

The Importance of the Discussion about the Notion of Subject: Foucault, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty¹

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Abstract

Initially, we emphasize the importance of the discussion of the notion of subject for education, building on the phenomenon of child bodily education and the thought of Michel Foucault. Then, we engage the discussion from the definition of subject as the active pole of the individual in its possibilities of world configuration and its relationships with others and things. We start from this idea because the notion of activity seems central to us in any conception of subject. Even the meaning of subjected subject presupposes in such a subject an active principle that subjects to another or to a certain world situation, without which the term would not even make sense. Our goal is to introduce variations of meaning around this definition in order to inscribe it into a wider, more intricate frame of subjectivation. We try to achieve this, firstly, based on the analysis of an event in the process of school adaptation of a two-and-a-half-year-old child, and, later, through the conceptual contributions of Merleau-Ponty's thought in points of contrast with the thoughts of Foucault and Sartre. We highlight the notions of flesh, perceptual ground, and implication or intertwining of bodies and subjects, which impose on us a new understanding of the subjective or social being. We conclude that the subject's activity is inseparable from its passivities and relations with others - relations in which it is impossible to know exactly where the meaning (sens) of the other ends and the meaning of the subject itself begins.

Keywords

Subject – Subjectivation – Merleau-Ponty – Michel Foucault – Sartre.

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A importância da discussão sobre a noção de sujeito: Foucault, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty¹

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Resumo

Inicialmente, destacamos a importância da discussão da noção de sujeito para a educação, a partir do fenômeno da educação corporal das crianças e do pensamento de Michel Foucault. A seguir, assumimos a discussão a partir da definição da noção de sujeito enquanto polo ativo do indivíduo em suas possibilidades de configuração de mundo, nas relações com os outros e as coisas. Partimos dessa ideia porque a noção de atividade parece central em qualquer concepção de sujeito. Mesmo o sentido de sujeito assujeitado pressupõe nele um princípio ativo que se assujeita ao outro ou a determinada situação de mundo, sem o que o termo sequer teria sentido. Nosso objetivo é introduzir variações de sentido em torno dessa definição, a fim de inscrevê-la num quadro mais amplo e intrincado de subjetivação. Procuramos fazê-lo, num primeiro momento, a partir da análise de um acontecimento de adaptação escolar de uma criança de dois anos e meio de idade, e, num segundo momento, através de contribuições conceituais do pensamento de Merleau-Ponty, em contrapontos com o pensamento de Foucault e Sartre. Destacamos as noções de carne, fundo perceptivo e implicação ou entrelaçamento dos corpos ou sujeitos, que nos impõem uma nova compreensão do ser subjetivo ou social. Concluimos que a atividade do sujeito é inseparável de sua passividade e suas relações com os outros, nas quais não é possível saber ao certo onde termina o sentido do outro e começa o do próprio sujeito.

Palavras-chave

Sujeito – Subjetivação – Merleau-Ponty – Michel Foucault – Sartre.

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Introduction

The goal of this article is to conduct a reflection about the notion of subject, which seems to us a central one in every educative practice. After all, to educate is always to form a subject for a certain type of social behavior. We can highlight the concrete character of that education by quoting an evaluation of Lévi-Strauss (2012 [1950], p. XI, translation by the author) about the importance of the work of Marcel Mauss for human sciences, where the former affirms the crucial importance:

[...] “of a study of the way each society imposes on the individual a strictly determined use of its own body” [...] It is by educating the bodily necessities and activities that the social structure imprints its marks on individuals: “We train children... to tame reflexes... we inhibit fears... select interruptions and movements”. This study of the projection of the social over the individual should look deeply into uses and conducts; in this realm, nothing is futile, gratuitous or superfluous: “Child education is full of that which we call details, but which are essential”. And still: “Multitudes of details, unobserved and of which observation must be made, form the physical education of all ages and both sexes” (translation by the author).

It is worth noting in particular the perspective that this study of Mauss later acquired in Foucault’s work, towards a genealogy of power in modern Western societies. Indeed, this quote of Lévi-Strauss seems to reveal one of the sources of his thought. This seems even clearer when we consider what Lévi-Strauss opposes to racism, based on the emphasis on bodily techniques in the work of Mauss (2012 [1950], p. XIV, italics by the author): “Contrary to racist conceptions, which think of man as a product of his body, *man has always made*

of his body a product of his techniques and representations”. This was a program assumed verbatim by Foucault in his work. To bring forward another, more general conception than that, one that will participate prominently in our discussion, we also quote Merleau-Ponty in this respect: “Humanity, Mauss says, has built its spirit by using its body (body technique), hence a complete osmosis of all the generally distinct domains” (2001, p. 295).

But we initially highlight Foucault’s perspective, not only because we know that his work is the source of many studies in education, but most of all, because we will start from a perspective that is inverse to his, and then move towards the field of his objects of study. Namely, until the point where the question of ‘the care of the self’ enters his work, Foucault privileges the perspective of power over us, of what it makes us see and do, acting over our bodies, including by means of its distribution in space and time. Now, this methodological choice elides, on the one hand, the perspective of the subject, although Foucault (1995a, p. 232) affirms that his question has always been the subject rather than power (“it is not power, but the subject which is the general theme of my research”) and that the subject and the object are historically constituted together in forming ‘games of truth’ (the conditions or rules for saying what is false or true) (FOUCAULT, 2004a [1984]). More precisely, his “question is to determine what the subject must be, to what conditions it is subject, what is its status, what positions it must occupy in the real or the imaginary in order to become a legitimate subject of a certain type of knowledge: in sum, to determine its mode of ‘subjectivation’” (FOUCAULT, 2004a [1984], p. 235). To put it as clear as possible, he is interested in showing the “modes of subjectivation that turn human beings into subjects” (FOUCAULT, 1995a, p. 231), the historical constitution of a certain type of subject, or the process of subjectivation that individuals will undergo within a given social form; it is the perspective of the objectivated subject. On the other hand, this methodological perspective also

elides the positive value of social institutions over us as it highlights the negative side of power over freedom of thought and, more broadly speaking, over our way of being. We might also say that Foucault's thought is interested in colliding against the limits of power, rather than recognizing what in it is a condition for realizing freedom of thought or the free expression of our way of being. The result is that if, on the one hand, this generalized perspective of suspicion can reveal oppressions until then unsuspected about life, on the other, it generates a feeling that everything about power is negative or bad – and for this reason he found himself having to affirm the opposite in several of his interviews, i.e., that there are power relations that can make us grow, etc. And, of course, that is a role of education, in which the school is included, in a particular way. Not for no reason did he stress:

I don't see where the evil is in the practice of someone who, in a given game of truth, knowing more than another, tells him what must be done, teaches him, transmits knowledge to him, communicates techniques to him; the problem is, preferably, to know how it will be possible to avoid, in these practices – where power cannot fail to be exercised and is not bad in itself – the effects of domination that will cause a boy to be subject to the arbitrary, useless authority of a primary school teacher; a student to the tutorship of an authoritarian teacher, etc. (FOUCAULT, 2004b [1984], p. 284-285).

It is also important to stress that, to Foucault, power is everywhere or in every human relationship. Certainly, wherever there are domination relations, but also in relations between free men: "The more people are free in relation to each other [Foucault refers to societies like ours], the greater the desire of each side to determine the conduct of others" (2004b [1984], p. 286). And to counter the mistaken idea about his thought that power is the evil, before taking

into account the pedagogical institution as an example, as quoted above, he says:

Power is strategic games. It is well known that power is not the evil! Consider, for example, sexual or love relations: exercising power over the other, in a sort of strategic open game, where things can be inverted, is not the evil; that is part of love, of passion, of sexual pleasure (FOUCAULT, 2004b [1984], p. 284).

Or in a general way,

I mean that in human relations, whatever they are – whether it is a matter of communicating verbally, like I'm doing now, or whether it is about love, institutional or economic relations – power is always present: I mean, the relationship in which each one seeks to direct the conduct of the other (FOUCAULT, 2004b [1984], p. 276).

Well, all this contains anthropological or ontological conceptions which are not admitted by Foucault as premises in his work, since there is nothing fixed about man that allows us to make a general idea of him or, in fact, of anything whatsoever; there is not *the* power, *the* sexuality, *the* homosexual, *the* State, etc., but determined relationships of force, visibility, and discourse between bodies which form different realities under such overly abstract generalities. But a few conceptions or presuppositions seem to us unavoidable. For example, when Deleuze (1988, p. 101) highlights a passage where Foucault supposedly finds himself in the impasse of always assuming the perspective of power over us, of what it makes us see and say, or what it makes to our bodies – a reflection that would have led him to direct his interests also towards ethics in his works – how does Foucault justify himself there? By affirming that "The most intense point of lives, that in which they concentrate their energy, is right

there where they clash with power, struggle with it, try to use their forces or escape its traps” (FOUCAULT, 2003 [1977], p. 208). Well, that is certainly an assertion full of consequences with an anthropological or even metaphysical meaning. We do not doubt that life intensifies in the clash with power, although we could say that the same holds for any event that threatens life. What we question is the privilege of such clash as a manifestation of life, because conflict or threat can be embedded in a broader context where life manifests itself most of all as a desire of bonding – if not a harmonious bonding, not necessarily a conflictive one. Or, still, to speak in generic terms, is it possible to maintain, without anthropological presuppositions, that power is present in every human relation? It is not our purpose here to change one representation of life for another, nor to engage this discussion, not least because the definition of power as an attempt to direct or determine the other’s conduct can be sufficiently wide to blur the differences. We just wish to point to the complexity of our relations with others through which we enter a common life; complex relations also because the modes of this entrance are diverse and intricate in that they can be embarrassing, traumatic, seductive, challenging, pleasant, exciting, boring, etc. While institutions, according to their social regulations, represent processes more or less necessary to form certain types of subjects, they are also possibilities for the emergence of innovative subjective experiences. Thus, while they impose a given way of life on their individuals (even though that way of life might be always in progress), they allow them a field of experiences that individuals would never reach in their lives if they had to restart from scratch the history of their society.

That being said, for our discussion, we will start from the idea of subject as the active pole of the individual in its different

possibilities of world configuration, in its relations with others and things. We will start from this idea because the notion of activity seems central in any conception of subject. That is, even the meaning of subjected subject presupposes in such a subject an active principle that subjects to another or to a given world situation (FOUCAULT, 2004b [1984]), without which the term would not even make sense. Therefore, unlike Foucault, we will privilege as our starting point the perspective of the subject.

Our focus will be to produce a few variations of meaning around the question, starting from that initial definition of subject, with the purpose of situating it in a wider frame of understanding. Firstly, we will do this by analyzing an event in the school adaptation process of a two-and-a-half-year-old child, and later, through the conceptual contributions of Merleau-Ponty’s thought in points of contrast with the thoughts of Sartre and Foucault – more with the purpose of shedding light on, and problematizing the question than comparing the thoughts of these authors – highlighting the notions of flesh, perceptual ground (perceptual Gestalt), and implication or intertwining of bodies or subjects.

Methodological Considerations

Because we will start from the analysis of a *lived experience*, which will emerge as exemplary of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, we would like to make a few considerations about the act of describing it which are inscribed in the ontological conception of the *lived* in his philosophy and which we find suitable to human sciences in general. The lived is the fundamental basis of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, and describing it is its theme. It so happens that the lived is in its facticity, i.e., as the expression of a body which is at once natural, historic, and social. Therefore, the dimension of the lived points to a subject that is *capable of living* such dimensions of meaning (*sens*) (i.e., natural, social and historic) in that

it is also constituted by them. In this sense, we agree with the principle of the philosophies of finitude that Foucault (1999 [1966]) renders in *The Order of Things*, but we do not collude with his purposes in that work, which aims at the overcoming of the lived by a new episteme, then represented by structuralism.¹ To avoid failing to indicate our contraposition to Foucault on this point, we cite Merleau-Ponty's critique of Lévi-Strauss, in the position we consider to be terminal in his philosophy about this question: "[We should] take the social and sociology as an idealization of social perception, [a] society, [a] matrimonial system as a symbolic system or social thing, i.e., a principle of order according to a perceptual style, not according to an essence" (2003, p. 118, translation by the author). More precisely, "Taking literally what Lévy-Strauss gives as a metaphor: a perceptual orientation of the social space. Because the perceived thing is a principle of lived cohesion without being an essence, the symbolic system, the pattern, would be a social thing. A society [is] perceived as a thing – and as a thing, it is never 'pure'" (2003, p.121, translation by the author).

What Merleau-Ponty refuses in this quote is the movement from the perceptual field to another order of reality, which, at the same time, would be the principle of his explanation, i.e., the essence not as an idealization of the lived, but as its determinant reality. With regard to Lévi-Strauss, Merleau-Ponty refuses the realism of structures, a realism that, in the privileged view of the social scientist, would be the foundation of the order of lived social phenomena as such. From an epistemic viewpoint, it is towards that other order that Foucault points in his book, glimpsing structuralism's notion of unconscious in psychoanalysis (Lacan), anthropology (Lévi-Strauss) and in linguistics (Saussure), the last having the prerogative of formalizing the other two.

¹- We addressed this subject in Furlan (2009).

Or, still, if phenomenology will not give up what is lived in the first person, i.e., a subjective point of view, this does not mean that the meaning (sens) of what the subject lives is given to his consciousness, and that a reflexive attitude would then suffice to describe it. And it is for this reason that ordinary consciousness, as Merleau-Ponty (2001, p. 474, translation by the author) stressed, in light of Freud and Marx, is usually misleading:

In order to know, it is necessary to take some distance, which we cannot do by ourselves. It is not that an unconscious would mislead us; the phenomenon of mystification is owing to the fact that all consciousness is the privileged consciousness of a "figure" and tends to forget the "ground" without which it would make no sense (cf. Gestaltheorie). We do not know this "ground", even though it is lived by us.

More specifically, in this quote, what does the necessity "to take some distance, which we cannot do by ourselves" mean? Precisely that we do not have access to a fuller meaning (sens) of what we live simply through a reflexive attitude, i.e., through a direct description of the meaning (sens) of it, because that attitude ignores the ground that is a condition for living this meaning (sens), i.e., "the principle of order according to a perceptual style" (would it be abusive to say that investigating this principle of order is the objective of Foucault's investigations?), or that the "dimensions of the field, in which all the lived is distributed, but which are not lived as themselves (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2003, p. 58, translation by the author). What we can do is to vary our point of view or its situation, making the ground a figure, from another ground, as there is no perception of a figure without a ground where it appears. This is what psychology, ethnology and sociology do – in a more radical way – when they put "the morbid, archaic, or simply different experience

in contact with our experience, clarifying one by the other, criticizing one by the other” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2001 [1964], p. 153-154, translation by the author).² In sum, one cannot overcome depth (the ground that sustains the perception of any particular thing), but one can bypass it (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2001 [1964], p. 268), because we cannot separate from ourselves, i.e., see from nowhere the world and our own worldview. It will always be in some situation that we will do it.

A Concrete Example

We begin with an example that shades, right from the start, our proposed definition of subject, or that relativizes the principle of activity that it stresses. It is not a matter of denying the activity or spontaneity of the subject in its configuration of the world, but rather inscribing it in a situation that seems to us much more confuse or intricate.

It was an experience I had when I took my son to school – he was then two and a half years old – and of which I took notes at the occasion. The event I will describe occurred in the end of his first school year, in November, 2010, when he was already “adapted” to school, which he attended in the afternoons. The adaptation period took place earlier that year, from February to March, after which he would make his way to his classroom everyday: 1) led by the teacher or her assistant when we were late (one of them would come to the entrance yard and take him to the classroom, where his colleagues already were); 2) led by his parents, when we arrived in time, or even making his way to the classroom by himself, accompanied only by his father’s or mother’s gaze. In this last case, more easily when in company of another colleague who was arriving at the same time. I make this first description because I believe it configures the situation of a subjectivation process (Foucault) in the sense of incorporating

a habit through the subjective configurations of various forces: with the parents, without the parents and with the teacher, without the parents or the teacher, only with a colleague – which is an encouragement to autonomy – and, finally, by himself. In this last condition, I noticed that he would head straight to the classroom, looking fixedly ahead, without hesitation, apparently calm and confident, without turning to his parents even as he knocked on the door and went in, and was received by the teacher.

The experience I now proceed to describe occurred in the situation where we arrived late, which often happened, and also, which was less frequent but not rare, with my son asleep. I add that the fact of arriving late at school was not due, strictly speaking, to family disorganization, but to my son’s process of life, still in a stage of adaptation to school hours: sometimes his lunch would take longer, sometimes he would require a longer rest after lunch, and, which was rarer, sometimes he would sleep before going to school, which, we noticed, was always better for his school activities and his return home. When that sleep did not happen, which was more common, sometimes he would be irritable in the last school hour and would sleep on the way back home, which caused some trouble, because if we woke him up for bath and dinner, he would be annoyed the whole evening until bedtime; If we did not, he would not have dinner or bathe, and would wake up more often during the night, being hungry. In this sense, I affirm that he was in a stage of adaptation to school hours, which reminds us of the bodily education process we highlighted with Mauss. And once he arrived awake at school, there was not a single day in the year in which he accept to sleep or take some rest in the classroom, which occurred with another colleague. In fact, he was the youngest in his class, with colleagues from three months to a year older than him. He was also a child who usually showed a great interest in life, and would only fall asleep when his “energy” ran out, and then it seemed as if he were being “switched off” in a process that

2- Cf. also Merleau-Ponty (1984a [1960], p. 201-205).

lasted few minutes. But when riding in a car, as an experience that seems very common to me, the chances of a sleepy child falling asleep increase considerably, and it was in this context that my son arrived sleeping at school.

Well, as I was putting him on the mattress that was within the classroom, I realized he was not deeply asleep, and he started a small cry. So, I took him back in my arms and took him to the corridor outside the classroom to avoid what it seemed to me that would happen if he were to wake up at that moment: maladjustment to the situation, crying, confrontation with the idea of staying, irritation, etc. I told the teacher I would walk around there for a while so he could actually sleep, and then I would put him back on the mattress. That was my expectation.

But he quickly realized he was in the school, and instead of proceeding to a deeper sleep, he woke up and got down from my arms. He ran to the yard, and from there to the park. Then I realize that, unintentionally, I produced a new configuration of possibilities to him: I was with him in the bosom of the school, he therefore had me close by, and, between the classroom and the park, he ran to the park. His field of action was other than the usual one (here I think in terms of Gestalt), the forces of which were reconfigured through my action – unintentionally, since my intent was to put him back in the room asleep – and favored his attraction to the park. In other words, I, as the subject of the action, was integrated in the school's norm and was not seeking new alternatives in face of the way its activities were organized, but, unintentionally, I reconfigured my son's field of action, and he ran to the park.

I do not believe we can properly say that he was being the subject of a break of the rule in that it does not seem to me that he lived that conflict, i.e., between going to the classroom or going to the park. Or, if he had some consciousness of the difference of what he was doing, I do not believe that this dimension of meaning (*sens*) was important in what he was doing, as in face of a situation that was

facilitated by me, he spontaneously adhered to the park and exercised what is more natural for a child his age: the immediate fulfilling of a desire, of which I was the support at that time. But the curious thing is that I, who did not intend to break the rule either, accepted the new configuration of breaking the rule: attracted by him, by his joy and will to play (obviously, also based on my education background and on my assessment of the situation). In me did the conflict with the rule stand out, not least because, as an adult, I am more subjected to social rules than he is. But I was led, and, at the same time, entered the condition of subject of the consciousness that a rule was being broken, and, at the same time, I was not its breaker in a proper sense – I was just assuming responsibility for the event, as his father or responsible person. It is also necessary to shade this break. Although he was adapted to school in the strict sense of the word, in his age group, this type of behavior is more understandable or tolerable by parents and school.

So my activity of subject was, in a way, proposed and protagonized by the other (my son), but was assumed by me in that I accepted the break he carried out in a more irreflective way. I actually had a more reflective role, he did not, but my activity was, in a way, led by him, seduced by the subjective configuration that he spontaneously carried out. And this is the point we want to highlight, i.e., the invasion of me by the other, and the seizing of my way of being for an alternative practice where, curiously, the subject of consciousness of the break was me, rather than him, but the initiative of the activity was more his than mine. He had been, in a more spontaneous or irreflective way, the protagonist of his world's organization at that moment – supported by the new configuration of forces unintentionally provided by me – in the same way that my reflective activity had been invaded and seduced by his behavior. And the fact that the situation created escaped my original intent indicates how the social dynamic sometimes creates situations through

which society does not simply reproduces itself, but also changes itself through deviations that can also be imperceptible.³

I will give another example with this same son, by way of indication of what we wish to highlight. He used to be attracted by trucks! And we would pay attention to them as we drove, particularly in the stretch of road we took to get to school: flatbed, tank, dump, car-carrier or box trucks of various colors and sizes. Thus I discovered how we obviously also “look with the eyes of others”! During that time, even without him, it was common for us to watch trucks. It was his presence, even absent, which selected our gaze then. And if we consider that the same occurs through other senses, we can say that thus are our most lasting habits built, involving the people who participated and participate in our lives... and that thus also is a society built, with the difference, in this case, that our sight or any other of our senses does not necessarily remind us of somebody, because then it is everyone’s or many people’s sight and senses. In an even broader way, we remember, in this respect, what Lévi-Strauss says about the possible endeavor of listing the bodily habits of humanity, relying on Mauss’ emphasis on bodily techniques:

It would bring information of unexpected richness about migrations, cultural contacts or borrowings situated in a distant past, of which apparently insignificant gestures, transmitted from generation to generation, and protected by their very insignificance, attest frequently better than archeological deposits and figured monuments. (LEVI-STRAUSS, 2012 [1950], p. XIV, translation by the author).

The example of my son’s gaze, attracted by trucks, reveals how this is a two-way route,

3- For a study of the notion of deviation and imperceptible deviation, which can also be an interesting variation for thinking about our question, cf., Cassiano and Furlan (2013), which deals with the subjectivation process according to schizoanalysis.

in which a child’s gaze selects what it sees, and ‘contaminates’ the adult’s gaze, while it is also contaminated by the established gaze of the adult at the objects or way of life that the child sees; after all, a society of big, noisy machines is also a pretty visible proposal of life for a child, one that attracts its gaze with or without an express appeal of its parents. If my son were a little peasant (in a not very modern context), cows, horses and hens would probably stand out in his world, when his attention first turned to moving cars in the streets.

In these two examples with my son, the former with the school and the latter with trucks, the purpose is to highlight the spontaneous incorporation of others’ meanings (*sens*), i.e., their subjective configurations. Parents incorporate the gaze of their children, who incorporate that of their parents, or, generally, that of others. It is noteworthy that gazing is part of a form of activity of being in the world. My son ran to the park, attracted by the possibility of its activities, in the same way that our vehicles are activities that attract our children to our ways of life. But, while the difference of a child’s gaze in us can favor the perception that we also “look with the eyes of others”, our adult, ordinary gaze forgets its genealogy: “tradition is the forgetting of the origins” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1984b [1960], p. 239).

Subject in Relations with Others - Subject in the World

That being said, let us return in a more conceptual way to our problem. The two examples above highlight the spontaneous and pacific movement of one subject’s meanings (*sens*) into another – although, in the first example (with the necessary shading), I also supported the break of a rule, which generally implies some form of conflict due to the sheer fact that it was perceived. But other examples can highlight, with various degrees of intensity, the acceptance of these meanings (*sens*) in a

tense, conflictive way, or a confrontation with the other or with the established reality (this is what I tried to avoid by taking my son back in my arms and trying to get him to sleep outside the classroom). These latter instances, i.e., of tense acceptance of, or confrontation with established meanings (*sens*), we can call them desire for another form of relationship with the world or the other, in *frontal opposition* to the established rule; as to the examples with my son, we can call them desire for another form of relationship with the world or the other, in *lateral opposition or deviation* in relation to the established rule. But the main aspect we wish to highlight is the movement of one's meanings (*sens*) into another person in our relations. As Merleau-Ponty (1994 [1945], p. 251) says in this respect, it is as if the intention that inhabits your body came to inhabit mine, awakening in me the same motor possibilities,⁴ which means that the body, rather than thought, is the subject of that understanding. More precisely, "this subject, which feels itself *constituted* at the moment it works as *constitutive*, is my body" (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1984c [1960], p. 138, italics by the author) – which feels itself, therefore, constituted by the other's intention, in that it perceives the other and apprehends his meaning (*sens*); this also holds for language:

The "I" who speaks is installed in his body and language, not as in a prison, but, to the contrary, as in an apparatus that magically transports him to the perspective of the other [...] There is no speech (and, ultimately, personality) that is not for an 'I' who contains this germ of depersonalization. Speaking and understanding do not presuppose only thought, but, more essentially, and as the foundation of thought itself, the capacity to let oneself be undone and rebuilt by an actual other, by various possible others

and, presumably, by anyone (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2002 [1969], p. 41-42).

We will use a contrast between Merleau-Ponty and Sartre to mark the point of movement that is of interest to our question.⁵ It is worth stressing that, contrary to Foucault, we will find in Sartre, for understanding our insertion in the world, the emphasis on the subjective perspective, and it is thus, and only thus, that we can agree with Foucault when he says that Sartre started from the notion of subject to understand this insertion, a perspective that he attributed, in a general way, to phenomenology and to Merleau-Ponty himself, even when Foucault recognizes that it was Merleau-Ponty who introduced in the French philosophical world the importance of the studies on Saussure (FOUCAULT, 2005 [1983], p. 311).

To put it briefly, Sartre starts from the notion of consciousness, which is not a thing, but a condition for the appearance of things, in that these, without consciousness, are dense reality closed in itself. In other words, through human reality, it is the emergence of consciousness, empty of being and amidst the full in-itself of things, which will be the occasion of manifestation of Being. This is how things show themselves as being, and consciousness perceives itself as not-being, or being-for-itself. Or, still, more concretely, because of his consciousness, man appears precisely as a lack and a desire of being, and for this reason, he is a *project* (of being). As Silva (2003, p. 120) says, "The for-itself, contrary to the in-itself, is the being that is always distant from itself, and the "*for* in the for-itself indicates that it projects itself to cover the distance that separates it from itself, to realize *itself*, beyond the for-itself" (2003, p. 120). In this sense, there is no inertia in the for-itself, because consciousness is not, or it is pure movement of being. Now, the gaze of others will appear as a stanching of this freedom, because it will identify this

4- Which, nowadays, through neuroimaging techniques, neuroscience corroborates with the phenomenon of mirror neurons.

5- For a more detailed presentation of Sartre's philosophy and its comparison with Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, cf. Furlan (2012a; 2013)

movement as a meaning (*sens*) of being in the world. Now, this dimension of being of the for-itself, which, in this sense, is (seen by others), conflicts with its subjective dimension, which is pure movement from not being towards being. It is by the very nature of gazing that the relation with the other will thus be necessarily conflictive. It is also the gaze of the other which will open to the for-itself the dimension of knowledge and the assessment of its acts, which requires the perspective of looking at oneself from outside instead of being only in one's acts. In other words, being-for-the-other is being, ineluctably, in this expression of a meaning (*sens*) of being which *identifies* itself in some way, and thus, language will always be, in a privileged way, the field of objectivation of the for-itself in the world; after all, language says what things and people *are*.

Curiously, this seems to us the meeting point between the thoughts of Sartre and Foucault. Considering the widely accepted image that their conceptions of subject are opposed to each other (cf. REVEL, 2005, p. 84), it is worth remembering that the character of subject objectivation in the speech of the other, unfolded by Foucault in our forms of knowledge and power, had been highlighted by Sartre. And although Sartre was from a generation which was closer to the belief in the possibilities of big narratives for understanding the world, such as Marxism, Foucault's considerations about himself, when he addresses ethics, remind us, in a way, of Sartre himself. When asked, 'You talk about 'detaching from oneself. Why, then, such a singular will?', he answers: "What can the ethic of an intellectual be – I claim the word intellectual, which, nowadays, seems to make some people sick – if not this: to become permanently capable of detaching from oneself (which is the opposite of the attitude of conversion?)" (FOUCAULT, 2004c [1984], p. 247).

The word *detaching from oneself* has Sartrean echoes, as the interviewer soon notes, and Foucault's answer fulfills rather the function of decentralizing the role of the (Sartrean)

intellectual, just like Foucault (1995b, p. 261) seeks to differentiate his project by saying that, in Sartre, the idea of authenticity of self still prevails, which points to an identification that seems in contradiction with his own philosophical presuppositions, e.g., when Sartre analyzes Flaubert through his works. Indeed, the notion of existential psychoanalysis in Sartre (1976 [1940]) highlights the presence of a fundamental choice in the beginning of life, to which we would therefore remain linked. But also, curiously, Foucault (2004d [1984], p. 289) finally admits that, in the end, all of his work could be seen as developing the same question, i.e., of a same self:

When we write books, we wish them to completely change everything we thought, and that, in the end, we perceive ourselves completely different from what we were at the beginning. Then we realize that, deep down, we have changed little. We may have changed the perspective, gone around and around the problem, which is always the same, namely, the relations between the subject, truth and the constitution of experience.

Which certainly goes towards the possibility of a self in the past operating and organizing the self in the present, and, therefore, the question of detaching from oneself is not as simple as his affirmation might sound.

But in this comparison between the thoughts of Sartre and Foucault, what interests us for this article is the absence, in both, of a middle term for the movement between subject and world, subject and others, or between the subject's "inside" and its "outside". In Foucault, even the problematization of ethics, in which the subject is seen in an active way in the care of the self, based on a historical moral field, only the perspective of power is stressed, i.e., the outside, for the constitution of the subject. When Foucault enters the question/perspective of ethics, he also enters the question/

perspective of the possibility of a constitution of the subject by itself, from the field of moral in communication with the fields of knowledge and power that were previously treated in his work. As he says:

I've tried to highlight three major types of problems: the problem of truth, the problem of power, and the problem of individual conduct. These three major domains of experience can only be understood in relation with each other, and they cannot be understood without each other. What bothered me about the previous books was the fact that I only considered the first two experiences without taking into account the third one. (FOUCAULT, 2004e [1984], p. 253).

And what does this third experience open up to? To “an elaboration of self by self, a studious transformation, a slow, arduous modification through the constant concern for truth” (FOUCAULT, 2004c [1984], p. 248). When asked, again, in what way does this, which opens to an esthetic of existence or the possibility of transforming life into an “artwork”, differ from Sartrean existentialism, Foucault (1995b, p. 261) alludes to the question of authenticity in Sartre to say that this creative activity does not point to the relation of self with itself, i.e., of a self that acts based on the recognition of itself (being authentic), but to the relation of self with its own activity, more precisely, with its experience, or, finally, with its work. The interviewers then complement, “That sounds like a remark by Nietzsche, in *The Gay Science*, that we could create our life by giving it a style through long practice and daily work” (FOUCAULT, 1995b, p. 262). To which he replies: “Yes. My point of view is much closer to that of Nietzsche than that of Sartre” (FOUCAULT, 1995b, p. 262). Or that of Heidegger, perhaps? “One should not put the care for others before the care of the self; the care of the self is ethically prior, in that the relation with oneself is *ontologically prior*” (FOUCAULT, 2004b [1984], p. 271, italics by the author). But

our question is: what goes on in the individual? How does that occur in it? Is it thus that a *reflection* about its creation and its acts emerge? And in what way does it differ from the structure of the modern conception of the subject-object relation or consciousness-object relation? Only as the impossibility of the assessment and decision that are concentrated in a moment, which would presuppose the sovereignty of the “I think”?⁶ More precisely, as an assessment that relies on its results or experiences, which thus cannot be anticipated by thought? In this direction, we remember what Foucault (1995b, p. 277) says about the emergence of the modern subject through Descartes, who, unlike the ancient, undoes the tie between ascesis and truth, i.e., the necessity of a transformation of self to gain access to truth, and that access came to be guaranteed through evidence to thought, regardless of the subject’s moral or what the subject is as a person. Now, this transformation of self which is not identified with an act of thought, does it not point to the body as a middle term in the relation between subject and world, and now, in particular, in the relation between the thinking subject and the subject objectivated in the world? That is the hinge that, it seems to us, is missing in Michel Foucault’s philosophy, or at which he arrived without saying it properly.

In Sartre, because the for-itself is pure negativity and project of being, there cannot be any hinges. The for-itself does not mix with the being-in-itself of things, nor with any other for-itself. It is pure spontaneity, a consciousness of that which is and towards its own being. But, and this is worth stressing, precisely because consciousness *is not*, it can only be that activity based on the being-in-itself, in which it represents an emptiness that, as a lack projecting towards being, relies on the very being of things. In other words, the for-itself is its world, i.e., in situation, where it already is, therefore, as negation and project of being. Being in situation is already an

6- It is worth stressing that even in the modern notion of thinking subject in Descartes and Kant, this traditionally divulged sovereignty is relativized, if not *de jure*, at least *de facto* (FURLAN, 2009, p. 106-107).

organization of the being-for-itself (hence our highlighting the subjective perspective in his philosophy) from its historical facticity, i.e., its body and the things around it, which represent the natural-social-historical context. Perceiving is, therefore, already an action of choosing and projecting itself, and the motor action, which the project will trigger, will be carried out with the being of things, since the for-itself simply is not. In this perspective, as the project turns out successful, the for-itself is the experience of the own-body, the always implicit reference of linking utensils together in this operation of world configuration. But the adversity of the being-in-itself of things or own-body can reveal to the for-itself that the being it relies on for realizing itself is independent of it, showing, then, the crude face of its facticity. Now, the dimension of the other's gaze at the for-itself also directs it to this facticity, since apart from representing the stanching of this creative activity of the for-itself, identifying it in its being (which is in some way), this dimension also settles it in its body as a sensitive being; it therefore directs it not only to the meaning (*sens*) of what the for-itself does or *is* (in doing), but also to its corporal being, until then only implicit in its for-itself as a constant ground or the always implicit reference in its perception or its use of things – as also affirmed, in fact, by Merleau-Ponty (1994 [1945]).

In this respect, the Sartrean conception of flesh, such as described in the act of desiring, is of great interest to us, because it is through it that we will enter Merleau-Ponty's perspective. When the for-itself desires, its body, until then implicit in everything it does in the world, comes to incorporate or paste consciousness on its sensitive or carnal being, and what the caress aims at is the same, i.e., to withdraw the other from his projects of world in order to paste him on the desiring body of the for-itself.⁷

7- “[...] the caress reveals the flesh bearing the body of its action, separating it from the possibilities that surround it: it is made to discover, under the act, the fabric of inertia – that is, the pure being-there” – that sustains it (SARTRE, 1976 [1940], p. 440, translation by the author).

What is more, desire does not only incarnate consciousness in its sensitive body,⁸ but the world too tends to become incarnate, ceasing to be the compound of utensils for the projects of world of the for-itself, which in turn comes to aim at them in their sensitive being:

Thus I am sensitive, not so much to the shape of the object and its instrumentality, as to its matter (grainy, smooth, warm, greasy, rough, etc.), and I discover in my desiring perception something like a *flesh* of objects. My shirt rubs on my skin and can feel it: that which is usually to me the remotest object turns into the immediate sensitive; the warmth of the air, the blowing of the wind, the sun rays, etc., all this is present in me in a certain way, as if placed upon me without any distance, and revealing my flesh through its flesh. From this point of view, desire is not only the pasting of a consciousness by its facticity, it is correlatively the body being made viscous by the world; and the world becomes viscous; consciousness becomes buried in a body which becomes buried in the world. (SARTRE, 1976 [1940], p. 442-443, translation by the author).

The important thing is to stress that, between these two conceptions or modes of being (being-in-itself or being-for-itself), it is impossible for there to be any indistinctiveness. My body, Sartre says (1976 [1940], p. 351, translation by the author), “is either a thing among things, or that by which things are revealed to me. But it could not be both at once”. I can be my body as a for-itself, and in this sense, I do not see nor touch it as a thing among other things in the world, or I can perceive it as a thing, obviously from the body for-itself that aims it, touches or observes it. This is how, for example, we treat it with the doctor, considering its parts, its

8- “The being that desires is consciousness making itself body” (SARTRE, 1976 [1940], p. 439, translation by the author).

organs, or taking clinical tests, even though we are aware that this body is that of a for-itself. Sartre is very explicit in this respect, as he remembers Husserl's famous example about the hands that touch each other: Touching and being touched, to feel that one touches and is touched, these are two types of phenomena that it is futile to try to bring together under the name of 'double sensation'. Indeed, they are radically distinct and exist on two incommunicable plans" (SARTRE, 1976 [1940], p. 351, translation by the author).

In contrast, the notion of flesh in Merleau-Ponty aims precisely to understand that mixture, which, in the Sartrean perspective (SARTRE, 1976 [1940]), is primarily a sign of the pasting of consciousness on the sensible matter, or an attempt to alienate its freedom. We might also say that Merleau-Ponty relies on Sartre's thought to say its opposite, or that he owes a lot to Sartre, in this perspective, for the operation of his philosophy.

The difficulty Sartre refers to when he gives the example of the hands touching each other is the impossibility to feel them *at the same time* as touching-touched. This is a possibility which is always imminent, but never actually realized. But what Sartre views as a sign of impossibility of indistinctiveness between the modes of being-in-itself and being-for-itself, Merleau-Ponty views as the carnal circuit, or its composition: "I experience, and as many times as I wish, the transition and metamorphosis of one of these experiences into another, and it is only as if the hinge between them, solid, unshakable, remained irremediably hidden to me" (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2001 [1964], p. 192, translation by the author). Hence his contraposition to Sartre:

[...] this hiatus between my right hand touched and my right hand touching, between my voice heard and my voice spoken, between one moment of my tactile life and the next, is not a nothingness or an ontological void: it is transposed by the total being of my body, and by that of

the world (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2001 [1964], p.192, translation by the author).

In other words, Merleau-Ponty makes the flesh, rather than consciousness (SARTRE, 1976 [1940]) the principle of our being in the world, of a body which

[...] is a self not by transparency [...] but by confusion, narcissism, by the inherence of the one who sees in that which he sees, of the one who touches in that which he touches, of the sentient in the sensed – a self, therefore, who is caught up among things, who has a front and a back, a past and a future. (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1984d [1960], p. 88-89).

Narcissism, therefore, in the sense of the migration or generalization of self among things (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2001 [1964], p.181) or, as the quote says, "by inherence of the one who sees in that which he sees".

Merleau-Ponty evidences this condition of inherence between the sentient and the sensible, the seeing and the visible sides of the body in relation to the world by means of his onto-phenomenological description of the tactile exploration of the hands:

How does it happen that I give to my hands, particularly, this degree, this speed and direction of movement, which are capable of making me feel smooth and rough textures? It is necessary that, between the exploration and what it will teach me, between my movements and what I touch, some relation of principle exist, some kinship exist [...]. This can only happen if, at the same time as my hand is sensed from the inside, it be also accessible from the outside, that it be itself tangible [...]. Through this *crisscrossing of the touching and the tangible in it, its own movements incorporate themselves into the universe they interrogate* (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2001 [1964], p. 173-174, italics by the author, translation by the author).

Just like there is no tangible that is not somehow promised to visibility, and vice versa (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2001 [1964], p.175), there is synergy between the organs of the senses of the body for perceiving the world (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1994 [1945], p. 314). To such an extent that the flavor of the madeleine can keep in Proust the childhood of his life in Combray, that a certain odor can encapsulate the high school environment for Heidegger, according to a comment of Merleau-Ponty (2001 [1964], p. 152, translation by the author): “The high school, for us who return to the place thirty years later, as well as for the ones who inhabit it today, is not so much an object that might be useful or possible to describe by its characteristics, as a certain odor, a certain affective texture which has an effect over a certain vicinity of space.” A comment that marks, in special, the prominently affective nature of our perception of the world.

It is noteworthy that, in the example of the tactile exploration of the hands, it is the body which explores and interrogates, and thus, the activity of the “subject” that we mentioned in our introduction immediately emerges as both active and passive at once – “sensing is sensing oneself” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2000, p. 439) –, more precisely as an activity of the passivity (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2001 [1964], p. 270), because the flesh is a “record” of being (quote marks added), the fundamental openness of being, and therefore, consciousness will never be pure spontaneity. To say this, Merleau-Ponty compares the relation between the two sides of the body, i.e., the seeing and the visible, the touching and the touched, in sum, between its inside and its outside, to the mirror phenomenon: “The flesh is a mirror phenomenon” (2001 [1964], p. 303, translation by the author), in such a way that one should not say that the junction between both sides is made by “Thought or Consciousness”, but rather, that “Thought or Consciousness is *Offenheit*⁹ of a

corporeity to... World or Being (2001 [1964], p. 302, translation by the author).

It was precisely to express this crossing or chiasm between these two dimensions of the body that Merleau-Ponty coined the term *flesh*.

Well, this carnal structure or process is the same that we find in the relations with others, and it surmounts its abstract conception as relations between one consciousness and another. Or, as Merleau-Ponty says (2001 [1964], p. 184-185, translation by the author),

[...] why would this generality that makes the unity of my body not open it to other bodies? (...) Why would the synergy not exist between different organisms, if it is possible within each of them? Their landscapes intertwine, their actions and passions adjust exactly: this is possible as long as we stop defining sensibility primordially as belonging to a same “consciousness”, and, to the contrary, understand it as a return of the visible upon itself, a carnal adherence of the sentient to the sensed, and of the sensed to the sentient.

A structure or process that is also present in the language or prose of the world (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2002 [1969], p. 42), and founds the social being, or gives full right to the dimension of being with the other, which the notion of consciousness does not admit (SARTRE, 1976 [1940], p. 464-486).

It is no wonder, then, that Merleau-Ponty uses in courses the term *magma*, which he took from his readings of Claude Simon, to express this totality of concentrated meanings (*sens*) in the life of men: meanings (*sens*) of time, which “is not only irreversibility, but also eternal return: it is only different because it is the same” (1996, p. 209, translation by the author), meanings (*sens*) of space, “of ubiquity where bodies imprint themselves on each other (mirrors here are only limit-cases), where places fit into each other”

⁹- Openness (Translation by the author).

(1996, p. 209, translation by the author), and, of course, “the magma of men”:

This mixture and this invasion (of one upon the other) exist, not least because we can see, that is, we can see others seeing, with an extraordinary subtlety, we can see with the eyes of others, as long as we have eyes [...]. This sounds like second a second sight because we believe one can only see qualities or visible things: but I can see bodies directed towards the world and to the same world that I can see, their slightest gestures, I spouse them, I can see them from the inside. Men are also gigognemen¹⁰ – If one could open one man, one would find all the others like in Russian dolls or, rather, less well ordered, in a state of indivision. (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1996, p. 211, translation by the author).

Thus, the carnal structure of our relations takes us to a new understanding of the subjective being or the social being as intrinsically implied notions: the other is in me and I am in him, being difficult to distinguish what is mine and what is his in me, or, to close this sequence of quotes of Merleau-Ponty about the question of our incarnation in its relation with Sartre, it is difficult to distinguish in me what is being-for-itself and what is being-for-the-other. Merleau-Ponty, now with psychoanalysis,¹¹ tries to show how the intertwining between me and the other is of such a nature that it imposes a necessarily ambiguous understanding of the meaning (*sens*) of our relations:

In a + profound conception: the relation with the other and myself are intertwined and simultaneous [...]. Aggression is also masochism: it is myself which I pursue in the other, it is the other which I pursue

10- A reference to the character of children's theater who presents itself as the mother of many children, who appear from under her skirts.

11- About this topic, cf. particularly his courses or course notes about psychoanalysis at Sorbonne or the Collège de France (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1996, 2001, 2003).

in me. Freud: sadomasochism. By no means am I simple: the other is in me, I destroy myself by him, there is exchange – Not the being-for-itself [...] + the being for another, but the *Füreinander*¹², this is sadomasochism – What I am in “for self”, I am also “for the other”, what he is “for self”, that he is also “for me” – This is impossible to think of through “consciousness”: it can only feel obliterated through the absolute other [...] – but, if I am an existence, i.e., always linked to inertia, to another than me, this generativity absorbs me, I know I will not be consciousness by negating it (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1996, p.152-153, translation by the author).

It is noteworthy, with this last quote, that more importantly than finding a conflictless situation closer than the conflict, it is a matter of finding the meaning (*sens*) of our community of being somewhere closer than consciousness, which is our goal here.

Rather than undoing subjectivity, our purpose here, as we saw earlier, is to understand it as a self by indistinctiveness from, and inherence in things and others, with the ambiguity of meanings (*sens*) that are present in our relations. And, contrary to this representing the dissolution of responsibility for our acts or activities, being aware of this incarnation of ours into historical and social life can favor the possibility to exercise it in a less naïve way. This is what Merleau-Ponty had warned about, with regard to the limits of decision of the resolute being in Heidegger, which, starting from the ekstasis of the future, believed itself capable of leaving completely its dispersion in the world (1994 [1945], p. 573). To the contrary, says Merleau-Ponty (1996, p. 214, translation by the author), decisions in our life are not instantaneous, they are always anticipated, “One does not decide to do something, rather, one decides to allow it to

12- “One for another” (translation by the author).

be done”. Like the slow work of style made by an artist, but in a more complicated way, as our relations with the world are more varied, among which we can include relations with art itself, as Merleau-Ponty has pointed out with regard to Cézanne and Leonardo da Vinci (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1984e [1948]).

Final Considerations

We opened this article by highlighting the importance of the discussion about the notion of subject for a conception of education, and with the purpose of situating the principle of subjective activity in a broader framework of understanding. We used the analysis of an event of school adaptation to highlight how this question can and should be thought of in a concrete way, with attention to the details and meanings (*sens*) of what goes on in our everyday lives. By comparing the thoughts of Foucault, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, we sought to achieve our goal through the notion of flesh, in which the subjective activity emerges as 1) inseparable from its passivity, 2) in its relations with others and the world, and 3) configured in a given way, where it is not possible to know

for sure where one’s own meaning (*sens*) begins and the meaning (*sens*) of another ends. Which means that our relations with others and the world are very intricate. In this respect – but this is a theme for another work – the most important thing from the subjective point of view is the capacity to maintain these relations and to favor the communication between them (dissociation is pathological, MERLEAU-PONTY, 2001, p. 336-339), which seems, even, the condition for being a subject in the world. In other words, if we assume these premises about the notion of subject, which we did in light of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, a first consequence for a reflection about our educative practices, whether in family or in school, is to make it favorable for the subject to build its capacity to communicate with the world and with others, taking into account the incarnation of our practices, which includes the “suspicions” of Foucault. Which, let us agree, holds for all of our relations. Let us say, then, that the student is in a more decisive situation of formation. But that is just the beginning of a new reflection.¹³

13- For an example of an application of these premises on education, see Furlan (2012b).

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