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## Virtuality and immanence in Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** In this paper we aim to find a definition of virtual which fits the latest developments of digital technology, but also applies to the analog world. We consider the virtual as related to immanence, taking inspiration from Deleuze's reading of Bergson and Merleau-Ponty's last work. We first analyze Deleuze's idea of immanence, from which virtuality emerges, then we focus on Merleau-Ponty's concept of flesh and its virtual center. We argue that both philosophers see immanence as a dynamic medium of virtuality, overcoming the traditional concept of substance and theorizing a deep intertwining of bodies and technology. Our analysis shows that the virtual is defined by the following features: it implies an epistemological and ontological monism, relationality, and entanglement with reality. The virtual clearly emerges in digital technologies, but also belongs to analog reality, as a general condition for our knowing and being in the world as such.

**Keywords:** virtual, immanence, flesh, Deleuze, Merleau-Ponty.

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### INTRODUCTION

The words “virtual” and “virtuality” are of common use, especially since the development of digital technology. In a specific sense, one talks about “virtual reality” (VR) referring to specific environments characterized by an immersive experience<sup>2</sup>, which takes place inside a simulated version of analog reality. However, the word “virtual” is used also about less immersive cases: one calls “virtual identity” the one used in social networks, just as Facebook,

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<sup>1</sup> This paper has been realized through a strong collaboration and synergy between the two authors. However, it shall be specified that Andrea Colombo has mainly worked on Part 1 and Conclusions, whereas Introduction and Part 2 were mostly written by Floriana Ferro.

<sup>2</sup> The definition of “immersive” shall be properly developed and referred to the relation between our embodied mind and the surrounding environment; since it is still a matter of discussion, it needs to be addressed elsewhere.

Twitter, Instagram, etc. In this case, the word “virtual” seems to be closer to the word “digital”: a virtual identity is simply a digital identity, our identity transposed in a digital dimension. Moreover, one shall not forget that there is a less recent (and maybe deeper) sense of “virtual” and “virtuality” that is not strictly bond to digital technology: it is something in potency which is related and/or opposed to something in act. The first name coming to our mind is Aristotle (*Metaph.* IX), who develops this distinction, thus giving birth to the Western concepts of “possible” and “virtual”. Another important author is Leibniz, who writes about the «power to receive ideas» (Leibniz [1765]: Book II, Chap. xxi), also known as virtual innatism, which opens the way to the Kantian concept of transcendental<sup>3</sup>. However, our aim here is not to outline the full history of the idea of virtual, but to understand how we conceive it philosophically in our own time, therefore in light of the new technological developments and of their effects on our subjectivity.

Our proposal is a definition of virtual which takes inspiration from two crucial ideas: Deleuze’s immanence and Merleau-Ponty’s flesh. Notwithstanding the differences between these concepts and their philosophical background<sup>4</sup>, they have something in common: they give sense to virtuality, conceiving it on a ground of dynamical immanence, which overcomes the traditional concept of substance and consists in a deep intertwining of bodies and technology. According to our perspective, the virtual is defined by the following characters: (a) it refers to an epistemological and ontological monism; (b) it implies

relationality; (c) it is not opposed to the “real” or “actual”, but is entangled to it.

Our proposal will start from the analysis of the virtual according to Deleuze, who takes inspiration from Bergson’s *Matter and Memory* and develops an idea of immanence which extends to all the bodies in the world. We will then focus on Merleau-Ponty’s concept of flesh, deepening the passages where he writes about a “virtual focus” or a “virtual center” of the flesh in *The Visible and Invisible*. Interpreting these passages in light of a posthuman interpretation of the idea of flesh, the bond between bodies and technology will turn out to be very tight, dynamical, and in line with future developments. The virtual will be thus considered not only as related to digital technologies, but even as a condition for shaping our view of and our being in the world as such, in both analog and digital dimensions.

#### 1. FROM THE INDIVIDUATION OF THE BODY TO THE PLANE OF IMMANENCE: THE CONCEPT OF THE VIRTUAL FROM BERGSON TO DELEUZE

While the concept of the virtual is often linked to different meanings, making a rigorous analysis and theoretical coherence difficult, in France its authorship is very clear. The concept of the virtual, in contemporary French philosophy, is closely linked to the name of Henri Bergson. It is from Bergson, in fact, that Deleuze inherits this notion, which would later become one of the most characteristic concepts in his entire oeuvre, to the point that research conducted today on the philosophical value of the virtual must always be supplemented with his name. It is no coincidence that Pierre Lévy, in the introduction of his own book devoted to the virtual, writes that the fundamental distinction between the virtual and the actual is something that first «Gilles Deleuze discussed in ‘Difference et Repetition’» (Lévy [1995]: 24). In the following pages we will try to clarify how the concept of the virtual has been transformed by moving from Bergson to Deleuze, trac-

<sup>3</sup> Even if Kant distances himself from Leibniz’s theory of knowledge (Kant [1781]: 371-383), his idea of the transcendental, of pure principles constituting the conditions of possibility of phenomena, may be considered as a development of virtual innatism: these conditions of possibility, which virtually shape our mind, shape also empirical data when they are received and processed by our faculties.

<sup>4</sup> Deleuze does not share a phenomenological perspective, indeed, as Montebello states, he tries to use Bergson to contrast Merleau-Ponty (Montebello [2012]).

ing its history and, more importantly, its theoretical implications.

In *Matter and Memory* (1896) Bergson has an ambitious goal, namely to overcome the dichotomy between realism and idealism. The former, represented by Descartes' thought, holds that empirical reality does not depend on the subject's perception and is absolutely separate from it. The second, which has Berkeley as its polemical target, thinks the opposite: real objects depend on the subject's perception of them. It is worth mentioning that Bergson's rivals, namely Descartes and Berkeley, will be the same as those of Deleuze, who will, however, further radicalize the issue by seeing them not only as two distinct ways of doing philosophy, but as part of the same great error that, from Plato to Husserl, has marked *all* Western philosophy: the problem of representation. By conceiving subject and object as two separate spheres, the Western philosophical tradition has attempted to resolve this gap, which, however, philosophy itself has generated. For Bergson though in his 1896 work, the way to overcome the dichotomy between realism and idealism passes through the concept of "image." Bergson, anticipating the phenomenological reduction by a few decades (Ronchi [2011]: 113-119), hypothetically imagines himself on the side of the common man asking: how would we see the world if we knew nothing of all the theories and ideas we have had for centuries about reality and the way we perceive it? The answer is: only images would be seen. «Here I am in the presence of images» (Bergson [1896]: 1). Images which, as Bergson himself writes in the preface to the 1907 seventh edition of *Matter and Memory*, are «more than that which the idealist calls a *representation*, but less than that which the realist calls a *thing*— an existence placed halfway between the 'thing' and the 'representation'» (Bergson [1896]: vii-viii).

Among all these images, however, which are presences and perceptions at the same time, and which have no definite or clear origin because they *simply* appear around us, there is one that man immediately recognizes to be different from all others. Our *body*. The body is, in fact, the

only image that I do not know solely by perception (it is not just around or in front of me), but that I perceive internally because of the *affections* it gives me. In addition, the body is the only image, among those I perceive, that has the power to modify other images. It is not simply passive or *already there*. The body, according to Bergson, is an image capable of selecting and modifying the images around it on the basis of what is necessary for its survival and needs. The fact, however, that the body is capable of this operation places it on a different degree than other images: the body breaks and ruptures the mechanical continuity of images that simply allow itself to be perceived, because it is capable of performing a higher-level operation. It is not merely matter in the midst of other matter, but matter capable of acting on the rest and modifying it. «My body, an object destined to move other objects, is, then, a center of action» (Bergson [1896]: 5). The question that remains is, then: where does it come from, and what is this capacity that only the body possesses? It is in answering this question that the concept of the *virtual* makes its first appearance.

The answer, for Bergson, is that this unique capacity of the body comes from *memory*. The reference to memory, and not to other faculties or capacities, might be surprising, but it becomes clear when one considers that for Bergson every action of the body, every modification imposed on the images around it, comes from a need that has been learned in the past. Our actions are the result of the images and perceptions we have already known, which have taught us needs and impelled us to realize them. Having reached the needs, these, in turn, push us, however, toward other images, in a chain from the past to the present, where the body then acts. However, a very clear distinction must be made within the concept of memory. On the one hand, in fact, there is a habit-memory and on the other a pure memory, which is the virtual. What is the difference between the two? The former is simply related to the body's action on the basis of mechanical reflexes, which have transformed previously perceived images into habits, which the body now

repeats. Pure memory, on the other hand, is the set of all perceptions of images that the body has experienced, of which memory-habit realizes only a small part. In other words: habit-memory extracts from pure memory those impulses that the body needs to act according to its needs. Pure memory, on the other hand, is the set of all images that the body has perceived or been affected by. A set that thus corresponds to the entirety of the identity of the subject in question (which Bergson calls consciousness or *esprit*) from which the body, based on what is happening around it in the world, extracts the impulses necessary for action. What is the special feature of pure memory? It is that it does not contain all possibilities, it is therefore not a general open and indeterminate whole, but it is the collection of the overall experience of a single individual, and, since it is from this that habit-memory extracts the possibilities of action, it is also all that an individual can do. If pure memory is thus what an individual can do, and if pure memory is also what an individual is, it means that, for Bergson, the being of an individual *coincides with what the individual can do*. And that is precisely what the *virtual* is.

This purity of the virtual, however, should not be misunderstood. Indeed, it is not a feature that places the virtual on a higher level than the world of images: it only means that pure memory, as opposed to habit-memory, is not characterized by the need to act. It is also for this reason that Bergson proposes a curious and apparently ambiguous observation. He writes, in fact, that consciousness does not function by adding something to the objects of the world, but, rather, *by taking something away from them*. Habit-memory is in fact the realization of *a part of* what is contained in pure memory, with a view to action and the realization of a need. In order to act, an individual is forced to select the images around him, indulging a specific purpose. He must therefore take away completeness from things, seeing objects only according to what, in some way, is useful to him. But, on the other hand, pure memory feeds on *all* the images that the individual's body encounters in its actions. Between the two types of memory, therefore, there is a continuous relation-

ship and hybridization. They are two different, but not distinct, orders of the same singular individual. On the one hand, habit-memory acts among images, based on need; on the other hand, pure memory retains these images (which are perceptions) in their completeness. The acting thus imprints affect on the virtual, and the virtual gives the acting possible solutions on how to move in the world.

To sum up: if we suppose an extended continuum, and, in this continuum, the center of real action which is represented by our body, its activity will appear to illuminate all those parts of matter with which at each successive moment it can deal. The same needs, the same power of action, which have delimited our body in matter, will also carve out distinct bodies in the surrounding medium. Everything will happen as if we allowed to filter through us that action of external things which is real, in order to arrest and retain that which is virtual: this virtual action of things upon our body and of our body upon things is our perception itself. (Bergson [1896]: 309)

We can then draw some conclusions. For Bergson, reality is composed of entities in contact with one another (*continuum*). Among all these entities man, with his body, is able to act not following strict necessity, but according to his own impulses, which illuminate the portion of matter on which he acts. Other bodies also behave in this way, so reality is composed of bodies acting against each other on the basis of their own needs. In bodies, however, not only the effects of our actions are recorded, but also the images we encounter in the world, depositing themselves in a pure memory that contains them in their entirety (the virtual). From this pure memory, each time, bodies extract habits on the basis of which they react to external impulses. In other words: the action of bodies on each other increases the capacity of pure memory, which, in turn, can offer more capacity for action to habit-memory. For Bergson, in this sense, a body *is what it can accomplish*, because it acts on the basis of the images it contains (in the virtual), and, at the same time, *a body acts on the basis of what it is*,

because memory-habit extracts from the virtual its possibilities for action. Thus, there is a cyclical relationship<sup>5</sup> between the virtual and the world, and this is why there is not the same kind of relationship between the virtual and the real as there is between Aristotelian essences and possibilities. For Aristotle, the essence of an entity establishes what the entity is and what the entity will become. For Bergson, and Deleuze, the being of an entity is determined by its capacity to act; a capacity that acting itself concretizes and changes. This is why Bergson writes that the virtual «it is neither its cause, nor its effect, nor in any sense its duplicate» of the real, but «it merely continues it» (Bergson [1896]: 309). To express this relation not causally or hierarchically, but horizontally, Bergson and Deleuze speak of *actualization*: the virtual actualizes itself (habit-memory) and, at the same time, remains distinct from any actualization of it. Aristotelian essences, on the other hand, are *manifested* or *actualized* as the cause of bodies, which are therefore already determined a priori. For Bergson, on the other hand, each body is surrounded by a constant aura of latent possibilities (the virtual) that determines action on the basis of external impulses (i.e., of other bodies) and yet is also sensitive to what happens to it, modifying itself.

Gilles Deleuze inherits from Bergson both the distinction between actual and virtual and their relationship. But he radicalizes its ontological power. Above all, there is a specific point at which Deleuze contradicts Bergson and changes his premises. Keith Ansell Pearson sums it up very well this way: «It is true that Deleuze is keen to develop the theory of virtual in the direction of

ontology. This is because he wants to show that there is a being of the virtual which, although peculiar complex, individuated form of life such as us, is not reducible psychological consciousness» (Pearson [2005]: 1117). In other words, Deleuze does not consider the (human) body as a special entity, but broadens the ontological scope of the virtual to *all* reality. The virtual, according to Deleuze, does not belong exclusively to man, but to every entity that populates the world and which, as such, always possesses its own degree of latent elements susceptible to change through its relationship with other entities. A potentiality that does not reduce an entity to its actualizations alone, but always leaves open a possibility of becoming and change. Deleuze thus eliminates the anthropocentric component and the remnants of subjectivity. A text by Deleuze is particularly helpful in understanding this point, especially since he seems to take up the passage from *Matter and Memory* that we have quoted, changing, however, some fundamental elements:

Purely actual objects do not exist. Every actual surrounds itself with a cloud of virtual images. This cloud is composed of a series of more or less coexisting circuits, along with the virtual images are distributed, and around which they run. [...] It is by virtue of their mutual inextricability that virtual images are able to react upon actual objects. From this perspective, the virtual images delimit a continuum, whether one takes all of the circles together or each individually, a spatium determined in each case by maximum of time imaginable. (Deleuze [1977]: 149)

All the main terms used by Bergson return in this passage: there is the concept of image, *continuum*, circuits of actual-virtual, and images meeting. What is missing is exclusively the body, because, for Deleuze, *every* entity is a composite of actual and virtual and man has no ontological priority. To succeed in expressing this world devoid of subjects or anthropological references, Deleuze will need a different language than Bergson's. As Manuel DeLanda shows very well (DeLanda [2002]), Deleuze will find in mathematics the use-

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<sup>5</sup> It is Bergson himself who uses the *circuit* metaphor. For example, he writes: «Thus there is supposed to be a rectilinear progress, by which the mind goes further and further from the object, never to return to it. We maintain, on the contrary, that reflective perception is a circuit, in which all the elements, including the perceived object itself, hold each other in a state of mutual tension as in an electric circuit, so that no disturbance starting from the object can stop on its way and remain in the depths of the mind: it must always find its way back to the object whence it proceeds» (Bergson [1896]: 126-127).

ful language to define this reality composed of entities whose identity corresponds to the actions they are capable of performing, without the need to refer to a consciousness or a thinking mind that represents them. At the same time, Deleuze will also engage philosophy in the search for useful concepts to describe this union of actual and virtual, as opposed to Aristotelian essences, such as the well-known *plane of immanence*, which arises precisely in the need to consider the virtual as an ontological element.

## 2. THE CONCEPT OF THE VIRTUAL IN MERLEAU-PONTY'S *THE VISIBLE AND THE INVISIBLE*

Another author in French philosophy who gives way to an interesting interpretation of the virtual, beyond purely digital contexts, is Maurice Merleau-Ponty. His idea of virtual is very present, though not clearly developed, in his last work, *The Visible and the Invisible*. There are only a few passages where the word “virtual” is mentioned: it is used as an adjective in the expressions «virtual focus» (Merleau-Ponty [1968]: 34, 215) and «virtual center» (Merleau-Ponty [1964]: 115). In order to give an interpretation of this concept, we will refer to the general idea of flesh, which is at the center of Merleau-Ponty's reflection in this fundamental though unfinished work.

(a) In this way, we suddenly meet what is a basic characteristic of the virtual for us: its reference to an ontological and epistemological monism. The term “monism” may remind us Spinozism and its objective way to see reality or, on the other hand, German idealism and its subjective, spiritual perspective on being. Merleau-Ponty has something in common with these views, that is a dynamic monism: the flesh, in which being consists, is always becoming and in motion, a hiatus between polarities directed the one towards the other.

What we are calling flesh, this interiorly worked-over mass, has no name in any philosophy. As the formative medium of the object and the subject, it is

not the atom of being, the hard in itself that resides in a unique place and moment; [...] this hiatus between my right hand touched and my right hand touching, between my voice heard and my voice uttered, between one moment of my tactile life and the following one, is not an ontological void, a non-being: it is spanned by the total being of my body, and by that of the world; it is the zero of pressure between two solids that makes them adhere to one another. (Merleau-Ponty [1964]: 147-148)

As this passage clearly shows, even if Merleau-Ponty shares dynamism with both subjective and objective monism, he sees dynamism as chiasmatic and dialectic. The flesh is a «hiatus», «a zero of pressure», which may be considered as an “in-between”, a *Zwischen* between the object and the subject, of two supposed “solids”, even if solidity is just illusory<sup>6</sup>. It is neither the hard core of being, an untouchable and changeless substratum – as in traditional metaphysics – nor the privation of being, the void, or non-being.

Merleau-Ponty calls into question not only metaphysics and ontotheology, as Heidegger (1953) does. He also criticizes Husserlian phenomenology and its way to see subjectivity. According to Husserl, our body shall not be conceived as a *Körper*, as a purely physical body, but as a *Leib*, as the zero-point (*Nullpunkt*) of our orientation (Husserl [1952]: 165), a subject which coincides with the individual, phenomenal living body and its perceptual field. In Merleau-Ponty's earlier works, especially in the *Phenomenology of Perception* (Merleau-Ponty [1945]), Husserlian influence on this respect is evident, whereas, in the *Visible and the Invisible*, subjectivity is conceived differently. The flesh is an extended subjectivity, that is an extended mind in an extended

<sup>6</sup> With “illusion”, we do not mean something that is not real. Rather, illusory phenomena have their experiential value, just as Merleau-Ponty asserts about the vision of the cube (Merleau-Ponty [1945]: 236), taking inspiration from Gestalt psychology (i.e., Köhler [1929]). According to phenomenology, illusions are ways in which reality presents itself to us and are considered deceptive only from a scientific, non-experiential point of view (Taddio [2020]).

body. It may be considered as an “impersonal”<sup>7</sup>, but not in a privative sense, that is the absence of “personality” as such: if “personal” is considered as purely individual, then the flesh will be “impersonal”, however, it is not a-subjective or anti-subjective. It may be defined as an extended first person (Vanzago [2012]: 194-195), a subjectivity which is not confined within the limits of the phenomenal body, but as involving the subjectivity of other people, animals, plants, etc. The flesh is the common element of the world, its “stuff” (*étouffe*)<sup>8</sup>. In this way, Merleau-Ponty overcomes anthropocentrism and goes in the direction of a posthuman subjectivity, which is not on the top of the hierarchy of being<sup>9</sup>: the flesh is impersonal and thus non-hierarchical. Moreover, subjectivity is not confined to the sphere of our ego-pole or of the other ego-poles in the world, but involves also objectivity, where our intentionality is directed. In this way, the phenomenological concept of relation between subject and object is differently defined, through an innovative way to conceive dialectic.

In Merleau-Ponty’s words, «We have to reject the age-old assumptions that put the body in the world and the seer in the body, or, conversely, the world and the body in the seer as in a box. Where are we to put the limit between the body and the world, since the world is flesh?» (Merleau-Ponty

[1964]: 138). The opposition between the objective world and the subjective body disappears: the flesh involves both and is the world itself. This characteristic of the body allows to overcome the dichotomy between realism and idealism (which is also the aim of Bergson in *Matter and Memory*), since it eliminates the dualism between the subjective and the objective dimension. It also gives rise to a particular kind of monism, which does not consider the two poles as opposites, but as animated by a «hyperdialectic» (Merleau-Ponty [1964]: 94), which repels the Hegelian synthesis and resembles, according to Vanzago, the circular dialectic theorized by Schelling (Vanzago [2012]: 194-195). This dialectic is what constitutes the reversibility of one pole into the other, which is «always imminent and never realized in fact» (Merleau-Ponty [1964]: 147). The visible and the invisible, the touching and the touched are about to become their corresponding opposite, but it never happens: this being “on the verge of”, this hyperdialectic movement is what constitutes the virtual.

In this context, the virtual focus or center is what characterizes the flesh as such: in its dynamism and openness, it contains the potentiality of existence, of the poles which may emerge and become actual, without being imprisoned in a traditional and static view of substance. Merleau-Ponty’s flesh does not correspond to Aristotle’s *hypokeimenon*, since it is, at the same time, matter and form, but not a form-matter compound, a «synolus» (*Metaph.* VII, 1029a1-3), thus the poles are chiasmatically involved in a movement which brings the one towards the other. They are distinct, because of the *écart* (divergence) between them, but not radically separated: «this divergence is not a void, it is filled precisely by the flesh as the place of emergence of a vision, a passivity that bears an activity» (Merleau-Ponty [1964]: 272). This point is crucial, since the virtual is not pure passivity, that is pure potency separated from activity, but passivity “bearing” activity; this clearly refers to the difference between virtuality and possibility, which will be discussed in point c.

(b) If the flesh is openly considered by Merleau-Ponty as dialectic and chiasmatic, it has

<sup>7</sup> Enrica Lisciani Petrini has pointed out a turn toward the impersonal in Merleau-Ponty’s later works, which starts from the *Phenomenology of Perception* and its concept of pre-personal (Lisciani Petrini [2012]: 80-83), a concept whose history shall be deepened elsewhere. Moreover, Reynolds and Roffe notice that Merleau-Ponty’s concept of flesh has a strong affinity with Deleuze’s immanence, since they both reveal «an impersonal and pre-individual transcendental field that cannot be determined as consciousness» (Reynolds, Roffe [2006]: 233).

<sup>8</sup> This shall not be confused with the Deleuzian “membrane”, which, unlike Merleau-Ponty’s flesh, has no thickness (Michalet [2012]: 247-249).

<sup>9</sup> Anti-anthropocentrism is one of the main features of posthumanism and is well expressed by the first principle of the *Posthuman Manifesto*, according to which «humans are no longer the most important things in the universe» (Pepperell [2003]: 177).

to involve a relation between two poles at least. However, this aspect needs to be deepened, since hyperdialectic is different from the Hegelian one, considered by Merleau-Ponty as a «bad dialectic».

The bad dialectic is that which does not wish to lose its soul in order to save it, which wishes to be dialectical immediately, becomes autonomous, and ends up at cynicism, at formalism, for having eluded its own double meaning. What we call hyperdialectic is a thought that on the contrary is capable of reaching truth because it envisages without restriction the plurality of the relationship and what has been called ambiguity. (Merleau-Ponty [1964]: 94)

Unlike bad dialectic, which opposes the thesis and the antithesis, in order to obtain an overcoming synthesis, resulting «in a new positive, a new position» (Merleau-Ponty [1964]: 95), good dialectic gives up the sharpness of this new position. It is a movement which embraces ambiguity, a well-known concept in Merleau-Pontian philosophy and at the heart of the *Phenomenology of Perception*. According to this idea, the poles are not considered as two opposites of which the one is the negative and neatly contrasts the other, but as a duality whose limits are blurred. Taking inspiration from what Husserl writes in the *Cartesian Meditations* (Husserl [1950]: 97), Merleau-Ponty points out that the boundary between the subject and the object of perception is not clear (Merleau-Ponty [1945]: 106); moreover, the subjective body (*Leib*) is the place of third-person processes, such as agility, motility, sexuality, etc. (Merleau-Ponty [1945]: 230).

In *The Visible and the Invisible*, these characteristics are enhanced and considered in a different framework, which is the phenomenology of the flesh: ambiguity turns into reversibility, therefore not only the limits between the two poles are blurred, but each of the pole is on the verge of becoming the other. The flesh is thus relational in itself and not only in a dual way: the chiasmatic movement between the poles takes place inside the *Umwelt*, the surrounding world, which is characterized by a tissue of relations between subjects and objects, living and non-living beings,

body and technology, etc. It is a particular kind of field, which has not a privileged center or starting point, because its center may be virtually everywhere. It means that it is focused in our body as much as in the body of the other, in our hand as much as in the digital device I am holding, in the society outside the screen as much as in the social network. The flesh is virtually there in the network of relations<sup>10</sup> taking place in both the analog and the digital dimensions, thus allowing an authentic «transdimensional analogy» (Ferro [2022]) to take place. Even in this case, the virtuality of the flesh leads us toward a posthuman reading of this concept, since technology is seen as taking part in the transformation of the human (Pepperell [2003]: 177).

In this context, the virtual may be intended as the main characteristic of the chiasm – which defines flesh as well – that is the “separation in relation”: separation (*écart*, divergence) concerns poles which are different the one from the other, but are, at the same time, related in a movement of reversion. The flesh, which is considered as the *Zwischen* between the poles, is not in a specific place and moment, but “virtually” everywhere and connected to everything that constitutes the surrounding environment of the poles. It is an «originary connectedness» (Clarke [2002]: 213), which is the main feature of the flesh, a shared ontological medium among polarities and what surrounds them: it is an extended corporeity where an authentic interpenetration occurs (Ferro [2021]).

(c) This brings us to the third feature of the virtual, that is the entanglement with the real. In order to understand this point about Merleau-Ponty’s concept of flesh, the difference between the concepts of “virtual” and “possible” shall be pointed out. As we have already shown in section 1, Pierre Lévy shows how the virtual is conceived in French philosophy, taking inspiration by

<sup>10</sup> We are taking inspiration here from Yuk Hui (2012; 2016), who defines digital objects as being in a network of relations, thus adopting an anti-substantialist perspective. However, unlike Hui, we think that this characteristic extends also to analog objects, shaping the idea of virtual as such.



Deleuze. Lévy opposes two couples: possible-real and virtual-actual. Whereas the poles of the first couple are fully constituted – the possible resembles the real, since it misses only existence – the poles of the second couple belong to the event: «the virtual is a kind of problematic complex, the knot of tendencies or forces that accompanies a situation, event, object, or entity, and which invokes a process of resolution: actualization» (Lévy [1995]: 24). Let us think, for instance, to social networks. In this case, virtual identity cannot be considered neither as “real”, nor as simply “possible”: it is not real, because it does not correspond to our analog identity (which we conventionally, socially, and juridically assume to be the real one); neither is possible, because it does not properly lack existence, since we can find it in a digital dimension. Something similar may be said about virtual reality: it is not the analog world where we live, so it is not “real” in our usual sense, but is not either “possible”, because it is there and we may have an experience inside it, with its peculiar ways to configure space, movement, perception, etc.

Lévy’s perspective helps us catch the ambiguity of the virtual, its being neither possible nor real, but in relation to the actual. What is virtual is already “becoming” into the actual. If reality is dynamically conceived as a process, where singularities are included in a network of relations, then the virtual will not be something that is not there yet, or waits to be there, or is ready to be there in this or that way: it is how reality is, a dynamic being in a process of transformation towards actuality, where the latter is not fully defined and constituted. This idea also applies to Merleau-Ponty’s idea of flesh. The dynamism of the latter shall be conceived as dialectically becoming, as a reversion of divergent poles in a network of multiple relations. This recalls a well-known characteristic of the virtual body, which is «in essence interactive» (Diodato [2005]: 2). As we have shown in point (a), the flesh is not pure potency or passivity, but bears activity, moreover this activity shall be considered relationally, as inter-activity (“activity between” or “among”). If

the flesh is the body of the world, its being virtual means to be crossed by a plurality of singularities which continuously relate. At this point, there is not whatsoever distinction between the virtual and the real, since virtuality characterizes the tissue of reality itself, its warp and weft, whose knots are multiple singularities in multiple relations the one with the other.

## CONCLUSIONS

Reviewing the history of the concept of the virtual, however incompletely, has allowed some basic theoretical considerations to emerge:

(a) The idea of virtual does not coincide with the idea of digital, philosophically speaking. In fact, digital is closely related to information technology and the mathematics behind it, as well as requiring the presence of material supports for its manifestation. Why the two terms have come to be identified is yet to be explored and needs its own history.

(b) The virtual has its own ontology, distinct from the ontology of the actual and the digital (Evens [2010]: 150).

(c) The ontology of the virtual has a strongly posthuman and desubjectivizing connotation.

(d) By virtue of its ontological approach aimed at entities and not the psychological subject, the virtual enables a new epistemological collaboration between philosophy and science.

From Bergson and Deleuze to Merleau-Ponty, the concept of the virtual has been created both to counter a way of doing philosophy that is still dualistic and tied to a distinction between subject and object, and to propose an ontological image of a processual and becoming world, whose end, however, is not established by any *a priori* essence. All this makes the virtual a concept today that needs to be deepened in its specificity, since it allows for a rigorous and coherent philosophical analysis of many of the phenomena in which humans find themselves involved, from expanded reality to the digitization of spaces.

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