

Research  
Based  
Curricula

Does consciousness have  
a body?

Key Stage 5 Philosophy

Resource 4

2019



# Resource Four Overview



Topic	The body as incarnate consciousness
A-Level Modules	Supra-curricular content
Objectives	<p>After completing this resource you should be able:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ To develop an understanding of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of reversibility</li><li>✓ To explore the philosophical dimensions of the phenomenon of touch</li><li>✓ To evaluate the idea of an "incarnate consciousness"</li></ul>
Instructions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Read the data source</li><li>2. Complete the activities</li><li>3. Explore the further reading</li></ol>
Context	<p>Reversibility is a central concept of Merleau-Ponty's later philosophy. Yet, as Merleau-Ponty admits, this concept is quite enigmatic. The idea of reversibility allows to conceptualize perception and sense not as products of the perceiver merely but of an operation beyond the perceiver wherein the field of perception internally diverges into active and passive moments. Reversibility is a sign of this divergence and is thus a sign of a sort of gap or excess in being that allows the genesis of sense, a creative operation, within being itself.</p>

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## Data Source



Reynolds, Jack. Maurice  
Merleau-Ponty.

Internet Encyclopaedia  
of Philosophy  
<https://www.iep.utm.edu/merleau/>



Rather than maintaining a traditional dualism in which mind and body, subject and object, self and other, are discrete and separate entities, in his later writing, *The Visible and the Invisible* Merleau-Ponty argues that there is an important sense in which such pairs are also associated. For example, he does not dispute that there is a divergence, or dehiscence, in our embodied situation that is evident in the difference that exists between touching and being touched, between looking and being looked at, or between the sentient and the sensible. On the contrary, this divergence is considered to be a necessary and constitutive factor in allowing subjectivity to be possible at all. However, he suggests that rather than involving a simple dualism, this divergence also allows for the possibility of overlapping and encroachment between these two terms.

For example, Merleau-Ponty has somewhat famously suggested that the experience of touching cannot be understood without reference to the tacit potential for this situation to be reversed. Merleau-Ponty argues that we can never simultaneously touch our right hand while it is also touching an object of the world. He suggests that "either my right hand really passes over into the rank of the touched, but then its hold on the world is interrupted, or it retains its hold on the world, but then I do not really touch it" (VI: 148). There is then, a gap (or *écart* in French) between ourselves as touching and ourselves as touched, a divergence between the sentient and sensible aspects of our existence, but this gap is importantly distinct from merely reinstating yet another dualism. Touching and touched are not simply separate orders of being in the world, since they are reversible, and this image of our left hand touching our right hand does more than merely represent the body's capacity to be both perceiving object and subject of perception in a constant oscillation.

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As Merleau-Ponty suggests: "I can identify the hand touched in the same one which will in a moment be touching... In this bundle of bones and muscles which my right hand presents to my left, I can anticipate for an instant the incarnation of that other right hand, alive and mobile, which I thrust towards things in order to explore them. The body tries... to touch itself while being touched and initiates a kind of reversible reflection" (PhP: 93). This suggests that the hand that we touch, while it is touching an inanimate object, is hence not merely another such 'object', but another fleshy substance that is capable of reversing the present situation and being mobile and even aggressive.

Given that we cannot touch ourselves, or even somebody else, without this recognition of our own tangibility and capacity to be touched by others, it seems that the awareness of what it feels like to be touched encroaches, or even supervenes upon the experience of touching (VI:147). Any absolute distinction between being in the world as touching, and being in the world as touched, deprives the existential phenomena of their true complexity. Our embodied subjectivity is never located purely in either our tangibility or in our touching, but in the intertwining of these two aspects, or where the two lines of a chiasm intersect with one another. The chiasm then, is simply an image to describe how this overlapping and encroachment can take place between a pair that nevertheless retains a divergence, in that touching and touched are obviously never exactly the same thing.

More significantly, the hand touching itself represents the body's capacity to occupy the position of both perceiving object and subject of perception, if not at once, then in a constant oscillation. However, as he puts it, "when I press my two hands together, it is not a matter of two sensations felt

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together as one perceives two objects placed side by side, but an ambiguous set-up in which both hands can alternate the role of 'touching' and being 'touched'" (PhP :93). This double touching and encroachment of the touching onto the touched (and vice versa), where subject and object cannot be unequivocally discerned, is considered to be representative of perception and sensibility generally. For Merleau-Ponty, the "reversibility" of the body, its capacity to be both sentient and sensible is a proof that incarnate consciousness is the central phenomena of which mind and body are abstract moments (PhP: 193).

But these observations also retain an applicability that extends well beyond the relationship that obtains between touching and being touched. Merleau-Ponty suggests that the realisation that the world is not simply an object: "does not mean that there was a fusion or coinciding of me with it: on the contrary, this occurs because a sort of dehiscence opens my body in two, and because between my body looked at and my body looking, my body touched and my body touching, there is overlapping or encroachment, so that we may say that the things pass into us, as well as we into the things" (VI :123). The world is capable of encroaching upon and altering us, just as we are capable of altering it. Such a view rejects any absolute antinomy between self and world, as well as any notion of subjectivity that prioritizes a rational, autonomous individual, who is capable of imposing their choice upon a situation that is entirely external to them.

References PHP – [Merleau-Ponty, Maurice](#).(1945) *Phénoménologie de la Perception* Paris: Gallimard, Translated by Colin Smith as *Phenomenology of Perception* (1981) Revised by F. Williams. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

VI – Merleau-Maurice Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, Followed by Working Notes trans. by [Alphonso Lingis](#), (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968).

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## Activities



- Activities**
1. Read the extract and write a brief response to the following questions:
    - a) Does Merleau-Ponty refute the idea of a distinction, a "divergence" between touching and touched, sensing and sensed?
    - b) What shows that the hand that we "touch" is not just an inanimate object?
    - c) What does the notion of "chiasm" convey in Merleau-Ponty? How does Merleau-Ponty reach the idea of an "incarnate consciousness"?
    - d) In what way(s) reversibility extends beyond the relationship between the (hand) touching and the (hand) touched?
    - e) Can you think of an objection to Merleau-Ponty? How do you think he would have responded to it?
  2. Create a complete sentence by joining the sentence halves together.
    - i. The phenomenon of reversibility...
    - ii. The reversibility is never complete...
    - iii. Every experience of the visible...
    - iv. There is double and crossed situating of the visible in the tangible and ...
    - v. Between my movements and what I touch...
    - vi. The intertwining of the touching with the touched ...
      - a. has always been given to me within the context of the movements of the look.
      - b. of the tangible in the visible.
      - c. blurs the boundaries between subjective and objective experience.
      - d. there must exist some relationship by principle.
      - e. shows that the body exhibits a sort of reflexivity, is capable of cognizing.
      - f. because a coincidence of the touching with the touched would abolish the body and bring us to a pure consciousness.

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## Activities



### Activities

3. Read the 2 extracts below from Sartre and Merleau-Ponty and fill in the gaps with the missing words. Do the two philosophers advance similar or differing views?

### Missing Words

exploration  
world  
hand  
touch  
interrogate  
opening  
useless  
them  
relationship  
feel

We are dealing with two essentially different orders of reality. To \_\_\_\_\_ and to be touched, to \_\_\_\_\_ that one is touching and to feel that one is touched – these are two species of phenomena which it is \_\_\_\_\_ to try to reunite....In fact they are radically distinct, and they exist on two incommunicable levels.

Jean Paul Sartre, (1969). *Being and nothingness: An essay on phenomenological ontology.* (H. E. Barnes, Trans.). London: Routledge, pp.402-403)

Between the \_\_\_\_\_ and what it will teach me, between my movements and what I touch, there must exist some \_\_\_\_\_ by principle, some kinship, according to which they are not only, like the pseudopods of the amoeba, vague and ephemeral deformations of the corporeal space, but the initiation to and the \_\_\_\_\_ upon a tactile \_\_\_\_\_. This can happen only if my \_\_\_\_\_ while it is felt from within, is also accessible from without, itself tangible, for my other hand, for example, if it takes its place among the things it touches, is in a sense one of \_\_\_\_\_, opens finally upon a tangible being of which it is also a part. Through this crisscrossing within it of the touching and the tangible, its own movements incorporate themselves into the universe they \_\_\_\_\_ are recorded on the same map as it; the two systems are applied upon one another, as the two halves of an orange.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible, Followed by Working Notes* trans. by Alphonso Lingis, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968, p.133)

# Resource Four Further Reading



## Explore

You may need to create a free account to be able to download this article but you can also ask your teacher to download the article for you.



[https://www.academia.edu/269896/The\\_Enigma\\_of\\_Reversibility\\_and\\_the\\_Genesis\\_of\\_Sense\\_in\\_Merleau-Ponty](https://www.academia.edu/269896/The_Enigma_of_Reversibility_and_the_Genesis_of_Sense_in_Merleau-Ponty)





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