

Childhood in the philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. The barbarian thinking of children as an expression of the world of life

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Abstract

In this paper an analysis will be conducted on some of the works of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in which the phenomenologist provides a description of childhood or where the child image will report any relevant aspect within his theory. The description of the child as a place inhabited by many places, as a primary silence or as that unspeakable, shows us the childhood as the opening of a new field of experience, as the institution of a new sense. Childhood will not only be a methodological interest object in his psychology studies, but also that primal going-forward of experience, the mere potentiality yet not thrown (or rather, not yet been thrown) in the world where everything will, necessarily, have sense.

Keywords: MERLEAU-PONTY - CHILDHOOD - EXPRESSION - SENSE - PERCEPTION

Palavras-chave: MERLEAU-PONTY - INFÂNCIA - EXPRESSÃO - SENTIDO - PERCEPÇÃO

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1. *Introduction*

Setting out a lineal path that goes through all Merleau-Ponty works in which he speaks about childhood or about child development is not an easy task. Sometimes as a metaphor, others as a concrete phase in the individual's genesis, the reference the French philosopher makes about children in his works sometimes seem to go by different ways. Neither opposites, nor excluding. Only two different views (or two alternative utilizations) around the features and functions of child thinking, interlacing, mutually nourish and complete as two faces that allude to the parts that together constitute a reality that overtakes them. On one side, in the texts more linked to psychology as *Psychologie et pédagogie de l'enfant. Cours de Sorbonne (1949-1952)*, childhood is presented as the historically neglected phase that shows up in the frame of phenomenology as a space to be vindicated, as a period with features of its own and that have to be necessarily differentiated from other phases of development. In other works, in contrast, as *Phenomenology of Perception* or *La Nature. Notes Cours du Collège de France*, the child acquires the image of a figure, of a way of being, expressing the relaunching itself of an individual in history, in his own history, in his own private environment, that will be built by himself.

The childhood in the theory of Maurice Merleau-Ponty has not been a subject sufficiently explored by those who dedicate themselves to its study, for which the antecedents on this subject in particular are scarce. For Etienne Bimbenet (2002), children's thinking in Merleau-Ponty expresses "the phenomenological return to the things themselves, and the chronological return to the past of objective thought" (BIMBENET, 2002: 65). Childhood is then installed as a privileged moment of human development, which represents "a stricter proximity to nature" (BIMBENET, 2002: 66) where objective thought has not yet been falsified by the arrival of adulthood. Bimbenet (2002) takes up the problem of child egocentrism of which Piaget speaks, to compare it under the light of the *Cours de Sorbonne*. In infantile thinking, self-centeredness is experienced as the forgetting of one's self, which insofar as it is ignored, becomes the very centre of the child's world. There, the child lives with the certainty of being part of a plural and intersubjective world. Bimbenet (2002) inverts the conditions in which the discussion of childhood in Merleau-Ponty is usually involved, to make this topic not an accessory concern in the philosophical path of the phenomenologist, but rather as a relevant aspect of his theory that can shed light on the very genesis of the acquisition of perceptual habits. On the other hand, Saint Aubert (2006) analyses the "discovery" of the Piagetian topology by Merleau-Ponty from the reading of *La représentation de l'espace chez l'enfant*. Piaget describes infantile spatiality from five relationships: closeness, separation (or segregation), order, involvement and continuity. Piaget will argue that the evolution of the spatiality of the child is closely linked "to the progression of the competence of his hands and his exploration strategies" (SAINT AUBERT, 2006: 235). Merleau-Ponty will integrate this approach to the perception of the perceived world and that of the body itself. For Saint Aubert (2006), Merleau-Ponty "understands topological space as primordial"; "is the space of 'the thing itself'" invested by

the body itself "as a total part" (SAINT AUBERT, 2006: 237). From this interpretation, one can observe how Merleau-Ponty receives Piaget's texts on spatiality "as concerning the spatiality of the body itself".

In this paper an analysis will be conducted on some of the works of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in which the phenomenologist provides a description of childhood or where the child image will report any relevant aspect within his theory. Childhood will not only be a methodological interest object in his psychology studies, but also that primal going-forward of experience, the mere potentiality yet not thrown (or rather, not yet been thrown) in the world where everything will, necessarily, have sense.

2. Childhood in the *Cours de Sorbonne*: restore the child to history

The methodological proposal presented by Maurice Merleau-Ponty in *Psychologie et pédagogie de l'enfant. Cours de Sorbonne (1949-1952)*, will try to restore or place again the child in the socio-historical context where he belongs. Just like women or "primitive people", children should be restored to history and be considered acting members in historical processes that will confer them diverse features. First, for Merleau-Ponty, we do not have to set something like a "child condition", this is, a mindset typical of the child. Merleau-Ponty identifies certain "originality" in the child consciousness, so setting features typical of childhood would be ignoring this fact and, at the same time, presupposing a mental structure inaccessible a priori to adults.

From this conception of scientific endeavour and spotlighting the epistemological consequences caused by the effacement of the historical particularities of the individuals, Merleau-Ponty considers that the description of the child made by the adult is the expression of the relationship the latter institutes with the first and not a naturalistic description of the underlying mechanisms. In *Méthode en psychologie de l'enfant*, the child's consciousness is, primarily, opaque to the view of an adult located completely out of it. Merleau-Ponty criticizes certain "realistic" attempt in the childhood analysis, which "cuts, separates, distinguishes between exterior and interior, situation and response (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2001: 476). There are neither organisms without situation, nor moments over the life of an organism where it would not be immersed in a determined situation. In child psychology, what Merleau-Ponty calls "atomist conception" is impossible and takes out what truth represents in the life of a child, since it constitutes an "immovable cut of what development is" in a child. This discipline must constitute, then, "through relativity", integrating, as subject of study, the child environment and the relations he is immerse in. It is necessary for Merleau-Ponty to reintegrate the child to the set of social and historical environment where he lives and to which he reacts. There features do nothing but disable the naturalistic position or "a priori" about childhood.

First, Merleau-Ponty speaks about *child polymorphism*. In the child coexist very diverse possibilities that make him resemble a neurotic, as long as multiple features inhabit in him, in an individual whose cultural root has not yet been defined. The child must not be conceived neither as an absolute other nor as similar to us, but as an individual in constituting process, open to all possibilities offered by his environment. Levi-Strauss generalizes this idea by affirming that "there is no child mindset, but a child polymorphism" (MERLEAU-

PONTY, 2001: 470): when the child is not integrated to the culture, it could manifest conducts that may seem primitive or pathological. The physical and intellectual developments of a child are not the only factors conditioning his access to the world of culture, but also his imitative abilities utilized to “copy” adult’s conducts; child acquire habits proper of his group using “quasi-dramatic means” of imitation. Polymorphism makes reference to the Merleau-Pontian negative of “crystallizing” the child conferring immovable attributes. Many of them, he affirms, are nothing but the result of the historical path and upbringing received by women throughout time. At first, libido has nothing to do with sexual instinct, but will call “sexual” to these first conducts since they are related to the difference of sexes, without knowledge of genital mechanism. Sexuality comes in the life of a child as anticipation. The libido circulating by different ways in the child psycho-sexual development is not necessarily meant to acquire a sexual significance. The initial libido, affirms Merleau-Ponty, “should be undetermined”, consequently all individuals are polymorph perverse. Libido indeterminacy (that will take a more precise path with the castration produce by the closure of the Oedipus complex) is one of the notes that could define the nature interrogative and open to a future, described by Merleau-Ponty.

Second, the *prematuring phenomenon*. This refers to the possibility of the child of living the conflicts or certain episodes of his life before the development of the physical or intellectual powers required to do so. From the beginning, the child possesses a determined culture since he starts at a very early stage to have a relation with his peers as of the intervention of cultural objects and institutions. The utilization of certain utensils (as the baby bottle during the lactation period) or the adaptation to socially regulated behaviors (such as breastfeeding, which features vary from one social group to other), give account of the insertion of the child in a particular culture, with which he will interact and build determined standards of the “usual” or ordinary. The sleep cycle¹, in turn, another phenomenon that is many times considered as merely “natural” or biological, is nothing but the ordering of the sleeping and waking periods in the heart of a determined culture.

Third, the *identification relation*, established between the child and the caretaker adult. For Merleau-Ponty, the child sees himself in the other, as much as the others see themselves in him. This identification relation creates tension between its participants, typical tension between who is the “model” and who cannot adapt to it. Merleau-Ponty distinguishes a double imitation phenomenon: from the children to their caretakers, for whom adult age represent a sort of “perfection”, idealized as that moment when they will be able to do what they want; in second place, there is an identification from the parents to the children, as long as they revive their childhood by taking care of their sons or daughters. The double identification phenomenon between the child and the adult subscribes the methodological starting point of Merleau-Ponty according to which the child cannot be defined a priori of his social, historical and cultural environment. This double identification implies an idealization of the other’s lived moment: for the children, adulthood is the moment of continuous joy, of perfection, when all problems disappear; in contrast, adults (Merleau-Ponty refers to the mother in particular) revive their own childhood with the children.

¹ See : Merleau-Ponty, M. (1995). *La nature. Cours du collège de France*, p. 196.

3. *The original interlacing: the child as a place inhabited by many places*

The world opens up in front of the child's view in a different way from that of adults. A body still being built, pushing for splitting up from the body of the caretakers and the exit of Oedipus complex partially closes to give way to other transformations. The discussion is announced in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1984) to be extended in *Psychologie et pédagogie de l'enfant. Cours de Sorbonne (1949-1952)* (2001), reporting about the relevancy of the child figure and his perceptive faculties will have for the French philosopher.

In *Phenomenology of perception*, Merleau-Ponty states the child lives in a world equally accessible for all, where there is no difference between his perspective and the one of those around him; the child “has no awareness of himself, nor of others, as private subjectivities, does not suspect we all are, and he is, limited to a certain point of view about the world” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1984: 366). This undifferentiation of the points of view is nothing but a mention of the indiscernible nature of corporeality in early childhood, which unclear boundaries express the plasticity of the corporeal scheme, including within its boundaries the body itself of their primary caretakers. This first mention of infantile subjectivity as full openness to others and as a dimension, in turn, crossed by the environment will have towards the end of this section of *Phenomenology of perception*, a meaning above all political, which will become flesh in a call to return to that openness towards others from which adulthood seems to distance us, thus returning to that first state where we do not exclude the other, but transform it into a constitutive part of our being. About it, Merleau-Ponty states:

But, actually is necessary that, in a way, children are right against adults or against Piaget, and barbaric thoughts or first childhood continue being an indispensable capital below the adults (...) with cogito begins the fight of consciousness where each one, as Hegel says, pursues the death of the other. For the fight to begin, for each consciousness could suspect the alien presences that denies, it is necessary they have a common ground and they remember their peaceful coexistence in the child's world. (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1984: 366)

The child is this omniscient individual that seems to embrace all possible perspectives and, in turn, is crossed by them. In one of Merleau-Ponty examples, the child believes his dreams are accessible by everyone sleeping in the room. The world for the child is “the vague place of all experiences”, embracing from true objects to “individual and instantaneous ghosts” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1984: 356). The distinction of different perspectives and points of view experienced by adults, is not a real problem for children, who are still immerse in the peace brought by the syncretism typical of a scheme that has not yet consolidated. The child “does not have the science of points of view” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1984: 356), since he still does not note that each individual thoughts are private and we can only access to them (or to part of them) by the exteriorizations made by themselves. In the same way, the world and everything happening within are for the child, in Merleau-Ponty's words, “quasi-material” (“to the point that a child asks himself why looks, when crossing, do not break”). It is around age of twelve when the child would reach, taking Piaget's theory, to a rational thinking, discovering himself “as sensitive consciousness and intellectual consciousness, as point of view about the world and as call to overcome this point of view, to build an

objectivity at the level of judgement” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1984: 366). The “truths of rationalism” appear with all their weight. For Merleau-Ponty, Piaget makes the mistake of thinking childhood as a degraded adulthood, as the place of chaos and nonsense, considering, also, that at the age of twelve the rational thinking comes and with it, all contradictions disappear. Facing this idea, Merleau-Ponty retrieves the “barbaric thinking” of the child, who remains in the happy coexistence with other thinking, without struggling to eliminate them. With the coming of rational thinking, the fight begins, where every consciousness pursues the “death of the other”. For this fight to occur, the individual must, according to Merleau-Ponty, remember the first phase of indiscernibility where all consciousnesses were part of a common ground.

In *Phenomenology of perception*, Merleau-Ponty clearly describes the dynamic from which the child makes way among the world spectacle to start ordering it. In that beginning still mute, where the way to the other has found him, the child gets lost in the vastness of sensations opening in front of his eyes, and in that pure possibility of discovery, is presented as the privileged beholder of a world still not limited by the boundaries of the senses:

It is true that, often, other’s knowledge clarifies our knowledge: the outer spectacle reveals to the child the sense of his own impulses, since it proposes an aim. But the example would pass unnoticed if it doesn’t run into the child’s inner possibilities (...) The communication or the understanding of gestures is achieved with the reciprocity of my intentions and the gestures of others, of my gestures and of the intentions, legible in other’s behaviour. (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1984: 202)

The previously quoted passage references us to a passage of Henri Wallon (one of the most recurrent backgrounds in Merleau-Ponty’s work), who in *Kinesthesia and the Visual Body Image in the Child*² uses a quote of Karl Marx to report the dialectic and intersubjective constitution of the body of the child:

Man begins to reflect himself in another man as in a mirror. Only when he has, in front of the individual Paul, a similar behavior he has in front of him, the individual Peter begins to be aware of him as a man. This quote of Marx expresses very well this fluctuation from him to other and of the perceived image in other in him, which is not only a moral or social reality, but also an essential psychological process. (in CALMELS, 2000: 61)

This phrase, with clear political and moral connotations, is taken by Wallon as the dynamic itself of subjectivity auto-construction from the body of the others. We exist amid that constant dialog with our environment with which we establish, from the so called “golden time”, a tonic emotional dialog based on the changes of muscle tone, interchange that satisfies the postural needs of the baby when getting from an adult the “first postures” in an act of giving. It is postulated as the possibility condition (along with the satisfaction of the

² See: Wallon, Henri (1965). “Kinestesia e imagen visual del propio cuerpo en el niño”, *Estudios sobre psicología genética de la personalidad*, Buenos Aires: Lautaro.

biological basic needs of the baby) in the construction of every individual. The dialectic then, is for Wallon the dynamic that structures and defines the subjectivity itself of the baby and will rise for Merleau-Ponty in the dynamic itself of the being in the world.

4. *Opening towards expression: the child as primary silence*

For Merleau-Ponty, “All those who transform into words a certain silence” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1984: 201), this is, the child that is learning to talk, like the writer, both give account of the contingent of the human communication. The child owns that contingency, manipulates it, makes a fruitful use of it and adapts it to his needs when referring to the things of the world. The “primary silence” from which everything could be born, expresses the pure communicative potentiality of the child, that capacity of being able to refer even to those that disappear in adulthood. Creating communicative situations in the middle of silence, interpret sounds as constituents of a communicative process or reading in them a missing musicality. This point is addressed by Merleau-Ponty in the section “Dialogue and the perception of the other” in *La prose du monde* (1971), where Merleau-Ponty will try to recover that first word, the conqueror word (*parole conquérante*) that will enable the language from the significant potentiality of the gesture.

In communication, we are never in the passive subject role: when I talk, it will be in the middle of the interchange with another individual; when I listen, neither am I, since I will talk later. “As speaking subjects, we continue, resume a single effort, older than us, where we are integrated one and the other”, so the word will not be other than this “anticipation and resumption” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1971: 200), as long as “the acquired significances” will contain the new ones as a “trace or horizon” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1971: 183). Likewise, the style of the expression that will cover the words that have been said or the words in a book cause “the general environment of interpreting” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1971: 184) the world they refer to. In *Le monde sensible et le monde de l’expression* (2011), Merleau-Ponty states “that the perceived world (...) already implies the expressive function” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2011: 45). In these courses, the phenomenologist deepens the linking between the act of perceiving and expression, dynamic identified in the circularity of the function of the perceived word, which perception will remain as sediment to grab the world that contains it and will be the trace from which the new worlds could open. Then, the expression will be defined by the philosopher like “the property that a phenomenon has, by its inner agency, to make other (phenomenon) known, that was not or even never has been given” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2011: 48). For this reason, “the function of expression (*parole*) itself” is described by Merleau-Ponty as “the power of saying overall more than what it says word by word” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1971: 182). The episode narrated by Merleau-Ponty in *Phenomenology of perception* (1984) about a child with his grandmother at the bed story time, could illustrate this fact: the story, daily told by his grandmother in a determined situation and using certain objects to do it (her glasses, the book arranged in a specific way, etc.) magically “appears” for the child when that narrative situation is rebuilt; the story begins to be told when the situation that facilitates the story is arranged. “The story is a world and it has to be a way of making it magically appear putting on glasses and leaning into a book” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1984: 410). This way, language will make sense for a child when he

could link it to a particular situation, until then, situatedness of experience will be something indefinite, unable to evoke anything in the child. Then, the word spoken, the use of it, will be the vehicle of that operation by which a world will open from the horizon of significance that underlies it. This way, in *Phenomenology of perception* (1984), the child is presented as the beginning itself of the Cogito that is fulfilled in the moment it is expressed, as the beginning of the human being, unitized and split from other that always seems to mix with his body. “Even as thinking subject” states Merleau-Ponty, “I am still this first perception, the sequence of life itself that this (perception) will open” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1984: 416). For Merleau-Ponty, this first “vision” waits to “be set and explicated by perceptive exploration and word” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1984: 413).

Likewise, the expressive world of the child offers us other aspects of the act of expressing itself, where the aesthetic dimension crosses, like in the artist, with the temporal dimension. We are immersed, Merleau-Ponty states, in the “objectivist illusion” according to which “the act of expressing, in its regular or essential way, consists, given a significance, in building a system of signs in a way that each element of the significance corresponds to an element of the significant, this is, to represent” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1971: 205). This way, the planimetric perspective intends to offer a “notation of the world that would be applicable for all”, from which “the lived perspective is set” and whilst it builds an image that could be translated as any other point of view, “it is the image of a world in itself” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1971: 207). As long as the “deformation” of this kind of perspective produce is “systematic” and applies to all elements of drawing, it produces the illusion of seeing things from “the knowledge that may have of a human vision a God that does not immerse in finitude” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1971: 207). The child’s drawing, instead, expresses another way of approaching to our environment, no longer from this attempt of grabbing a universal point of view, but “our relationship with the world”. The child’s drawing does not try to rebuild, for Merleau-Ponty, an objective point of view, but to point out our contact with things, as long as they call us in a way. The child expression proposes us a way of “elliptic” expression, according to which, when a determined spectacle is represented, all elements that intervene in it are called, placing them in a same level of coexistence. “All the elements of the spectacle are pointed out without error and without overlapping” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1971: 206). In child drawing, the presence of our body in the world is revealed, “the mark of our finitude” and “the secret substance of the object”. In child’s drawings, children put all the elements of a story at the same level, this is, all moments, actions and characters involved in a story are summoned in a single image. Children conjugate the evolution of a story in a single level, that connects them and make the relations between its parts visible. Far from “the reasonable ‘adult’, who thinks about time as a series of overlapped temporary spots” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1971: 209), the child puts us facing the temporal plexus itself, facing the elliptic dynamic of the lived time where the present refers us, like a beam, to the past and to the future.

Child temporality, remaining as background in the children’s drawing analysis, will be another relevant point that Merleau-Ponty will take from the theory of Piaget, as long as, when analyzing the way in which children experience time, it could be observed the cultural nature of this dimension. Perception is defined by Merleau-Ponty as “a machine of living” the time (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2011: 190), from which temporality is given to us as a cultural setting. “My body is not only an apparatus of making attachments in space”, but it

will also make attachments in time” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2011: 190). Time will be, in the end, what organizes to some extent the perceptive field (*champ*). The child, in the still fluctuating construction of his own past, gives account of the conventional and cultural nature of the “time marking machines”. The “yesterday” which are months in the younger or the “tomorrow” that will be in several days, render account of that, of an episodic disorder that contacts us with an experience not yet ordered by a cultural setting.

5. *The birth as institution: opening of a field of experience*

With the arrival of a child, a new story begins, a new record of experience opens facing our body; the whole environment resignifies and, with that, the story of who take part of this new sense opening also acquires a new signification. With that, a new “record” is opened, a new story “is founded”. With the birth, a “new possibility of situation” is opened (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1984: 415), as long as it cannot be considered merely as an objective fact between others, but it is linked to the past and to the perspectives of a future. To the phenomenologist, birth compromises a future as long as it sets up as a situation which will necessarily have an outcome. With the arrival of a child, “the world received a new level of significance” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1984: 415) from which the objective space acquires a different significance: the windows of the building, which in the past were only sources of light and space for contact with the outside, turn into dangerous spaces that should be away from the newcomer; a certain outfit is covered with the veil of some memory related to the child’s birth; a room will be the actual place of the beginning of the family. About this, Merleau-Ponty affirms:

In the house where a child is born, all the objects change their sense, they expect from him an undetermined treatment yet, someone else, someone different is there, a new story, short or long, was just founded, a new record, was just opened. (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1984: 416)

This new look that is opened with the birth itself is pure institution, as long as it opens a new record of substitution that will impregnate with a certain sense the course of the child’s experiences. In *The institution in the personal and public history* (2012), birth appears as an instituting or sense giving event, from which other events will have a determined significance. First, let us remember the definition of institution developed by Merleau-Ponty:

[it means] setting of an experience (or in a built apparatus) of dimensions (in the general Cartesian sense: system of reference) in relation to which a whole series of other experiences will make sense and form a continuation, a story. (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2012: 8)

However, for whom is an institution the event of birth? In the courses about institution, birth seems to be another instituting event in the life of an individual, same way as Oedipus complex during childhood and falling in love during adolescence. In *Phenomenology of perception* (1984), it is expressed the ambivalent nature of this event, where it could be seen the link itself of the individuals in the world, and overlapping and

resignifying of personal stories between each other. Birth is not only a sense giving event for the individual that arrived to the world, but also for all the ones taking part of his experience environment. Likewise, in *La Nature. Notes Cours du Collège de France*, the child is for Merleau-Ponty a “new field” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1995: 271) of consciousness, not emerging for his mother’s consciousness, but because of “emptiness disposition”, because of “irruption of a new field coming from “interworld”³ which is not, for Merleau-Ponty, an effect of the predecessors, although in the beginning it depends entirely from them. There is not a “stickiness of souls” between the mother and the child. About this, Merleau-Ponty states:

It is a body that produces the stickiness and that perceives when the actions of the world reach him. There is no descent of a soul in a body, but rather an emergence of a life in his cradle, caused vision. (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1995: 280)

This way, the coming to the world of a baby is considered by the French philosopher as opening to a new experience, but at the same time, as opening of new sense courses within the experience of the others. Birth is the overlapping or linking (*empiétament*) about which Merleau-Ponty will elaborate in *La prose du monde*, according to which the identification of the other is produced in the world itself and in the crossing of my corporeality and my moving possibilities with the other’s. With birth, the individual starts to take part of a determined vital tissue; it is pure sense relaunch, from the others and in between them.

6. Conclusion

The child appears in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology not only as the subject of study of Psychology (elusive, complex, opaque to the view of the adult), but also as an image quasi-metaphoric of the genesis of the perceptual act itself, the pristine and ideal stage of the corporeal organization of an individual that seems to arrive to this world only with few tools that determine, above all, his openness. Childhood, then, is in Merleau-Ponty’s work not only a period where psychogenetic development of an individual, but also a quasi-literary figure, poetic, that places us in the beginning of the dynamic itself of being thrown in the world. The child is the image of that field, full of peace, where all views cross with each other without touching. Reflection of the plexus of possibilities that open in the perception event, the child is the world itself, since in him all possibilities of the individual not yet realized fit. Childhood as a representative image of the wild experience hidden by the halo of scientificism and as a concrete phase in the psychophysical development of an individual will prompt to, in the work of the French philosopher, a new conception of human subjectivity, crossed by the world and in constant dialog with it. The child is that relaunch itself to sense within his own story, the beginning of accumulation itself of significances that link with the ones of whom surround him and that will acquire, from there, a new sense. The child is the beginning, the pristine phase of sedimentation dynamic that will later replicate in the story itself. It is the

³ *Entremonde* refers to the existence of a “world” (environment or group) within other.

incarnated expression, alive, that shows us the link we have with others and which we constantly avoid; it is the time that expresses itself and that finds in the not yet articulated space, without mediation of conventional representations, a place to shelter

The child described in *Psychologie et pédagogie de l'enfant. Cours de Sorbonne (1949-1952)* (2001), is a child completely permeated by the environment that receives him: even those behaviors we consider natural are mediated by culture. Functions like feeding or Oedipus complex are, in the heart of this courses, a sample of a determined group or community, and not universal phenomena that replicate in the same way in different places. In *La nature. Cours du collège de France* (1995), Merleau-Ponty takes the experiences of Gesell⁴ to explore the ambivalence of the body between the worlds of nature and culture. For Gesell the animal body is defined as a “take” (*prise*) or occupation of the outer world, therefore there will be no difference between the body itself and the behaviour, “because the body is defined as place of behavior” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1995: 196). In the case of a premature baby, analysed by Gesell, he describes how the sleep cycle, altered in the beginning, is “acquired”, “as if the child has learned the sleeping talent”. Merleau-Ponty affirms that sleeping at night and be awake during the day are completely social events. However, the existence of continuous periods of sleep (or, rather, the need of them) is a completely organic event and will be the organic maturity what will allow us distinguish between one period and the other. This event will be, for Gesell, a determination or reliability (*sûreté*) factor for the organism. Likewise, Merleau-Ponty raises the perception of geometric forms both in adults and in children. The perception of both, he affirms, differs remarkably, in particular in the recognition and discrimination of some features of the figure. For Merleau-Ponty, the circle is the figure originated by the rotation of a segment of a line around a point. The question Merleau-Ponty makes himself is how it is operated this conversion by which it goes from the perceived structure to the significance or the intelligible form. “The structure”, affirms Merleau-Ponty, “is stuck with the significance provided by the science”. “In the perceived circle”, he continues, “the whole is not independent from the sensitive *ipseity*”; “it is the science that releases significance” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1995: 204). In the naïf perceptive experience, the whole does not transcend the parts that conforms it. This is why, states Merleau-Ponty, even though adults cannot prevent identifying a centre within the circle, children do not have the same approach to the figure. Science has not yet printed its divisions, descriptions and concepts in the child’s perceptive act. This irruption of the science over the act of perception itself, on the way we have of assessing, arranging and referring to the world, will be the background of the dialog that Merleau-Ponty will develop in *The world of perception. Seven Conferences* (2012). In these radio conferences offered by the French philosopher about perception, the child is that place where the biased vision of the modern science has not yet arrived. The child, same as the insane or the primitive, are the wild movement, indomitable, that just like in art, guards us from the universal view of scienteficism that erases, with its uniformity impetus, the richness of an environment that

⁴ The work referred in the section is *The embriology of behavior* that Gesell wrote in collaboration with Catherine Amatruda. See: Gesell, A., Amatruda, C. (1953), *L'embryologie du comportement : les débuts de la pensée humaine*, Paris, France : Presses universitaire de France.

provokes different (even opposite) views. Within the description of the world made by Merleau-Ponty, the child and the artist (as relevant figures that enrich the way we refer to our environment) come to rescue the colors that are released from a scent, the different tones of a melody, the time that drains in a landscape.

Likewise, in works like *Phenomenology of perception*, the child is the image of full openness, of “going towards” characteristic of all individuals. The child is the significant potentiality that searches the sense among the others and that it is immerse in the pacific syncretism of the bodies that surround him. The harmony in which the children live from this lack of individuation (not only applied to the corporeality, but also to the thinking), make childhood an ideal of conviviality, a quasi-political figure diluted with the arrival of adolescence. The child is potentiality and, before all, the place of a wild thinking that adulthood does nothing but forgetting and, that efforts, with the entrance to rational thinking, in destroying.

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