscious or invisible) of recreation (life drives) or destruction (death drive) of signifiers. As chiasm, Gestalt is not the manifestation of the whole in the individual, as this would imply establishing the division and harmony of the parts even before expression. On the contrary, Gestalt is the moment of emergence of particularities, which, however, always announce what they differ from, thus denouncing the field of indivisibility in which they participate, and which is not of the order of synthesis, but of continued differentiation.

In fact, the description of experience in gestalt terms is no longer a phenomenology. It is now an ontology<sup>5</sup>, a way of referring to Being in a broad sense, which is not defined based on what may be essential in it, but on what may appear in it as continued differentiation, which also means to say: mutual remission of particulars, or, simply, reversibility. In this sense, Merleau-Ponty will say, if I wanted to understand what would be between my perceptive life and my reflection, between my perspective and that of the other, I would not need to seek the point of view of a God, or return to something like origin; it would be enough for me to go as far as speech led me, as far as it became silence, and thus I would witness, from within, the existence of a sense of the whole that would not be coincidence, but continued reversibility. That is, from reflection to perception, or from this to that, there would be no constitution or synthesis; there would be a passage: withdrawal of one and concomitant emergence of another; latency of one, awakening of the other; finally, reversibility. Likewise, in the perceptual life, I and the other would not exist “as positive, positive subjectivities”. We would be “two dens, two openings, two stages where something is going to happen – and both would belong to the same world, to the stage of Being” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1964a, p. 276).

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<sup>5</sup> According to Merleau-Ponty (1964a, p. 165) “(the) ontology would be the elaboration of notions that should replace that of transcendental subjectivity, those of subject, object, sense – the definition of philosophy would include the elucidation of the philosophical expression itself (...) as science and pre-science, as an expression of what is before expression and that sustains it behind (...)”. However, warns Merleau-Ponty (1964a, p. 174) a few pages ahead: “(it) cannot make a direct ontology. My “indirect” method (being in beings) is the only one conforming to being”.

In all these cases, what would be at stake would be different dimensions, but whose respective particularities would depend on the process that differentiated them, which would bring them together, without coinciding with each other. That is why, rebutting Leibniz, Merleau-Ponty (1964a, p. 315) said that the expression, or, according to the new terminology, “the chiasma [the reversibility] would be the truth of the pre-established harmony – Much more exact than it: because it is between local-individual facts, and the chiasma links as opposite and right sets previously unified in the process of differentiation”. In other words, as reversibility, expression would not be the manifestation of the whole in the individual, as this would imply establishing the division and harmony of the parts even before expression. On the contrary, expression would itself be the process of constitution of a Being of undividedness, now present, now latent, now visible, now invisible; thus, establishing itself as an implicit unit to the process of differentiation.

### **Gestalt as an ontological category and the philosophy of Freudianism: the expression of others as life drive**

The new treatment of the Gestalt notion enabled Merleau-Ponty not only to suspend the recalcitrant validity of an eventual “egology” in his own philosophy<sup>6</sup>. It also allowed a new basis from which he could revisit his reading and answer questions that, in his early works, remained open, for example, in relation to psychoanalysis. Merleau-Ponty is now able to clarify in what sense the experience of transference in the analytic relationship is, simultaneously, an intimate and intersubjective experience. Such an answer involves the way in which Merleau-Ponty started to employ the notions of life drive and death drive as ontological dimensions of Gestalt.

In the work notes on *Le visible et l'invisible*, between 1959 and 1960, Merleau-Ponty makes explicit the point of view from which psychoanalytic notions must be read. The point of view is the ontological, as it can be established through the notion of Gestalt, if by Gestalt I understand not “what” things are, but “how” they arise as particularities that, to differentiate themselves, express each other. In this sense, in a note from December 1960, when he speaks of the “philosophy of Freudianism”, Merleau-Ponty (1964a, p.

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<sup>6</sup> In a work note to *Le visible et l'invisible*, Merleau-Ponty admits that he was wrong in his attempt to ensure singularity by resorting to the figure of a tacit cogito. According to him (1964a, p. 224-225): “This is how I reasoned in *PhP*. Is this correct? What I call tacit Cogito is impossible. To have the idea of “thinking” (in the sense of “thinking of seeing and feeling”), to make the “reduction”, to return to the immanence and awareness of... it is necessary to have the words”.

323) criticizes the superficial interpretation of Freudianism. According to this interpretation,

someone is a sculptor because he is anal, because the feces are already chalk, modelling, etc. But feces are not “cause”: if they were, everyone would be sculptors. The feces only give rise to a character (*Abscheu*) if the subject lives them in such a way as to find a dimension of being there – There is no care to renew empiricism (the feces imprinting a certain character on the child). It is about understanding that the relationship with feces is, in children, a concrete ontology.

This “concrete ontology” – in the way in which the signifiers “gain form” from each other – is not an “abstraction” operated by the child. It is about the “particular” way in which the signifiers – which give particularity to a child – participate in the indivisibility of mundane existence (understood as the mutual expression of the signifiers among themselves). The feces express the muscular action through which they were expelled, just as such an action expresses so many others that could be exerted with the gaze, with the hands, such as smashing food or molding clay. Within the indivisibility of mundane existence, which Merleau-Ponty calls brute Being, each gesture or part of the body (in which a child is particularized) functions as a signifier of each other. After all, says Merleau-Ponty (1964a, p. 168), in a footnote citing Lacan as a source, “the very vision and the very thought are, they say, ‘structured like a language’”. Which is to say that, for Merleau-Ponty, each particular – be it part of a physical, vital, or symbolic experience – emerges from the differentiation in which, simultaneously, it expresses what it has differentiated from. Or, still, each element – as a signifier – expresses what it is not, namely, the other signifier. This always opens the possibility of continued differentiation, of transcendence towards what – in the signifier itself – expresses itself as difference. Therefore, for Merleau-Ponty, understood as a brute Being structured in a gestalt way, existence is the domain of the possibilities of transcendence<sup>7</sup>. It is the domain of transference (*Uebertragung*), if by transference one can understand the sensorimotor transitivity or metonymic transposability that the child – as an incarnated signifier – experiences from an early age, not as a mundane projection of a supposed conscious unity, but as a rapture or transcendence.

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<sup>7</sup> “Understanding that Gestalt is already transcendence: it makes me understand that a line is a vector, a point, a center of forces... (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1964a, p. 185)

Domain of transference (*Uebertragung*), of sensorimotor transitivity or metonymic transposability operated by signifiers towards transcendence expressed as difference: this is how Merleau-Ponty rereads in ontological-gestaltic terms what the life drive is. It is not – as an anthropological reading of Freud would have us believe – a substitute object for something originally lost. It is a dynamic of metonymic transposability operated by the signifiers and guided by what, in each one, expresses itself as a signifier that it is not. In Merleau-Ponty's figuration, everything happens as if each expressed signifier – beyond the signifier acted on – were an invitation to displacement, to participation in a brute Being, itself metonymic. There is here, between the signifiers and their characteristic expressivities, a sort of esthesiology, which is the way in which Merleau-Ponty begins to read the Freudian theory of libido, as if the power of cathexis (or connection) that Freud (1976f, p. 308) recognizes for each drive representative (or signifier) in its vital (or metonymic) functioning it was nothing more than the expressive dimension of each one. Which, finally, will lead Merleau-Ponty (1968a, p. 180) to speak of the unconscious – in its symbolic facet, which is to say, articulated as a life drive – as “the feeling itself”.

Understood as an ontological operator, which is to say, a matrix to describe what emerges as a particular image, the life drive is for Merleau-Ponty to feel in a broad sense. It is the chain of displacement carried out by a sensitive signifier – which can be a molecule, a cell, or a word – towards those who were expressed in it, for the benefit of temporary and itinerant implications, which are the multiple regions of raw Being that are formed as images, whether they are material, vital or instituted configurations, such as monuments, languages, knowledge, fantasies, daydreams, and dreams. The life drive, in this sense, responds for the “visible” or “imaginary” dimension of the brute Being. It is the expression of ambiguous and provisional totalities that can be valid as an “image”, if by “image” I can go beyond the common way of employing this signifier. In the words of Merleau-Ponty (1964b, p. 23), “(a) word image is badly reputed because it was thoughtlessly thought that a drawing was a tracing, a copy, a second thing”. But, for Merleau-Ponty, the image is the pull produced by the fabric of the world, the many avenues of rapture (sound, visual, palatable, odorous, tactile...) in which the significant bodies discover themselves – in a way mechanical, magnetic, chemical, biological, discursive, to name a few styles of differentiation – distinct from each other, as if each were, for the other, a kind of the other of the other. The image, therefore, is a movement of transcendence, in the form of which I experience both a proximity and a distance simultaneously, which defines my



belonging and my separation from the sensible in a broad sense. The image, finally, is the place where I was born as a difference; which is to say, as a producer of differentiation; which is the same as saying, as seer, listener, tangent, in short, sensitive. And it is precisely this capacity for differentiation – which defines expressiveness as an ontological operator – that Merleau-Ponty tries to lend to the verb “see”, to make it an equivalent of the life drive. In the words of the philosopher (1960, p. 29), “seeing is, in principle, seeing more than one sees, is having access to a latency being”. Hence, according to Merleau-Ponty (1964a, p. 173) that:

(t)he visible around us seems to rest in itself. It is as if the vision is formed in his core or as if there is a familiarity between him and us as close as that of the sea and the beach. However, it is not possible for us to merge with it [in the visible] nor for it to penetrate us, for then the vision would disappear at the very moment of formation, with the disappearance of either the seer or the visible. There are, therefore, things identical to themselves, which then offer themselves to the beholder, there is not a seer, first empty, who then opens to them, but something that we could not approach any closer to. not be palpating them with our eyes, things that we could not dream of seeing completely naked, because the very gaze envelops them and dresses them with its flesh.

For Merleau-Ponty (1964a, p. 175), in this visible dimension of brute Being’s carnality, images, as a life drive, are not indivisible absolutes, hard pieces of being, offered entirely naked to a vision that could only be total or null. It is, rather,

a strait between exterior and interior horizons, always open, something that comes to touch sweetly, making different regions of the colored or visible world resound at a distance, a certain differentiation, an ephemeral modulation of this world, therefore I feel less color or a thing of the difference between things and colors, momentary crystallization of being colored or of visibility.

Feeling is the differentiation. And a good part of the unpublished texts, written by Merleau-Ponty between the years 1959 and 1960 – some of them posthumously organized and published by Claude Lefort under the title *Le visible et l’invisible* – are dedicated to describing the different regions, always provisional, of feeling. What would correspond to doing, according to Merleau-Ponty (1964a, p. 321), a “psychoanalysis of nature”, of nature understood as the carnality of signifiers beyond the unconscious described by

Freud – and of which visibility is the imaginary dimension, the differentiation of images as a life drive.

### The expression of “somebody else” as death drive

But there is another aspect of extreme relevance for Merleau-Ponty in his reading of psychoanalysis, which is related to an ontological appropriation of the notion of the death drive. According to Merleau-Ponty, the brute Being also has an invisible dimension. In other words, the brute Being comprises zones of impossibility, in front of which a signifier – for example, that gives particularity to a child – experiences a kind of estrangement or “unfamiliarity”, which is a way of translating the Freudian term “*Unheimlichkeit*”, which, in turn, would designate the manifestation of the death drive (IANNINI and TAVARES, 2019). The most radical form of this impossibility is that which is expressed in the signifiers as “somebody else” (*autrui*), which is not confused with the “other” (*autre*) stabilized as a social image, as an identity or person, such as the mother or the father, in front of which a signifier can differentiate itself as a filial or childlike image. Now, what exactly does Merleau-Ponty mean when he employs the signifier “somebody else”? Here I want to return to an argument that I used in another work (MÜLLER, 2013), but for another purpose.

In the courses at the *Collège de France*, “somebody else” does not designate for Merleau-Ponty “my peer”. Closer to his friend Lacan’s reading of Freud, Merleau-Ponty uses the term “somebody else” to designate the “death drive”, if by death drive one can signal forgetting; that is, the presence of what is forbidden, overdetermined by other sayings, repressed to the condition of language residue, word dust that, for this reason, cannot be perceived, modified or achieved, as revealed by Freud in a letter written to the 80 years old and was intended for Romain Rolland on the occasion of his 70th birthday. In it, Freud confesses to being surprised by something that only at the time of writing this letter came to be revealed in his condition of rest: the discomfort of an experience that involved someone also 10 years younger, namely, his own younger brother.

When Freud reports it, the experience is already far away. It had been set in 1904, when Freud was forty-eight years old, ten years older than his younger brother, with whom, at that time, he used to travel to Italy in the months of August or early September. In 1904, however, the brothers had no more than a week to travel, given the younger brother’s business schedule. They were in Trieste and thought of going to the island of Corfu, when a

younger brother's friend said to them: "What makes you think of going there at this time of year? (...) It would be better if, instead, you went to Athens" (FREUD, 1976h, p. 294). They had never been to Athens, but they recognized it as a place of high spirits, which did not prevent them from being affected by a curious "affection" of "bad mood", duly registered by Freud. When they get in line to buy tickets and, especially, on arrival at the Acropolis, a strange idea comes to Freud – *merkwürdige Gedanke* – disconcerting, surprising, remarkable. Not only that, in the next moment, a confirmation statement sets in, but in a disappointing tone: "So, all this really exists, as we learned in high school!" (FREUD, 1976h, p. 295).

This is not about commenting on the self-analysis established by Freud. It should only be pointed out that Freud is clear about something conflicting that presents itself to him. On one hand, says Freud (1976h, p. 297), "I could not have imagined that it was possible for me to see Athens with my own eyes". But, on other hand, there is no way to deny:" the evidence of my senses, [that] I am now on the Acropolis, but I cannot believe it" (FREUD, 1976h, p. 298). Freud was facing the Acropolis and that was, for him, unbelievable. The Acropolis really existed as his brother's friend said. Furthermore, "(it is) too good for me to be able to fulfill my desire to see the Acropolis" (FREUD, 1976h, p. 296). At the same time, it is as if the experience of perceiving the Acropolis were not enough to overcome the "refusal to believe", the "disbelief" that persisted as malaise. What would have led him to say that "I am seeing here is not real" (FREUD, 1976h, p. 299): here is the perception disorder. Now, what exactly is articulated in this disorder?

Now, according to an interpretation offered by Jacques Alain Miller (2005, p. 301), in a text in which he precisely discusses the reception of Merleau-Ponty's theses by psychoanalysis, what happens to Freud in the Acropolis episode is a double defense, or a 'squared' defense. "To think that something is not real, when you have it under your eyes, is already a defense." But there is another defense, which has to do with the fact that, by making something present unreal, it is the past itself that Freud falsifies. This past puts at stake the paternal interdiction in relation to the desire of boy Freud, then 10 years old and motivated by the interest to travel to Italy to visit the Acropolis, but made impossible by the family's economic condition, now burdened by the birth of Freud's younger brother. Freud doesn't just deny what he now sees. Freud also denies that what he now sees is related to a past wish that cannot be fulfilled, for, as Napoleon I said to his eldest brother, on the day of his coronation: "what would *Monsieur notre Père* have said of this, if could he have

been here today?”, in a passage mentioned by Freud himself (1976b, p. 302) in his letter to Romain Rolland. With the visit to the Acropolis – more than a perception of the current experience, more than the prohibition pronounced in the past – it is the father’s impotence (to fulfill Freud’s desire) that ends up being denounced or, simply, expressed. Therefore, the Acropolis cannot be real.

In other words, Freud did not just come across the Acropolis, which he had long wanted to know. He was also faced with a strange look, which is the limit that was imposed on his father in the past and on Freud himself, now aged. Even after decades, such a limit could not be removed. “It was when he, Freud, was on the Acropolis with his brother that this father’s gaze was summoned, his gaze full of reproaches, of a nature to inspire him: what I see there is not real, against what Freud defended himself with the memory disorder.” (MILLER, 2005, p. 301). Still according to Miller (2005, p. 302):

Beyond what is veiled, from the little horror discovered by Freud, is the horror of castration that hangs over this little writing. It is the impotence of the father who was never able to go to Athens, nor allow his children to go. It is, above all, the impotence of Freud himself, because that is how he introduces himself in the preamble to Romain Rolland: “an impoverished man, whose production is exhausted...”

The father’s impotence – which reaches Freud either from the Acropolis or from the observation of his own old age – is precisely the correlative of what Merleau-Ponty signals as the presence of “somebody else”. It is about the emergence of the “unfamiliar” (*Unheimlich*), which expresses itself with each signifier not as a possibility, but as a limit to demand, from the signifier in question, a sort of passivity. The signifiers no longer express other signifiers that could be taken up, recreated, in short, “seen” – which would characterize the path of the life drive. Rather, they express a non-visible, absent signifier, in front of which it is necessary to wait, as if the difference they were to deliver had been silenced, as in a metaphor. In fact, someone else is the signifier lost in a metaphor; what is forgotten, repressed, expressing itself as absence, estrangement, or simply “death drive”.

By the way, the episode in which Freud is surprised by the “impotent gaze of the old father” beyond the columns of the Acropolis could be related to that anthological joke narrated by Freud himself (1976d, p. 26) about his grandson. According to the grandfather’s account, the boy could not control the departures and arrivals of his mother, to which he passively submitted

himself, even when he was busy representing them through a spool of thread thrown in front of him and immediately collected to the sound of the terms “far” (*Fort*) and “near” (*Da*). It was important to Freud to point out that – for the child – the symbolic reencounter with the mother (at *Da*) was no more intense than the playful realization that the mother was gone again (at *Fort*). In the signifier ‘Fort’, Freud will say, the child strangely rejoiced. So, according to Merleau-Ponty (1989, p. 97), both on the Acropolis and on the delight of his grandson, what is at issue for Freud is the encounter with a metaphor, in which an absence is expressed as something paradoxical, as if the Acropolis or the distant reel (*Fort*) expressed an intimacy that is now alterity, in short, someone else. Or what is at issue is the repetition of something that was forgotten, repressed, but which now returns as strange, as an unfamiliar sensation to which one is passive. Freud (1974f, p. 249) calls this sensation “another satisfaction” (*andere Befriedigungserlebnis*), or even “joy” (*Genuss*), which “seems more primitive, more elementary and more drive than the pleasure principle” (FREUD, 1976d, p. 34). Now, what is this rejoicing? It is about the encounter, abroad, with what is intimate, as if what is presented at a distance were at the same time something very close and, therefore, enigmatic, which would have led Lacan (1998b, p. 173) to translate the strange and passive satisfaction described by Freud with the neologism “extimacy”, which is a way of designating the exteriority of what is intimate, as if the most intimate for each one was at the same time what comes to us from the outside as a mystery, in a word, “somebody else”.

Now, this way of describing the death drive – namely, as a type of otherness that expresses itself with each signifier as an impossibility or impotence, repetition of an absence that makes itself felt as joy or another satisfaction – allows Merleau-Ponty clarifying what, in your previous descriptions of what is the coexistence between the analysand and the analyst, blurred, precisely, the difference between what is shared and what is singular. After all, if on one hand, through the life drive, each signifier employed in the clinical experience expresses the others from which it differs, enabling, for each applies, a possibility of metonymic transcendence; on other hand, through the death drive, the signifiers express that which does not allow displacement or metonymy, precisely the extinction of what is forgotten or repressed, as if each signifier could glimpse, in front of itself, not another signifier, but oneself as another, oneself as an absent signifier, impossible to reach. Hence the demarcation of a singularity, which Freud and Lacan, respectively, called rejoicing, other satisfaction or *jouissance*. There is, for each signifier, an ambiguity that consists in the fact that it can express,

simultaneously, other signifiers (life drive) and its own impotence (death drive). The singularity, in this sense, is not protected – as in the previous attempt established by Merleau-Ponty – by what each signifier would demarcate as an individual cogito. Rather, it is ensured by something that, in each signifier, is the opposite of the cogito, namely, what is lost or repressed in it as alterity, or, as Merleau-Ponty prefers, someone else.

## Conclusion

Reading from the psychoanalysis – which is to say, from the dynamics of differentiation that distinguishes, along with signifiers, the “symbolic connectivity” (life drive) from the “repetition” of the limit that is imposed on each one (death drive) – the Gestalt notion surpassed the condition of descriptive operator of the figure’s perception from the background. Gestalt is now the ontological operator with which Merleau-Ponty can think of Being as a primordial symbolism formed by incarnated signifiers, which express each other, as well as what – for each – which – is a limit, an alterity, if by alterity I can understand what in each one is lost, repressed.

Reading from the Gestalt, in turn, the Freudian theory of the unconscious drive gained an ontological status, so that it could be applied not only to the signifiers that resulted from the repression of mythical drives, but to the brute Being in general, that is, to the multiple differentiations that distinguish the different regions of Being, which include, on one hand, the visibility of physical, vital and instituted images, as well as, on the other, the invisibility of what for each is the repetition of its own limit. Through these readings, finally, Merleau-Ponty was able to think about the genesis of an elementary way of meaning that, despite being ambiguous and unfinished, does not depend on being assured by the transparency of the pure “I”, which, in turn, excludes the possibility that there can be “another self”.

But, above all, this strategy allowed Merleau-Ponty to answer the question about how it is possible to have, for each signifier, not only its other, but also what is intimate for each – even though it is an intimacy that, however, it is estrangement, unfamiliarity, in a word, someone else. In fact, with the theme of the expression of somebody else – beyond what is my indivisibility with others – Merleau-Ponty repositions the question of what intimacy is. Somebody else is not simply a different one, but a different one who “lives” in me as an intimate exterior; an “*extimacy*” that prevents me from being cogito or coincidence with myself. In this way, Merleau-Ponty opens the

possibility not of a phenomenology of otherness, but of an ontology of “otherness”, which displaces – to the field of passivity – what phenomenology only admitted to the immanence of the self, namely, the contact with the different. But, contrary to phenomenological thinking, contact is no longer about transparent coincidence. It has to do with decentering.

Here is how, says Merleau-Ponty (1969, p. 187-8), the problem of somebody else is that of decentering and not that of confronting two subjects face to face: “what is in front of us is an object. It is necessary to understand very well that [someone else’s] problem is not this one. It is to understand how I unfold, how I decenter myself”. Only in this way can that communication that Freud defined as “from the unconscious to (...) unconscious” can be realized and which is not the meeting or the coincidence between the analysand and the analyst, but the mutual expression between them of what is simultaneously intimate for both and unattainable, precisely, is the repressed signifier, devoid of a meaning that could be continued, resumed, constructed, which, in the end, will demand passivity from each one. This is in what sense Freud recommends to young physicians interested in analyzing that they can give way to what is unconscious in themselves.

He [the doctor] must direct his own Unconscious as the receiving organ to the patient’s unconscious sender, put himself to the analyzer as the telephone receiver is to the transmitter. How the receiver transforms the electrical oscillations of the received sound waves again in sound waves, the physician’s unconscious is thus able, from the derivatives of the unconscious communicated to him, to reconstruct [*wiederherzustellen*] that unconscious that determined the occurrences [*Einfälle*] of the patient” (FREUD, 1996, p. 129-130).

Communication between singulars, in the analysis, does not take place from the side of certainty, but from the opposite side, through what is not allowed to be known. Beyond the generality of what the differentiation between incarnated signifiers expresses as a life drive, participation in the same Being of undividedness, which is the carnality of feeling in its visible dimension, a transference flow between the signifiers; there is also the invisible dimension of the carnality of feeling, which is what in each signifier expresses itself as estrangement, an unfamiliar presence of a limit that demands passivity, decentering from each one. If the visible dimension delivers communication on a public level, as a shared generality, the invisible dimension delivers communication with the singular, with the intimate, but with the decentered

intimate, which comes from the other, not as another, but as somebody else, because it is about what of each one was lost, repressed.

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Recebido: 07/2021

Aprovado: 05/2022