



September 14, 2023

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Report on the doctoral thesis of Markéta Jakešová, *On Changing and Differing Types of Bodies and Their Relationships to Their Souls or/and Minds in Western Culture*, prepared under the direction of Professor Jean-Christophe Goddard, Université Toulouse – Jean Jaurès and Professor Martin Ritter, Charles University, Prague

The manuscript that is being evaluated in view of a doctoral defence in philosophy is titled “On Changing and Differing Types of Bodies and Their Relationships to Their Souls or/and Minds in Western Culture”. It consists of 207 pages of text, divided into five chapters as well as an introduction (“hors d’oeuvre”), an epilogue, and short conclusion.

The starting point of the thesis is Merleau-Ponty’s conception of the body and the guiding question is how to make Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology more inclusive. Placed within the phenomenological tradition, Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology is often seen as progressive, especially in relation to Husserl’s (though not always – see for example Alia Al-Saji’s work). This is why Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology is so often the starting point for critical phenomenologists seeking to use phenomenology to undermine hegemonic constructs of gender, race, sexuality, and so on.

This thesis takes a different angle. While it seeks to make Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology more inclusive, it does so by juxtaposing it with schools of thought that are, if not anti-phenomenological, at least non-phenomenological: Jean-Luc Nancy, ANT (Latour and Mol), Viveiros de Castro. What Merleau-Ponty has in common with these radically different thinkers is a desire to undermine dichotomies between subject and object, and as a result between soul and body.

The project is challenging methodologically in that it juxtaposes thinkers that have very different approaches. As the candidate mentions, ANT is much more empirically based than phenomenology, even though Merleau-Ponty was no stranger to empirical research in psychology. Viveiros de Castro’s method is much more anthropological than phenomenology. The candidate for the most part succeeds in respecting these differences while also staging

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productive dialogues between these approaches. But as she says in the Introduction, she will not be able to – and does not aim to – convince the staunch detractor of one or the other camp.

The thesis covers a lot of ground and shows mastery of a wide range of thinkers and sources coming from different traditions. This is not a specialized project in phenomenology, or even on Merleau-Ponty's corpus. The candidate calls the thesis a collection of loosely connected chapters. At the end, using the discussing of foraging, she more explicitly speaks of her thesis not as a story or even a collection of stories, but as a "compost of everything that has come around".

Given this statement, I feel that my reservations about the project are misguided. I mostly would want to ask the candidate to show more explicitly the (*single*) guiding thread that unites the disparate chapters. I am aware that in doing so I am explicitly requiring her to do something that her whole project demonstrates should not be asked.

Throughout the manuscript, we find various stated goal for the work at hand: "to render Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology more inclusive", "to give voice to bodies", "to acknowledge the disharmony [between phenomenology and ANT] and to enrich phenomenology so that the embodiments that were up until recently considered anomalies are fully appreciated", "to break the supposedly universal 'I'", to offer a "praise of disintegration", to offer "a tool or model to help strengthen empowerment, joy and emancipation", to "explore imperfect embodiments" and to "look for empowerment in those margins", and finally the further or future goal of helping "decolonize academia".

My main question would be: what is the guiding thread, or the overarching concern that unites all these goals together? The title of the thesis would lead the reader to believe that it is the changing and differing bodies' relationship to their souls. Is that really the case?

Now to more specific comments about each chapter:

The first chapter takes as its point of departure what Jean-Luc Nancy calls the body as mass. This is an interesting starting point because Nancy does not spend much time developing these kinds of bodies since they are for him not bodies, un-bodies as the author calls them. The question for Nancy is more: what does it take for a body to be a body (rather than a senseless mass)? Focusing on the other side of the question, on what is not quite (yet or anymore) a body, allows for openings toward a thinking of bodies before their articulation. The candidate finds these openings from out of and beyond Merleau-Ponty in Nancy's thought but also in ANT.

In this specific instance, I feel like the candidate does not give phenomenology its due (in the way she does in later chapters). What is difficult about any attempt at thinking the limit of sense or appearing (e.g. about thinking or touching an un-body) is that phenomenology will either always be able to claim what is being talked about as its own because the discourse proves that what is talked about is already minimally and meaningful appearing, or it will be able to dismiss it as absolute non-sense. While I am sympathetic to what the candidate is trying to think, I believe that taking more seriously the absolute indefeasibility of phenomenological sense would strengthen the presentation of Nancy's and ANT's case.

Also, given the relation to Merleau-Ponty in that chapter, it would have been useful to operationalize the distinction between *Leib*, *Körper* and *Leibkörper* as it is found in Husserl. It would have provided more conceptual clarity (especially e.g. on p. 24) and also allowed to explain why the un-body is not merely the Husserlian *Körper*.

Chapters 2 and 3 are more balanced. This is in fact one of the strengths of the thesis: the candidate doesn't remain uncritical of ANT even if the impetus behind the thesis is a dissatisfaction with Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology.

For example, the comparison with Latour (and ANT more generally) shows how Merleau-Ponty is able to think the subject (or the body)'s dialectical exchange with its environment so that we could even speak of the objects the body interacts with as actors. At the same time, the comparison highlights a strong normative component in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology that limits its ability to describe abnormal forms of embodiment positively. At this point, an engagement with critical phenomenology might have been useful. It would have helped clarify whether the limitations mentioned concern Merleau-Ponty's own interpretation of his work only, or the possibility of an inclusive/critical phenomenology itself (which is the candidate's conclusion in the last sentence of the thesis).

The back and forth between Merleau-Ponty and ANT and their respective criticism of the other also allows for a subtle discussion of human exceptionalism and the difficulty of going beyond it. And it allows to see points of contact between Latour and Merleau-Ponty, e.g. on their conception of nature.

The juxtaposition of Merleau-Ponty's levels of integration with the different kinds of spatiality developed by Mol and Law is also original and enlightening. Given that Mol and Law's article is no well known though, a more thorough explanation of what is meant by spatiality in this context (is it the same as situatedness or relationality? what allows for the slippage between these three terms?) and of the fourth type of spatiality in particular (why is the "mutable immobile" called like this? and why is that kind of relatedness limited to the properly human sphere in phenomenology?) would have been useful.

In Chapter 3, when turning to Mol's "more than one but less than many" as a concept to think disintegration (or a body integrated by its own disintegration), it would have been interesting to come back to Nancy since this seems to align well with his conception of the body and of the singular plural. Such a return might also have allowed for a more direct connection to the notion of "soul" in this chapter.

The fourth chapter, on Jelinek's novel *The Piano Teacher*, is probably the chapter where the relation to the theme of the thesis, the bodies' relationships to their soul, is the least apparent. This chapter is supposed to provide an avenue for empowerment, by challenging the normativity implicit in the concepts of normal and abnormal. The way it links up with a discussion of Young and Chisholm is interesting but the candidate could more clearly identify what the novel allows us to see that would not be apparent without it. Is it the creativity of the sick/abnormal subject? How is this different than what Chisholm points out in her criticism of Young? Or is it the fact that sickness is not merely a feature of the subject but is also present in the environment, so that creativity arises from the encounter between a sick subject and a diseased environment?

The last chapter and the epilogue, about alternative or unconventional modes of intersubjectivity and kinship, are the most interesting in that they carefully but also self-critically look at alternative ontologies and worldviews from Indigenous peoples of the Americas in order to move away from the anthropocentrism of (most of) Western philosophy. There is a reversal in the aim of the thesis in these final sections: rather than seeking to make Merleau-Ponty's more inclusive, the candidate seeks to enlist the help of Merleau-Ponty to illustrate Viveiros de Castro's ontology. Chapter 5 is explicitly about kinship and relation, including self-relation, which was Nancy's definition of soul,

but, again, that connection is not drawn out. What's the connection between the move to intersubjectivity (or kinship) and the topic of the thesis as announced by its title (changing and differing bodies and their relationships to their souls)?

These last two chapters (and especially the epilogue) are the place where the candidate's voice comes most to the fore. While some might see that as a problem, given the academic nature of a doctoral thesis, the embeddedness of the thinker in what is thought was a theme throughout the thesis, and the ability of the candidate to self-critically reflect about her own attempt at "appropriating" indigenous ontologies and mark the place from where she speaks and writes is a necessary outcome of her research, rather than a weakness.

Overall, I consider that the candidate satisfied the expectations of a doctoral thesis and I am **favorable** to its admission for a defence.



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