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## **Multistability as virtuality. Technology as a layer of the flesh**

### **1 – Introduction**

The study of technology and its developments emerges today, in an era shaped by the digital revolution, as an unavoidable subject—fundamental for understanding the transformations of the present and, consequently, for envisioning the trajectories of the future. However, technology is not a novelty in human history. We can assert that human history has always been marked by the discovery and the development of new artifacts, for instance, considering the central role we attribute to the invention of writing. This theme becomes even more critical when, with increasing lucidity over the last century, technology has become a pervasive element in human existence within modernity, something the World Wars have highlighted with tragic clarity. With this awareness, technology has become a subject of philosophical reflection in the last century.

Within the most original currents of thought regarding this subject, postphenomenology stands out. Founded by Don Ihde in the North American context, it is part of the so-called empirical turn in the philosophy of technology (Achterhuis 2001) and combines elements from both classical phenomenology and American pragmatism. The relationship between the human and technology is the primary focus of postphenomenological analyses, which are conducted with a method aimed at studying the context of action in which this relationship is actualized. This sets postphenomenology in explicit and conscious critique of other reflections on technology, which are considered too abstract and general, thereby losing the fundamental uniqueness of the human-instrument rela-

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tionship. In contrast to deterministic and essentialistic analyses, postphenomenology proposes the relationship among the human, technology and the world as original, considering none of these elements autonomous or preceding the relationship itself (Verbeek 2005). For this reason, postphenomenology advocates for a relational ontology (Ihde 2009) rather than a substantialistic one. According to Ihde and his followers, technology does not possess an essential identity, rather, it is an active mediator between the human and the world, receiving and transforming their intentionalities (Ihde 1990; Verbeek 2005; Verbeek, Rosenberger 2015). The consequences of this interaction are not determinable *a priori* but are shaped unpredictably on the contextual factors, including cultural and social elements.

Thus, postphenomenology emphasizes the need to rethink the modalities with which we relate to instruments, recognizing that their influence is as unpredictable as it is fundamental in shaping our experience. The central concept of multistability expresses the non-linearity of the relationships established between the human and the technological object. This work focuses on multistability and questions whether a method based solely on the analysis of the context is either sufficient or not to account for it.

The second paragraph introduces this concept, retracing its genesis and meaning within Ihde's philosophy. We also examine the formulation offered by Rosenberger, developed to coherently root multistability in a context-oriented philosophy. Meanwhile, the third paragraph focuses on the presentation of the ontology Merleau-Ponty, a contemporary French phenomenologist well known to postphenomenology (Ihde 1990; 2009; 2012), has developed in his later philosophy. It is believed that addressing this author is necessary in order to attempt to provide an answer to the questions that remain open regarding the concept of multistability. Although this work proposes a more phenomenological than pragmatic solution, it is believed that it remains coherent with the relational and anti-essentialist approach of postphenomenology, finding in the ontology of the flesh not a foundation in the classical sense, but rather a background of possibilities.

## 2 – Multistability and postphenomenology

Postphenomenology is a hybrid philosophy (Ihde 2009, p. 23), developed by Don Ihde in its first formulation and then further improved by his students. Its attention is devoted to the relationship between the human, technology and the world, adopting a phenomenological method with the implementation of the American pragmatist perspective (Ihde

2009, p. 19; 2012, p. 128). This double source of inspiration is clear in one main concept for this current of thought, that is multistability. Ihde defines it during his studies of experimental phenomenology, conducted following the method of eidetic variation. This one, developed by Husserl, consists of a mental modification of the characteristics of an object so to find in it, by varying, what, if modified, would change the object itself as such (Husserl 1973, pp. 340-348). But, if Husserl, at the end of the process, finds essences, Ihde, instead, arrives to discover multistability (Ihde 2012, p. xiv). The objects, on the basis of the context of use or of the user, do not express an essence, but a plurality of senses. With the concept of multistability Ihde moves an anti-essentialistic critique, in which the echo of pragmatism can be heard, to the analysis of classical phenomenology and, especially, to the way in which it has thought the theme of technology. Indeed, an instrument needs to be understood from a plurality of points of view, varying on the basis of the contexts (Rosenberger, Verbeek 2015, p. 28). Speaking, as Heidegger (1977, pp. 3,4) does, of an essence of technology only serves to conceal the multiplicity of configurations that the instrument could assume and the different effects that the human-technology relationship can assume. Breaking away from the concept of essence is necessary to better account for the concrete possibilities opened by technology, not merely viewed as abstraction and alienation (Verbeek 2005).

The concept of multistability defines both perception and material objects (Ihde 1990, p. 144). Ihde (2012) arrives at this through his studies on perception, conducted using the phenomenological method, which breaks down and problematizes the common and naïve vision of the world. Indeed, perception does not consist of the passive reception of external stimuli, thereby determining knowledge as the mere correspondence between internal images and external objects. Through the practice of *epoché*, which is the suspension of judgment, the phenomenologist brackets the thesis regarding the world that is not immediately given with experience, setting aside theoretical pre-judgments that hinder its adequate comprehension (Husserl 2014, pp. 52-56). The practice of *epoché* changes the gaze and teaches to look at the world anew. Experience is now conceived as a phenomenon, that is an intentional relationship between the subject and the object, noesis and noema in phenomenological terms.

Whereas, however, Husserl researches the structure of the phenomenon with eidetic variation, Ihde instead, after breaking away the sedimented vision with *epoché*, makes multistability the very condition of the phenomenon and his proper object of study: the possible polymorphisms are the condition of the thing itself as noema (Ihde 1990, p. 75). To study perception, Ihde uses images which isolate some

of its characteristics, as for example the Necker's cube. Starting from the initial bistability of the figure, the philosopher's analysis highlights that further stabilities, that is perceptual configurations, are possible. Indeed, the figure shows yet two cubes perceived from two different perspectives, but also an insect in a hexagon and a gem cut in a particular way, viewed both concave and convex (Ihde 1990, 2012). The active research of the subject reveals multiple possibilities of the perceived object. In this sense Ihde talks about multistability, specifying that the configurations are not infinite but determined in the limits of the structure of the object itself (Ihde 2012, pp. 83-85).

So, multistability derives from the polymorphism of perception and Ihde uses this concept to reveal the intrinsic ambiguity of the object, not defined by an essence but characterized by a multiplicity of configurations. Ihde then extends this concept from the perceptual sphere to the practical one, that is, to the material objects that come into relation in the subject's experience. Indeed, the bidimensional figures analysed abstractly exhibit a property of all the empirical objects. An eloquent study is conducted by Ihde (2009; 2012; Rosenberger, Verbeek 2015, p. 30) about the bow, an instrument that had almost universal diffusion in the human societies. Ihde identifies different typologies of bow, as the English, the Mongol and the Chinese ones, showing as to different practices of use and different cultural contexts correspond different stabilities, even not limited to the hunt or the war (Ihde 2012, p. 182). So, there is not an essence of the bow, but a multiplicity of its stabilities, limited by the object itself as it is: with a bow, for example, it is not possible for a doctor to monitor a patient's heartbeat. Moreover, this analysis highlights as, for every types of bow, it is required to the user a specific technique and posture, paying attention to a certain agency of the instrument. Indeed, the archer is in a certain sense shaped by the bow itself: in the relationship human-technology-world the instrument determines some consequences and requires some uses, it has an activity that interacts with the human intentionality (Verbeek 2005).

So, according to Ihde (1990, p. 159) the objects in general and the technological ones in particular are not characterized by an essence or a destiny, but they increase diversity, that is the continuous opening of possibilities even in the cultural field. Multistability is for Ihde the central concept that allows to postphenomenology an anti-essentialist study of the relationship between humans and technology, always referring to a particular context. However, Ihde's approach only allows a negative use, understanding this term according to the definition offered by Rosenberger (2017), of the concept of multistability. This use involves employing the concept of multistability only in an oppositional sense, particularly in contrast to a strong theoretical position that advocates for an essence of

technology, such as in Heideggerian analysis, which Ihde cites and critiques several times. Rather, as seen, Ihde reiterates the multistability and intrinsic ambiguity of the object, captured in its practical context of use. However, in doing so, the postphenomenological analysis opens itself to a series of criticisms regarding its positive interpretation of this concept and of technology. Indeed, if technology does not have an essence but it is multistable, how is it possible to assert such a property as a property of technology? This opens the risk of a contradiction (Ivi.).

To solve this *impasse* Rosenberger (2014; 2017; 2023) proposes a more coherent reformulation of the postphenomenological method, so to allow an adequate description of the relationship human-technology-world. In Rosenberger's approach the eidetic variation and the discovery of multistability are not to be intended as the end point of the analysis, rather its beginning. Indeed, next to a negative use of this concept, only used in a critical way, it is necessary to develop a positive one, aimed at identifying the various possible configurations of a tool in a given context in order to compare them with one another. Rosenberger calls this method "variational cross-examination" and it consists, firstly, of practicing the *epoché* on the usual perception of the object in question. In this way, the postphenomenologist can actively bracket its usual configuration of meaning, its dominant sense, so as to bring to light other possibilities not perceived by a naive gaze. Rosenberger' significant studies are conducted on urban architecture designed to deter homeless people, such as public benches with dividing bars between seats. For an ordinary citizen, these fulfil their function, allowing him to sit and relax in a park or wait for the bus without impediments. However, normal benches, due to their structure, could be used by a homeless person as a place for sleep during the day, as well as a place for gathering and forming a group. The addition of dividing bars is specifically intended to discourage such private and social use. So, after having bracketed the dominant stability of the bench it is possible to bring out other virtual ones, such as in the case of the anti-homeless people architecture but also the place in which a cyclist can lock his bicycle and the support for the runner for his stretching routine before or after the training. The cross-examination analysis allows to compare the dominant stabilities with the others discovered, thus highlighting a usually unseen meaning. In this way, postphenomenology, according to Rosenberger, can also pay attention to the political and social aspects of the relationship with technology. So, the positive study of multistability is not conducted *a priori* around an abstract concept of technology, but it starts from a context, only from which the comparison between stabilities is possible.

With this expansion and elucidation of the postphenomenological method, Rosenberger aims to answer to the problem before mentioned,

that is, if postphenomenology does not fall into contradiction, given its anti-essentialist approach, by using the concept of multistability as a property of technology. The philosopher names this theoretical difficulty the grounding problem (Rosenberger 2017), which highlights the epistemological limits of multistability. Rosenberger's answer, as seen, is that multistability is not a property of technology, as it might seem in some Ihde's formulations, but it is instead radically bound to the reference context. Indeed, the postphenomenological method requires starting from the study of a context in which the human-technology relationship is performed in order to practice *epoché* and to evaluate and compare the possible stabilities of the instrument beyond the dominant one. Multistability is understandable only as the multistability of that instrument in that specific context. Despite Rosenberger's intention, some limits remain in this concept. Our hypothesis is that these are to be ascribed to the anti-essentialist perspective taken by postphenomenology. Indeed, two problems remain outstanding despite the reformulation of multistability provided.

First, if there is no understanding of technology that precedes the study of specific contexts, then it is impossible to offer any definition that is not *a posteriori* abstraction concerning individual tools or an appeal to common sense. However, this extreme fragmentation would not allow for the identification of a more general category that defines what is and is not technology. On the one hand, this would not allow for the comparison of very different instruments, such as bows with industrial machines or information technologies. On the other hand, it would not allow for general statements about technology, which would render meaningless the postphenomenological assertion that technology is a mediation between human intentionality and the world (Ritter 2021). Secondly, conceiving multistability only in relation to the context does not reply to why objects are multistable, that is why multiple stabilities are possible (de Boer 2023). There still persists a non-justified invariance of the concept.

The attention devoted by postphenomenology to the study of technology is crucial for a philosophy that wants to live up to its time, especially in our present catheterized by the digital revolution. The concept of multistability is an important guide for doing so, understanding the instrument not with the logic of the substance or essence but, by observing it from multiple points of view, with the logic of possibility. The critical points noticed are not relative to the concept in itself, but to the context-oriented approach that postphenomenology derives from the American pragmatism. What postphenomenologists consider an achievement renders the analysis inadequate. Instead, we argue that addressing the doubts raised is more effectively achieved by remaining within a phenomenological perspective rather than adopting a pragma-

tist one. We do not want to negate or abandon the postphenomenological results, rather to discover for them a more adequate basis. Indeed, it remains central to think of technology not as a destiny that unfolds, but as a continuous opening of possibilities and meanings. The aim is to keep the theoretical intuition of multistability while providing it a different foundation. For this reason, we analyse in the next paragraph the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty, a classical phenomenologist known to postphenomenology (Ihde, 1990), that especially discussed his analysis regarding the incorporation of instrument of *Phenomenology of perception*. In particular, we refer to the ontology developed by Merleau-Ponty in his later reflection, aiming to show how the concept of "flesh" can ontologically found that of multistability.

### 3 – The ontology of the flesh and the dehiscence of meaning

Merleau-Ponty represents one of the most important pages of the contemporary French philosophical thought. His philosophy develops from two central theoretical references: Husserlian phenomenology and Gestalt psychology. Merleau-Ponty engages in a lifelong dialogue with both, embracing the styles and challenges of the two traditions. The dialogue with Husserl emerges from the engagement with his works, especially the unpublished ones. From these works, Merleau-Ponty draws the necessity of describing experience without theoretical biases, which serves as the foundation for all knowledge. Merleau-Ponty identifies both the limitations in his master's thought, such as the persistence of a privilege accorded to consciousness, as well as new possibilities, namely the implicits not seen by Husserl himself and which, in the later part of Merleau-Pontian thinking, the philosopher seeks to articulate in a radical way. Then, Merleau-Ponty philosophically reflects on Gestalt psychology and its experimental results, interested in the theoretical implications of the developed concepts, such as those of figure and ground, which he also explores in his ontological reflections. Since from the engagement with the psychology of Gestalt the Merleau-Ponty's typical philosophical approach takes shape: not an opposition to the scientific results, but rather a problematization of them so to grasp their philosophical meaning. In this way, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology remains in dialogue with the sciences, not accepting them uncritically but reflecting with and through them (Taddio 2024).

*The structure of behavior* is his first work, but it is *Phenomenology of perception* that consecrates him in the French cultural panorama, addressing the relationship between the subject, understood in its corporeality, and the world within the perceptual field. Perception is understood not

as an act but as a relational dimension between a subject and the world. The former opens to a genesis of meaning through his actions, whereas the latter has its own logic embraced by the subject (Merleau-Ponty 2012, p. 341). According to Merleau-Ponty, the embodied subject is like the heart within an organism (Ivi., p. 209). This metaphor highlights the central role of subjective activity, rooted in a world that precedes and enables it. Since its beginning, Merleau-Ponty's philosophy aims to overcome the modern dichotomy between subject and object by phenomenologically exploring the concept of perception, thus going beyond the Husserlian analysis. This scope is not entirely achieved in these first works. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty himself describes as unsolvable the problems of *Phenomenology of perception* due to its assumptions, namely the maintaining of a conscientialistic residue that presupposes the distinction between the perceptual and material plane, that is the tacit cogito and the explicit one of reflection (Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 200). So, since the first works Merleau-Ponty's problems are oriented towards an ontological direction. However, due to the inadequate premises of these works they cannot be solved. For this reason, a reformulation of his thoughts is considered necessary by Merleau-Ponty himself, moving toward an ontological radicalization of his philosophy. The years in which Merleau-Ponty sat at the chair of Collège de France, from the 1952 until his death in the 1961, coincide with an auto-critical period for the philosopher. The concepts of expression, institution and Nature are addressed in his courses and represent the starting point toward a phenomenological ontology that does not reject the previous results but rather deepens their implicit meanings (Barbaras 2000; 2004; Vallier 2005; Vanzago 2012; 2017). The concept of flesh becomes pivotal in the later Merleau-Ponty's reflection, discussed in the last course held during the academic year 1960-61, in the *Eye and Mind* and in *The Visible and the Invisible*, last and unfinished Merleau-Ponty's work due to his unexpected death.

The flesh, Merleau-Ponty (1968, p. 147) affirms, is a new concept, that no other philosophies have ever explicated before. It represents the keystone of his new ontological project. Indeed, the flesh is not a substance, it cannot be traced back neither to the idealistic consciousness nor to the 'thing' of materialism. Merleau-Ponty's aim is to definitively move beyond every dualistic perspective, which is rooted in an underlying substantialist metaphysical vision that he identifies as implicit in the scientific outlook of his time. To addressed this issue, the flesh is described as an element, term derived from the pre-Socratic tradition that denotes a general principle with the inherent potential for activity (Ivi., p. 139). The flesh does not represent a hyperbolic expansion of the reflections made about the proper body to the Being in general, rather the radical explication of the relational dimension that *Phenomenology of perception*

wanted to focus on. If in that work the subjective pole remains the source of the activity of perceptual relationship with the world (Barbaras 2021), the concept of flesh questions and overcomes this implicit premise. The Being that *The Visible and the Invisible* seeks to thematize, aware of the hyper-dialectic impossibility of fully capture it through the concept (Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 94), is raw, a state characterized by a relationality that challenges the classical understanding of identity as the pure self-coincidence. Indeed, this conception of identity is based on the substantialist ontology that Merleau-Ponty's aim is to overcome.

The flesh names the awareness of the de-singularization for the re-discovery of relationality that bounds together the self to the alterity (Vanzago 2017, p. 33): the chiasm expresses precisely the unity in the difference (Toadvine 2009, p. 112). Perception is the modality through which we experience primarily this relationship. The examples made by Merleau-Ponty concern the sphere of touch and sight. Concerning the former, as in *Phenomenology of perception* too, the reference is to the experience of the two hands touching each other, while addressing the latter, among the other essays, Merleau-Ponty dedicates *Eye and Mind*, an essay in which art is presented as a second level reflection about the sight and its ontological implications. The touching hand, just like the seer, actively turns towards the world, grasping its own object, touched and seen, in its state of passivity. Yet, the touched and the seen possess their own activity, which surprises the toucher and the seer, reversing their roles and rendering the once-active passive. Thus, the touched hand becomes toucher in turn, and the seen seer as well. What emerges from this analysis is that activity and passivity are not properties of a being that can be univocally defined as subject or object. The self and the alterity, the seer and the seen, are parts of the same structure which is vision: they recognize themselves as polarities of a more fundamental relationship. The truth is not in the poles themselves, but in their co-implication, in how they mutually refer to each other to structure themselves as a self.

Perception offers a key to understand the logic of the flesh. According to Merleau-Ponty (1968, p. 249), the own body represents an eminent example, the measurant through which understand the flesh of the world too. For Barbaras (2021), here is evident that Merleau-Ponty is not able to overcome the consientialistic residue he found in *Phenomenology of perception*. According to Barbaras, the Merleau-Pontian philosophy ultimately remains bound to perception, so to the human point of view, not providing adequate parameters for the study of otherness. Starting from perception, that is, from the proper body, does not guarantee a more general perspective to understand what the flesh of the world is, thus failing the project of finding in the flesh the principle for understanding the Being. However, Merleau-Ponty himself highlights this possibility, reiterating in this regard

that while the flesh of the body represents an eminent example, it does not explain the flesh of the world, by which it is motivated (Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 250). The flesh of the body allows to understand the perception's ontological structure, which is common to the one of the world, of which it remains an expression in continuity. In support of this position, solely evocated in *The Visible and the Invisible* due to its incompleteness, there are the courses held on Nature. Here, the philosopher examines through the recent results from biology and ethology the animal behaviour, adopting the third person point of view. The cases of mimicry and the sexual displays demonstrate its expressive and symbolic character, that is, its reference to something else (Merleau-Ponty 2003, pp. 187-190). Both these cases involve, in understanding the behaviour of a living being, the sight of the other: they refer to the co-implication as ontological structure, as perceptual experience also shows. Thus, the singularities are, for Merleau-Ponty, "differential existences"<sup>2</sup> (De Fazio 2020, p. 75), part of a totality that requires and implicates the alterity. Because we are embodied and part of the raw Being, we have a perspective from which to understand, though not completely exhaust, the other layers. These, or the Nature, are not alien but represent the network of living beings not instituted by the thought, rather its soil (Merleau-Ponty 2003, p. 4). In this sense, the flesh of the body is motivated by the flesh of the world and still represents a point of view from which to see it.

So, the truth of the flesh is its relationship, called chiasm by Merleau-Ponty, indicating with this concept the relationship and reversibility of the polarities. The chiasm cannot be the foundation of the raw Being, otherwise it would assert itself as a new positivity, falling again in the thought of substance. The flesh is the background to a figure. The chiasm provides the condition of possibility for polarities, but at the same time, it only exists insofar as it is enacted. Beyond the polarities, it does not exist as an in-itself. In this sense, the chiasm itself is in a chiasmatic relationship with the poles (Vanzago 2017, p. 50). Thus, Merleau-Ponty's ontology does not have the problem of the origin, it is a philosophy without foundation. Raw Being is an internally troubled relational structure, that does not achieve an ultimate synthesis. Indeed, the reversibility of the chiasm is always repeatedly activated by a "spread" (*écart*)<sup>3</sup> that permeates the flesh, leading the Being to do not coincide with itself, thus not determining a new positivity. Given the spread, visibility and invisibility are in a relation of continuous overturing, thus determining a processuality inherent to Being. However, the spread is not a deficiency of the flesh,

<sup>2</sup> My translation for the Italian expression "esistenze differenziali"

<sup>3</sup> I use the English translation of the French term "écart" offered by Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 1968, p. 148

rather, it is the motor that enables the opening of a new meaning within the Being (Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 148; Toadvine 2009, p. 114, 127; Morris 2010), its immanent dehiscence (Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 265).

Raw Being is not closed but is characterized by the continuous opening of new possibilities of meaning. This is not linked solely to human activity, but it characterizes reality itself, as shown by biological studies explored in the *Nature* courses. Indeed, life, rather than being a series of attempts driven by the principle of economy, presents itself as a “prodigious flourishing of forms” and as a “power to invent the visible” (Merleau-Ponty 2003, pp. 186, 190). Thus, the flesh is “pregnancy of possibles” (Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 250), to be understood in a double sense. The first sense refers to the meaning that Gestalt psychology gives to the term “pregnancy”. It is the principle that describes the ordering of perception through certain characteristics to obtain a good form. In this vein, the world of perception, as already clear in *Phenomenology of perception*, has an inner logic and it does not represent, regarding to the flesh, an error or an illusion. The world of perception fulfills the relational system of the raw Being. The second sense of “pregnancy” concerns the semantic order of generation. Thus intended, the flesh is the potential for the establishment of new actualities, that is, the spontaneous opening of new configurations of meaning.

The pregnancy of the flesh is, following the definition offered by Levy (1998), its virtuality (Colombo, Ferro 2023; Ferro 2021; 2022; 2023; 2024). Virtuality is not opposed to the real, but to the actual instead. In this way it names the opening of new configurations of meaning immanent to Being. The flesh, crossed by the spread, is dehiscence: the visible structured by the invisible, seen not as a hole but as a void, opens to further virtuality that may or may not find their actualization. The negative that characterized the flesh is what allows its processual multiplicity of configuration, without so embalming it in a substantialist synthesis.

Therefore, raw Being is presented as a primordial “there is” (*il y a*), an ontological existence that precedes essence (De Fazio 2020, pp. 78,79). It is dehiscence, an opening of meaning fulfilled in the relational process. The perceived is part of the same flesh and has the possibility to be structured by the invisible, an immanent configuration of sense. This also applies to technology, perceived as non-human, a theme whose centrality is recognized by Merleau-Ponty (2003, p. 228; 2022, pp. 11,12), although he does not address it extensively in his reflection. The task of the next concluding paragraph is to show how the reflections conducted here on the ontology of the flesh can benefit postphenomenological analyses around the concept of multistability, rooting it not in the fragmented analysis of the context but rather on the terrain of Merleau-Ponty’s ontology, contrary to the forms of classical essentialism criticized by postphenomenology itself.

## 4 – Conclusion

In the first paragraph the postphenomenological concept of multistability was introduced. This concept indicates the possibility of an instrument to assume different configurations for different users or cultural contexts after that a dominant sense, that is the usual one, has been bracketed. The study shows, according to postphenomenology, that multistability is an inner property of the objects, as seen in its Ihde's first description in the perceptual field. Furthermore, multistability represents a perspective from which criticize the essentialist interpretation of technology, showing instead its multiple roles played in a practical context. In order to make the concept more coherent with Ihde's initial formulation and the postphenomenological analysis of multistability, seen not only critical but also positive, Rosenberger offers a reformulation of the concept, strictly bounding it with its contextual meaning. As noticed before, this reformulation still leaves some questions unanswered. To provide an answer, it is believed that relying on the context only is not enough, as this approach fragments the analysis without offering a transversal vision of the concept beyond the individual practical situations. A more effective strategy is, instead, to base postphenomenological analyses on the late Merleau-Ponty's ontology. In this way, the postphenomenological method, in this sense more aligned with phenomenology than with pragmatism, would be situated within a broader and more coherent theoretical framework, while still ensuring an applied analysis of the examined contexts without distortion. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty's ontology, like postphenomenology, rejects and criticizes classical ontologies of substance and foundation. The ontology of the flesh is a thought of the unfounded, "the so-called *Grund* is *Abgrund*" (Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 250), without, however, descending into relativism.

The ontology of the flesh is not concerned with rediscovering the authentic, understood as the true origin, as neither aims to reach the ultimate end. It is not, in fact, a finalistic teleology. Both the perspectives are errors generated from wrong substantialist premises, which Merleau-Ponty radically challenges (*Ivi.*, p. 265). The focus of this ontology is on the dehiscence of meaning (*Ibid.*), its immanent emergence from the inner processuality, that is the continuous and relational configuration of the Being that, because of the spread, does not find a conclusion, remaining open instead. Thus, asserting that technology is flesh does not mean to find an atemporal essence similar to the one criticized by postphenomenology. Instead, it involves recognizing it as the background that provides the conditions of possibility for the concept of multistability. The multiplicity of the possible meanings and points of view on the instrument is rooted in the virtuality of the flesh, that is its dehiscence, thus avoiding the limits given by the fragmentation of the contexts or, conversely, by the foundation on an essence.

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## Multistabilità come virtualità. La tecnologia come strato della carne

Il concetto di multistabilità rappresenta uno dei punti teorici più importanti nella postfenomenologia, attraverso il quale è possibile intendere la tecnologia come né neutrale né orientata in modo deterministico. Uno strumento, essendo multistabile, si apre a una molteplicità imprevedibile di configurazioni, senza essere caratterizzato da un'essenza metafisica. Questo contributo prende in considerazione alcuni aspetti critici della multistabilità, sostenendo che essa non può trovare un fondamento adeguato all'interno di una filosofia incentrata esclusivamente sull'analisi del contesto. Per offrire un'alternativa a questa *impasse*, si approfondisce l'ontologia della carne sviluppata da Merleau-Ponty, fornendo un'interpretazione che ne evidenzia la virtualità, intendendo la carne come deiscenza del significato. Attraverso il pensiero di Merleau-Ponty, l'obiettivo è delineare un quadro concettuale più ampio su cui radicare il concetto di multistabilità, senza rinchiuderlo in un fondamento sostanzialistico nel senso classico.

*Parole chiave:* multistabilità, virtualità, tecnologia, carne, postfenomenologia, Merleau-Ponty

## Multistability as virtuality. Technology as a layer of the flesh:

The concept of multistability represents one of the most important theoretical points in postphenomenology, through which technology can be understood as neither neutral nor deterministically oriented. An instrument, being multistable, opens to an unpredictable multiplicity of configurations, without being characterized by a metaphysical essence. This essay considers some critical aspects of multistability, arguing that it cannot find an adequate foundation within a philosophy solely oriented towards context. To offer an alternative to this *impasse*, the ontology of the flesh, developed by Merleau-Ponty, is considered, providing an interpretation that highlights its virtuality, meaning the flesh as dehiscence of meaning. Through Merleau-Ponty's thought, the aim is to find a broader conceptual framework on which to root the concept of multistability, without enclosing it in a substantial foundation in the classical sense.

*Keywords:* multistability, virtuality, technology, flesh, postphenomenology, Merleau-Ponty