

**THE MELODY OF LIFE.
MERLEAU-PONTY, READER OF JACOB VON UEXKÜLL**

**LA MELODÍA DE LA VIDA.
MERLEAU-PONTY, LECTOR DE JACOB VON UEXKÜLL**

Luís António Umbelino

Associação Portuguesa de Filosofia Fenomenológica (APFFEN)/
Universidade de Coimbra, Portugal
luis.um@megamail.pt

Abstract: This paper aims to meditate on the importance of Jacob von Uexküll's notion of *Umwelt* in Merleau-Ponty's research of an onto-phenomenological path - that is to say, in Merleau-Ponty's putting to the test of some of the thesis and presuppositions that were at the heart of both *La structure du Comportement* and the *Phénoménologie de la perception*. As Merleau-Ponty is looking for a way to develop and overcome the results of an investigation based on the point of view of consciousness, this notion of *Umwelt* will become - namely in the three lecture courses on the concept of *Nature*, delivered by Merleau-Ponty in the late 1950s at the *Collège de France* - more and more decisive.

Resumen: Este artículo trata de meditar acerca de la importancia de la noción de *Umwelt* de Uexküll en la búsqueda de un camino onto-fenomenológico por parte de Merleau-Ponty, es decir, en la puesta a prueba de ciertas tesis y presupuestos que estaban presentes en el núcleo tanto de *La structure du Comportement* como de *Phénoménologie de la perception*. Siendo así que Merleau-Ponty persigue encontrar un camino para desarrollar y superar los resultados de una investigación basada en el punto de vista de la conciencia, esta noción de *Umwelt* llegará a ser -especialmente en las lecciones de los tres cursos sobre el concepto de *Nature*, impartidos por Merleau-Ponty a finales de los años 50 en el *Collège de France*- cada vez más decisiva.

Key Words: *Umwelt*, Perception, Nature.

Palabras clave: *Umwelt*, percepción, naturaleza.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the three lecture courses on the concept of *Nature*¹, delivered by Merleau-Ponty in the late 1950s at the *Collège de France*, we can find a line of re-

¹ "Le concept de Nature" (1956-1957); "Le concept de nature, l'animalité, le corps humain, passage à la culture" (1957-1958); "le concept de nature, nature et logos : le corps humain" (1959-1960). Merleau-Ponty, M., *La nature. Notes de cours du Collège de France*, Paris, Seuil, 1994.

search that intends to test, in a radical way, some of the presuppositions that were at the heart of both *La structure du Comportement* and the *Phénoménologie de la perception*. Merleau-Ponty is looking for a way to develop – to overcome – the results of an investigation based on the point of view of consciousness. And, in this regard, it's very interesting to note that an analysis of the relations between the living organisms and their environment, as biological sciences conceive of it, appears in Merleau-Ponty's notes as crucial to the development – and putting to the test – of some of his first phenomenological thesis. The results of those sciences will become more and more instructive and challenging to Merleau-Ponty, and the dialogue with the works of several scientists in the fields of zoology, embryology, or ethology, more and more decisive.

Among the authors studied by Merleau-Ponty in this context we find the name of Jacob von Uexküll, whose notion of *Umwelt* is going to play, in our opinion, a central role in Merleau-Ponty's research of an onto-phenomenological path. This is what will interest us here.

2. ON BEHAVIOR

In one of Merleau-Ponty's working notes on the concept of *nature* we can read the following claim: "the body is not just thing, but relation to an *Umwelt* [...]".² This is an important statement: first of all because it underlines the fact that to be-in-the-world as a body is not just to be localized in a measurable point in space, but to be active, to be in connection to a space of involvement, that is to say, to have a familiar link to a *milieu* of belonging; second of all because it stresses out that this type of relation is confirmed by animal behaviour, in the sense that what *presents itself* in the relations between the organism and its *Umwelt* constitutes the environment as having dimensions that are inherently significant; finally because it allows us to think that human bodily relations to an *umwelt* are the basis for getting a *sens* (let us keep the French word to mark the concept) of the word – a *sens* thus inseparable from moving, bodily being in the word.

Now, if this is so, what Merleau-Ponty is also trying to say is that we must, first of all, return to the concept of *Behavior* and measure its importance once

² Merleau-Ponty, M., *La nature*, p. 270. We will be translating directly from the original French version.

again. To do so, we must begin by going back to *La structure du Comportement*, where behavior was the answer, Merleau-Ponty thought, to finally approach in a *new way* - in the *right way* - the problem of the relations between conscience and nature³. In a "new way" because, according to Merleau-Ponty, the "old" concepts and frameworks by which traditional philosophy tried to explain reality, fail to account for the true meaning of its being⁴. The classical orientations of both idealism - declaring that nothing exists if it is not rational or a product of consciousness - and realism - sustaining that nothing other than objects is real -, when closed upon themselves and their own presuppositions, both fail to see the true meaning of reality. And, in a way, that is so because they reproduce a same approach to reality; even if one of those orientations talk about reality as a "thing", and the other as an "idea", both perspectives tend to make of reality something that can be totality apprehended, something fully accessible.

For Merleau-Ponty this kind of blind duality signals the major flaws of an inadequate way of facing reality, as its true meaning is shred between the excessive naturalism of an over-empirical science that understands life in terms of simple causal relations, and the delusions of vitalism in biology, or extreme mentalism in psychology, say. Closed over themselves these perspectives rapidly move away from the *topos* where that meaning (and the *way of being*) of reality can reveal itself: the relations between conscience and nature. That's why Merleau-Ponty will try a new path. He wants to begin by scratch. And that's why he acknowledges as the only suitable starting point the notion of "behavior" - a notion that "taken in itself" is "neutral" with respect to the classical distinctions between, for example, the physical and the mental in psychology, the mechanism and vitalism in biology, and between the empiricism and intellectualism in philosophy, thus offering "the opportunity of defining them anew"⁵.

But in order to use the notion of "behavior" in a productive sense, Merleau-Ponty also needs to rethink it, as some influential theories have neglected its true meaning. "Behaviorism" is one of those theories. In fact, as it focuses on

³ Merleau-Ponty, M., *La structure du comportement*, (1942), Paris, P.U.F., Quadrige, 1990, p. 1, ss.

⁴ See Barbaras, R., "A Phenomenology of Life", in Carman, T & Hansen, M. (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 212.

⁵ Merleau-Ponty, M., *La structure*, p. 1-2

the externally observable patterns of animal life, it becomes incapable of thinking behavior outside an atomistic and mechanical paradigm. The psychophysiological notions of "integration" or "coordination" are also not the right solution: because they take the organism to be a result of isolated parts⁶, they fail to see any constructive solution to the problem of Behavior. In behavior Merleau-Ponty finds altogether a different kind of evidence. Following some instructive thesis in contemporary biological sciences, he is convinced that behavior proves that no living organism can be understood if taken separately from all its attaches to the environment; and because of this, behavior forces us to critically destroy the classical theoretical frameworks that, as it continues to determine the way we look at life, keeps on making us believe that an organism is something like a "material mass *partes extra partes*"⁷, and *life* is the name for the causal coordination of an organism's functions and organs.

According to Merleau-Ponty, on the contrary, what we understand to be a behavior is somewhat like a relational structure without breaks. In fact, we can say that any stimulus that acts on the organism is received, in a lived situation, as having a vital meaning and a *general* significance, and any reaction to that stimulus always depict the way an organism doubles an "immanent intelligibility"⁸ that crosses the whole of the milieu. In other words, any reaction of the organism is connected to the whole of the organism's activity, and this activity is an effective correspondence – a *co-response* – to an involving space and time. That is to say that behavior can not be mistaken by a simple automatic reaction of an organ, or coordination of organs, to a determined external cause. Far from that, behavior reveals the way of *being a structural whole* of a living organism; and, at the same time, it discloses in what way the *being a whole* of the organism finds its counterpart in a mutual relation with the *whole* of the environment. In a word, the way of being alive of the living organism *is* reciprocity to an *Umwelt*⁹.

In this sense, the living organism cannot be understood in an atomistic model, nor can it be apprehended in a vitalist context. In fact, what *behavior* really is can only be understood *in* the relations of the organism to the envi-

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 140

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

ronment; that is to say, as “a form”¹⁰, a dynamic form; a *form*, moreover, that - as B. Buchanan has already pointed out - executes a “higher” dialectical relation between an organism and its surroundings, uniting the two in an unprecedented way¹¹, in a way that by no means can be expressed in terms of cause and effect¹². This is why, as R. Barbaras explains, we only arrive at the reality of the organism, or at “the organism as a real entity, when several events, in themselves devoid of meaning, appear as moments of a unity, manifestations of a vital behavior: we arrive at life when we ménage to find points of view from which ensembles acquire a common signification”¹³.

3. THE MELODY OF LIFE

Too major conclusions can be drawn from what has been said on behavior: first of all, behavior is something that only *appears* as mixture, mutuality, relation, therefore making us understand that the way of *being real* of behaviour is to be an act and not a set of “things”, or “ideas”, a movement and not a substance, an active *form* rather than something still. Secondly we must come to the conclusion that this act behaviour *is*, this mutuality, this relation that *makes* behaviour what it is, is not something we can objectively see as such: behaviour is “real *qua* phenomenon”¹⁴, and it is in this sense that we can see it as the announcement of a *totality* that links together. Now, what is also interesting here is that if we perceive the phenomenon of behaviour as some kind of global mutuality never objectively seen, thus we must conclude that the totality we are talking about must contribute for the *being real* of our perception as it is that capacity of following a presence never fully present - in other words, the *totality* behavior doubles as we perceive it as such, is, at the end, also a proof of our own belonging to that global mutuality.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 138. See also, for example, p. 140: “L’expérience dans un organisme n’est pas l’enregistrement et la fixation de certaines mouvements réellement accomplis : elle monte des aptitudes, c’est-à-dire le pouvoir général de répondre à des situations d’un certain type par des réactions variées qui n’ont de commun que le sens. [...] Situation et réaction se relient intérieurement par leur participation commune à une structure où s’exprime le mode d’activité propre de l’organisme”.

¹¹ Buchanan, B., *Onto-Ethologies. The Animal Environments of Uexküll, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Deleuze*, State University of New York Press, 2008, p. 121

¹² Merleau-Ponty, M., *La structure*, p. 140.

¹³ Barbaras, R., “A Phenomenology of Life”, p. 219.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 219. See also, for example, Merleau-Ponty, M. *La structure*, pp. 169-170.

This is why *La structure du comportement* demanded, at the end, a true *phenomenology of perception*¹⁵ capable of exploring the radical conditions of making sense of the word - and of showing that those conditions begin in the active presence (and way of belonging) of the body in the word. But as Merleau-Ponty finishes his monumental *Phénoménologie de la perception*, one question haunts still the analyses as its own shadow - a question first raised by the concept of behavior and not fully answered by the *Phénoménologie*: how to understand that totality we perceive *in* behavior¹⁶?

This is one of the questions that we can find not only at the centre of the lecture courses on the concept of Nature, but also, from there on, in the centre of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy¹⁷. As we arrive to the working notes on the concept of Nature, is as if, for Merleau-Ponty, the time had come to face the shadow of "something not yet fully thought" operating along his first works. And it's very interesting to see that, as Merleau-Ponty gives form to the onto-phenomenological explanation of all that remains implicit in those first works, the notion of behavior, as biological sciences conceive of it, once again is going to play an important role. It is in this context that, as he prepares for the classes at the *Collège de France*, Merleau-Ponty will return to the works and main concepts of an author he mentions once in *La structure* (as if already pointing out his importance): we are talking about Jakob von Uexküll.

In fact, in the notes on the concept of Nature, Merleau-Ponty seems particularly interested namely on Uexküll's concept of *Umwelt*. This notion seems to him to demonstrate, quite convincingly, that between the living organisms and their environment a true reciprocity is in place. In other words, Uexküll shows that the environment compels the organism to behave in particular ways, but only inasmuch as the milieu is also already established - and unfolds - by the preceding behavior of the organism. In a way this does not seem new by comparison to what Merleau-Ponty already underlines in his first books. But a set of new decisive philosophical implications of Uexküll's *Umwelt* are now to become clear as Merleau-Ponty begins to fully understand the implications of a notion - that of *Umwelt* - "destined to connect what we usually separate"¹⁸. It

¹⁵ See, of course, Merleau-Ponty, M., *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Paris, Gallimard, 1945.

¹⁶ Merleau-Ponty, M., *La nature*, p. 194.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 194: "Tell est la question philosophique [...] qui est au centre de ce cours [...] et peut-être de toute philosophie."

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 228.

must be taken seriously this evidence of something like a movement of pre-reflexive meaning that unites the organism as a whole and, by its structure, acts as a “cohesive bond”¹⁹ between the animal’s movements and its *environment*²⁰.

The way of being of the organism as a “being-in-the-world” is that of *crossing* the inside of an *Umwelt*, inasmuch as the *Umwelt*’s reality does not appear as something other than the reciprocal *crossing* of the organism. In other words, we could say that the living organism, by its movement, unfolds an *Umwelt*; but this unfolding is the counterpart of the way the *Umwelt* unfolds the whole of the organism. But what really is unfolded? Of what is the unfolding²¹? It’s like if the organism as a whole and the whole of the environment were intimately related in some musical theme, Uexküll would say; not in the sense that the organism would “dance” to the rhythm of external stimuli, but in the sense that they share a dynamic relationship by which body and space seem to *take care* of each other, and play each other - even if, sometimes, in a *quiasmatic* way. But what connects? What is this shared “melody” made of?

Merleau-Ponty is convinced that in order to answer these questions we must explore Uexküll’s metaphor as he talks of a “melody that sings itself”²². Merleau-Ponty writes: “When we invent a melody, the melody sings in us much more than we sing it; it goes down the throat of the singer, as Proust says. Just as the painter is struck by a painting which is not there, the body is suspended in what it sings: the melody is incarnated and finds in the body a type of servant”²³. This is a striking claim, full of ontological implications: we could say that in the reciprocal relations between organism and environment there is something like an area of passivity in the body; we could add that something *incarnates* in him, that the connections to a “privileged milieu”²⁴ are the unfolding of *Life* itself – the unfolding of a common texture that binds together and, in a sense, produces²⁵ the organism as a whole throughout the whole of the milieu. This by no means implicates the proposal of a higher reality, of an “es-

¹⁹ Buchanan, B., *Onto-Ethologies*, p. 134.

²⁰ Merleau-Ponty, M., *La nature*, p. 230.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 228.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 228

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 228

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 228.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 227: “L’animal est produit par la production d’un milieu, c’est-à-dire par l’apparition, dans le monde physique, d’un champ radicalement autre que le monde physique avec sa temporalité et sa spatialité spécifique ”

sence out of the time"²⁶, of "a thing above the sensible"²⁷, or of a pantheistic presence. In our view, what Merleau-Ponty is saying is that the *Umwelt* Uexkull is talking about is the *incarnation* of a reciprocal dimensionality, of a "cohesion without concept", of an active participation in the common *flesh* of the world. What is essential in the *Umwelt* – Merleau-Ponty consequently can argue – is a "theory of flesh"²⁸.

4. INVISIBILITY IN THE VISIBLE

But what do we *perceive* as the *Flesh* of the word? What exactly can we call the *Flesh* (or the *Sensible*)? The answer Merleau-Ponty offers in his working notes on the concept of Nature is full of implications, as it draws on a radicalization of the question of perception. To begin with, we can state that what we understand as the *flesh* of Nature (of Life) is a non-positive excess of a horizon that perception knows how to follow in its absence, in its lack. Perception therefore must be seen as a capacity to *co-respond* to the obsessive interpellation of invisibility, that is to say, to whatever announces in each presence what is missing, but is needed by perception *to get the whole picture*. Perception is thus still the key²⁹. But only if we understand it in a fundamentally new way: Merleau-Ponty writes: "do not introduce a 'perceive' without corporal 'attaches'". No perception without prospective movement and the conscience of this movement is not to think on the change of an objective place to another, we do not move as a thing, but by reduction of distance, and perception is but the other pole of this distance the distance maintained"³⁰. Let us look closely to this statement: first of all Merleau-Ponty recognises the inscription of the perceptive body in the origin of sense itself; secondly he claims that this is possible by means of a "movement of prospection" (by no means comparable to objective change of place); finally he underlines the notion of distance (*écart*) to conclude

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 230

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 233

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 271.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 278: "C'est la perception et le perçu qui sont la clef, mais en prenant les mots dans un sens neuf: si la perception n'était qu'un *Je pense que*, la perception ne me donnerait pas l'*Ineinander* homme – son corps – la nature".

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 284. "Ne pas introduire un 'percevoir' sans 'attaches' corporelles. Pas de perception sans mouvement prospectifs, et la conscience de se mouvement n'est pas pensée d'un changement de lieu objectif, on ne se meut pas comme une chose, mais par réduction d'écart, et la perception n'est que l'autre pôle de cet écart l'écart maintenue".

that the perceptive subject assists to the birth of sense because perceptive movement is a way of belonging to the carnal crossroads of visibility and invisibility.

Perception is not a capacity to distinguish things or parts of things, but the ability to follow (to belong to) whatever exceeds each perceived thing as an enigmatic orientation towards an atmosphere of global mutual belonging, towards a *Being* of generality, and cohesion. The totality of the *Being* of envelopment Merleau-Ponty is hence talking about is, in itself, out of reach; its way of appearing is the unseen apparition of the *Flesh*. That's why perception is no more, no less, than the capacity to follow the movement of the *écart* of all that remains invisible, and, in response to its calling, to try to overcome but without destroying it.

R. Barbaras has pointed out that to talk about a "melody", as in the example of the *Umwelt*, equals the claim that "on one hand, the theme determines each variation and is in this sense effective" and, on the other hand, that the theme "is absent from the variations because each variation is not itself the theme"³¹ – it is present as absence. So, if we understand the *Umwelt* in this way it's maybe because our perception *wants* what is absent³² and learns from it. That's why, in our opinion, in the lecture courses on the concept of Nature Merleau-Ponty defines perception in terms of desire³³ – desire of what lacks in each visible and is the promise of Being. Perception is an *adaptation* to the structure of *presentification* in absence of the *Sensible*. In this sense, we must accept an apparently unusual assertion: it is because something real offers itself as a whole that I arrive to perceive the whole in its always sketched presentification. In a way, then, my perception must be determined by whatever offers itself as a *whole*, even do that offering is never complete. The conditions of possibility of perception then appear to be on the side of that "element" of Being as it assures "the interiority of the events one in relation to the others" and, in a same movement, reveal our "inherence" to that some *Being* of involvement³⁴.

³¹ Barbaras, R., "A Phenomenology of Life", p. 227.

³² See Merleau-Ponty, *La nature*, p. 240 : "On peut donc parler d'une présence du thème de ces réalisations, ou dire que les événements sont groupés autour d'une certaine absence [...]. De même, la totalité est partout et nulle part".

³³ *Ibid*, p. 287 : "Le désir considéré au point vue transcendantal = membrure commune de mon monde comme charnel et du monde d'autrui".

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

Arriving at this point, it becomes impossible for Merleau-Ponty to stop. The analyses of the *Umwelt* show that in the order of *Life* what is real is the "opening of a visible whose being is not defined by the *Percipi*, were on the contrary the *Percipere* is defined by the participation in an active *Esse*"³⁵. We then have to ask for this *Being*, this *savage* Being, that does not reveal itself directly, that does not disclose itself as "substance", "matter", or "object", but only as the *sensible* medium by which "there can be being without it having to be posited"³⁶.

5. FINAL REMARKS

A new ontology is needed: an ontology that, eluding the "ontology of the *blossen Sachen*"³⁷, will be capable of replacing "the notions of concept, idea, mind, representation with the notions of *dimensions*, articulation, level, hinges, pivots, configuration"³⁸. That is to say, following Merleau-Ponty, we have to learn how to think in a radical new way: we need to thoroughly change our usual anthropocentric way of thinking and looking at the reality; we have to free our research from the excessive worry about the nature of perception (and the nature of conscience). Only in this way can we finally give room to an inquiry into the origins of meaning as it begins on side of Nature and Life - in the arrangements of the *flesh* and not on the side of consciousness.

The announce of Merleau-Ponty's new ontology represents the demand for a philosophy engaged in thinking Nature and Life starting from their own ontological power of gestation.

³⁵ *Ibid*, *La Nature*, p. 338. "[...] ouverture à un visible dont l'être ne se définit pas par le *Percipi*, où au contraire le *Percipere* se définit par la participation à un *Esse* actif". We follow here BARBARAS, R., *Le désir et la distance. Introduction à une philosophie de la perception*, Vrin, Paris, 1999, p. 119. See also, for exemple, Merleau-Ponty, M., *Le visible et l'invisible*, Galliamard, Paris, 1964, p. 245 : "La transcendance de la chose oblige à dire qu'elle n'est plénitude qu'en étant inépuisable, c'est-à-dire en n'étant pas toute actuelle sous le regard - mais cette actualité totale elle promet, puisqu'elle est *la*".

³⁶ Merleau-Ponty, M., *Le visible et l'invisible*, p. 267.

³⁷ Merleau-Ponty, M., *La nature*, p. 267.

³⁸ Merleau-Ponty, M., *Le visible et l'invisible*, p. 277.