

CONSCIOUSNESS INCARNATE: CONCEPT OF BODY IN MERLEAU-PONTY AND RĀMĀNUJA

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Introduction

The birth of any philosophy is from man's becoming conscious of his lived experiences. If philosophy is ultimately rooted in experience and consciousness, it evolves in particular contexts and cultures of peoples, always attempting at articulating the manifold layers of man's '*Lebenswelt*'. Philosophers and their philosophies are invariable products of the worlds they lived in, thoughts they shared and traditions they inherited. Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) and Rāmānuja (c.1017-1137), representing two great philosophical traditions are two philosophers who made unique contributions towards a creative and convergent thinking focussing on the body as an Incarnate Consciousness.

Drawing inspiration from the phenomenology and existentialism, Merleau-Ponty developed his own existential phenomenology, delving deeply into the existential derivatives of man being an incarnate consciousness in the world. The wonder of subjectivity exceeds all other wonders, not an abstract and sterile subjectivity, but a subjectivity steeped in actions and saturated by experiences, constantly in an existential encounter with oneself, with other subjects and the world, the home of being and the horizon of horizons. It is an existential subjectivity that stands revealed in an incarnate consciousness and a perceiving body, a constitutive medium that bridges the dimensions and differences of being. At the root of this incarnate consciousness, there is a primordial unity that prepared the ground for an intense interwovenness between man and his world, between man and his fellowmen. The body is not a mere accompaniment, but an existential accomplishment, enhancing the wonder of subjectivity. Subjectivity as proposed by existential phenomenology enhances the deep dialogue dimension of human existence, a dialogue deriving from man's inner unity and wonderful wholeness.

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Śrī Rāmānuja tried to make a synthesis of monism and dualism in and through his doctrine of the world as the embodiment of God. The universe as the body of Brahman is the existential and essential modality of his being. It is the real bridge that links the finite and the infinite, matter and spirit. Thus we find that the concept of the body, though understood very differently and in very different contexts, turns out to be a key concept with some philosophers, both in the West and the East. The incarnate consciousness and ensouled body of Merleau-Ponty have several existential implications and are preceded by rigorous phenomenological analysis. The body as the mode of Brahman in the philosophical analysis of Rāmānuja has more mystical taste and religious traits. However, the concept of the body as developed by both Merleau-Ponty and Rāmānuja, is an original contribution and a creative synthesis of several significant systems of thought that preceded them. Both of them presuppose an ultimate unity at the very heart of reality.

Consciousness Incarnate: Intervening Impediments

“In both East and West, we may trace a journey which has led humanity down the centuries to meet and engage truth more and more deeply.”¹ While man’s attempts at becoming aware of the wonder that he is, centred more on the world outside him in the West, his attempts in the East centred more on the self within. Our attempt becomes all the more challenging when we realize the barriers that separate these two thinkers. Rāmānuja was a religious teacher of the Vaiṣṇava community in South India who, as tradition goes, lived a long life of 120 years in the 11th and 12th centuries, at a time when the Western philosophy was still waiting for the birth of Thomism. While it is irrational to inquire into the awareness of Rāmānuja regarding the 20th century French thinker, there is the possibility that Merleau-Ponty had at least a general idea of the Viśiṣṭādvaita philosophy and its place in the Indian philosophical system.

In spite of the wide divergence in space and time with regard to their lives, there is something that unites both Merleau-Ponty and Rāmānuja. The human spirit in its search for truth and the underlying ‘constant’ beneath our everyday experience, tends to converge, in virtue of a universally shared

¹ JOHN PAUL II, *Fides et Ratio*, Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1998, §1.

human nature, both in the manner of their thinking and approach to life's meaning and mystery. This germ of concordant discord has fascinated many in the East and West, has awakened their imagination and has changed their worldview and approach to reality. This ultimate unity that exists among the diversities prompted Schelling to write: "The nature is the visible Spirit and the Spirit is the invisible nature."² Alfred North Whitehead, while speaking about the relationship between God and the World at the conclusion of *Process and Reality* observes: "... each temporal occasion embodies God, and is embodied in God... the World's nature is a primordial datum for God; and God's nature is a primordial datum for the World."³ The prologue of the Gospel of St. John, which is the quintessence of Johannine theology of the incarnation in the Christian tradition, points to this basic unity of reality when it says: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.... And the Word became flesh..."(John 1:1,14). *Īśā Upaniṣad* begins with such an acknowledgement of unity: "īśāvāsyam idam sarvam, God pervades every entity in nature."⁴ In the Far East, the foundress of the Tenrikyo religion, Miki Nakayama, writes explicitly in *Ofudesaki*: "This universe is the body of God."⁵ The cosmos is the body of God and man is a microcosm. Man is the harmonious blending of all the levels of reality, the most wonderful specimen of the embodiment of the Spirit, consciousness incarnate.

Consciousness Incarnate: The Existential Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty

Merleau-Ponty's philosophical thinking started, evolved, and became original and stimulating in the fertile soil of phenomenology and existentialism, culminating in his existential phenomenology. He was profoundly conversant with and greatly influenced by the contemporary trends in Western philosophy. Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is a genuine

²SCHELLING, F. W. J., *Works*, Vol. I, Manfred, Schröter (ed.), Munich, 1927-'28, § I, 57.

³WHITEHEAD, ALFRED, NORTH, *Process and Reality*, New York: The Free Press, 1979, p.348.

⁴*Īśā Upaniṣad*, I.

⁵*Ofudesaki*, III:40.

synthesis of the best in existentialism and phenomenology. Merleau-Ponty made an in-depth analysis of both German and French phenomenological and existential movements, accepted them critically, and created an original existential phenomenology of his own, digging deeply into the manifold layers and permeating factors of perception.

One important contribution, which Merleau-Ponty makes in his analysis, is the nature and function of the body in human perception, relatedness and action. The human consciousness is an embodied consciousness. It is immediately experienced in one's encounter with the world of persons and objects. The body is the locus of attention in all-human engagements. The human body is an ensouled body, a non-objectified and unabstracted body, which is part and parcel of man's pre-objective world. The meaning of the incarnate existence of a person is traced and shaped in the body, in the concrete and concomitant harmony of thought and action.

The human being as an embodiment of consciousness is an indivisible unity in which both body and consciousness interact, meet and merge in such a way that there is no action of the body or consciousness as such, but only of the embodied self. It is the embodiment of the self, as the self is an embodied self. Thus the body as the house of consciousness, is the encountering subject, reveals its projects to other subjects and builds up a world of interpersonal relationships as a wider horizon of its own life activity. The lived body is the unitary agent through the medium of which the reception of the world, others and myself is accomplished. The world is the ultimate horizon of all our experiences, it is the horizon of all horizons. The body is the medium through which I realize myself as a being-in-the-world. The experience of one's body and the perception of one's world are very closely interrelated. The body, thus, is not merely a thing that moves in the world, but that by which consciousness creates human space for the new worlds being conjured up by him everyday.

The centrality of body in human being as an incarnate consciousness leads to another essential dimension of body: the intrinsic interrelationship between the body and the world. The Husserlian clarion call to 'return to the things themselves' finds its echo in Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on the return to the world of the lived-experience, the *Lebenswelt*. Man finds his truth in his commitment to the world; his truth is the truth of being-in-the-world.

Human existence is intrinsically intertwined with the world; it is a dialogue with the world. Man, in his encounter with the world, has given birth to meaning. The essence of man is existence in the world; man as a being-in-the-world constitutes his essence. The body allows my being in the world; it involves me and gives me a standpoint in the world. For Merleau-Ponty, man is in the world and the world is in man. As an embodied consciousness, man is in communion with the world and with other embodied selves. It is the body-subject, which knows, which projects, which communicates and brings meaning to the being. The body is the privileged avenue of our entry into the world, through which we act upon the world, and experience the world in a new way. It is the vehicle of the power and process of consciousness in space and time. As an incarnate entity, it is the medium of the presence of a person to the world and to other subjects. Incarnation or embodiment of the human is not to be approached as a problem, which is to be solved by philosophical means; rather, it is a mystery in which we all participate.

The most primordial way in which man finds himself in the world is in his bodily perceptual interaction with it. Perception is a nascent logos, summoning us to the tasks of knowledge and action in a world that has been opened up through our own perception. As a 'nascent logos' perception also lays the foundation for language. Language is not an outer shell of human thought, but is that in which or with which thought originates and breaks forth in expression. The word is the incarnation of thought and in it the thought finds its accomplishment. Speech is not the mere accompaniment of thought, but rather its accomplishment. The engagements and projects of one's body are realized in the encounter with the body of the other which is a factor of one's situation and a part of one's world. This fact of being with the other creates the structures of intersubjectivity, which necessitates communication. In the context of intersubjectivity, the other is encountered as a subject, a non-objectivised presence which enables one to enter into and exist in communion with the other.

Communion necessitates communication of meanings and projects in which the body plays a significant role. Our body is the incarnation of consciousness, its presence in the world, its deployment in space and time. The body exists necessarily here and now. Every instant of movement encompasses the whole span linking together the here and the distant, the

present and the future. It is through the body that I act in the world; space and time are not merely a collection of adjacent points which are synthesised by the consciousness and into which my body is brought in. "I am not in space and time, nor do I conceive space and time; I belong to them, my body combines with them and includes them.... The synthesis of both time and space is a task that always has to be performed afresh."⁶ The body has its world, comprehends its world and the bodily experience of movement is its access to the world and its object. The body is essentially an expressive space; it is a mediator of a world. The body is the medium of having a world: responding to the exigencies of existence, it posits a biological world or a cultural world. Bodily experience makes it evident that imposition of meaning is not a function of universal constituting consciousness. My body is the meaningful core and the inherently dynamic bodily spatiality is the primary prerequisite for the coming into being of a meaningful world.

The image of the 'soul as a spectator of its outer shell' or as 'the pilot at the controls' of the ship leads to the idea of a soul which is contingently related to the body. But the body is not something like an object that I can inspect or an instrument, which I can use. I am an embodied vehicle of operative intentionality, an embodied point of view⁷. Our body is neither a mere object, nor an instrument; it is, rather, our Being-in-the-world: It is the privileged point of encounter, the dialectical blend between the subject and the object.

The relation between the body and the soul brings us to the centre of the mystery of man: man is an incarnate spirit; he is not merely a soul using a body. The body is also implied in the accomplishment of the spirit for the soul becomes itself through the body. The body, due to its structuration as a human body, has attained higher levels of integration and, hence, is the living expression of human behaviour and communication to other persons who are also the centres of meaningful communication and encounters. "It is through my body that I understand other people, just as it is through my body that I

⁶MERLEAU-PONTY, MAURICE, *Phenomenology of Perception*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1962, p.140.

⁷MERLEAU-PONTY, MAURICE, *The Primacy of Perception*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964, p.16.

perceive 'things'.⁸ 'My body is the vehicle of being in the world'; 'I am my body'.⁹ The soul does not use the body; rather it realizes itself through the body.¹⁰ The presence of the body to the soul is a "presence to consciousness of its proper history and of the dialectical stages which it has traversed."¹¹ The essence of the body is to be discovered not in an abstract manner, but in the contingency of existence, in the concrete lived situation. Soul and body are not two external entities or substances; nor can they be regarded as a pure subjectivity transparent to itself and a physical thing. They are integrated in a meaningful structure which does not permit the isolation and separation of the thing and consciousness, matter and form, and body and soul. Thus, for Merleau-Ponty, the body is the bearer of a dialectic and the soul realizes itself through the body. This is a constitutive relationship in which body and soul constantly become a realizing integration in which the *Welt* in its *umwelt* and *mitwelt* dimension plays a decisive role, more especially in the intersubjective dimension. Thus, phenomenologically interpreting the existential exigencies of a subjectivity enshrined in the body that man is, Merleau-Ponty made really original contributions to contemporary philosophy.

Consciousness Incarnate: The Viśiṣṭādvaita of Rāmānuja

The Viśiṣṭādvaita of Rāmānuja is better understood when it is situated within the wider spectrum of Indian philosophical scene, and more precisely, in the context of the Advaita and the Dvaita of Śankara and Madhva, respectively. The philosophy of Rāmānuja is called the Viśiṣṭādvaita, qualified non-dualism. Viśiṣṭādvaita is a system of Advaita but qualified by its own characteristic note which makes it different from the pure Advaita, led by Śankara. Brahman is the unchanging *ādhāra* (foundation or ground) of the universe which is Brahman's attribute as his body. With regard to cause and effect, Viśiṣṭādvaita stands for *satkāryavāda* which says that the effect preexists in the cause in a preeminent way and is allowed to evolve in time with name and form. Thus Brahman is both the *nimitta kāraṇa* and the

⁸MERLEAU-PONTY, *Phenomenology of Perception*, *op. cit.*, p.186.

⁹Cf. MERLEAU-PONTY, *Phenomenology of Perception*, *op. cit.*, p. 150.

¹⁰MERLEAU-PONTY, MAURICE, *The Structure of Behaviour*, Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1963, pp. 202-203.

¹¹MERLEAU-PONTY, *Structure of Behaviour*, *op.cit.*,p.208.

upadāna kāraṇa (efficient and underlying cause) of the universe. The world, thus conceived and brought to existence, will be called, the body of Brahman.

The definition given by Rāmānuja for *śarīra* has special connotations and implies that the *śarīra* is a reality, which is inseparable from the soul or *ātman*. After a critical analysis of the various definitions given for body in *Śrī Bhāṣya*, Rāmānuja proposes the following definition:

That substance which, in regard to all things, as can be accomplished by it, is completely (and always) capable of being controlled and supported by an intelligent soul, and which has its essential nature solely subservient unto the glory of that intelligent soul - that (substance) is the body of that (intelligent) soul.¹²

The definition of the body given by Rāmānuja which is pivotal to the Viśiṣṭādvaita philosophy contains many vital implications. The only substance that has an inseparable relation to the self is the physical body. Consequently, the *śarīra* has to be necessarily inseparable from the soul. In the same way, Brahman, who is modified by the individual soul, has this soul as his body. In the *mahāvākya*, 'tat tvam asi', (*Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, VI.8-15), Rāmānuja traces the essential identity that exists between the Supreme Brahman and the individual self:

It follows that both words *tat* and *tvam*, coordinated in a *sāmanādhikarānya* construction, denote that one Brahman. The word *tat* refers to Brahman as the One who is the cause of the world, the abode of all perfections, the immaculate and the untransmutable One; whereas *tvam* refers to that same Brahman under the aspect of inner ruler of the individual soul as being modified by the embodied soul. So

¹²*Śrī Bhāṣya* II.1.9. in RANGACHARYA, *Śrī Bhāṣya*, Vol. II, p. 262. In *Vedārthasamgraha*, Rāmānuja enunciates the same idea in the following way: "The relation between soul and body means the relation between substratum and dependent entity incapable of functioning separately, between the transcendent controller and the thing controlled, between principal and accessory. In this relation the one term is called *ātman* or "soul" because this is the one who *obtains* an object since he is in all respects the substratum, the controller and the principal; the other term is called, i.e. *form*, because it is a *modification* that is inseparably connected since it is in all respects a dependent entity, thing controlled and accessory. For such is the relation between the individual soul and its body." *Vedārthasamgraha*, § 76, in BUITENEN, *Vedārthasamgraha*, p. 235.

it is said that the words *tat* and *tvam* both apply to the same Brahman but under different aspects.¹³

The relationship that exists between the material body and the finite self is the same as that which exists between the finite self and the Supreme Brahman. Thus, for Rāmānuja, "as the individual souls, distinguished by their connection with aggregates of matter bearing the characteristic marks of humanity, divine nature, and so on, constitute the body of the highest Self, and hence are modes of it, the words denoting those individual souls extend in their connotation up to the very highest Self."¹⁴

It is Brahman who is both the efficient and material cause of Rāmānuja's world. All that came to be has its origin from the Absolute Being. "That from which everything proceeds, in which everything subsists, and to which everything moves, know Him,"¹⁵ says the Upanishad. This is Brahman. He contained everything in Himself in a supremely supereminent way, identified with the simplicity of his own being, and conceived them to be expressed as many, as the text says, "May I become many,"¹⁶ and He allowed them to be. This is the creation theory of Viśiṣṭādvaita. Rāmānuja explains this further by making use of a distinction between the causality effected by God as *kāraṇa* Brahman and *kārya* Brahman. *Kāraṇa Brahman* is that all transcendent Brahman who contains all in himself in a supremely transcendent way and thus is to be seen as the efficient cause of what is created. *Kārya Brahman* is the same Brahman, now seen as effected or expressed in the beings of the world which have assumed name and form according to His design. The world thus produced, which includes sentient and non-sentient beings, (*cit* and *acit*), is conceived as an enlarged body of Brahman, of which Brahman is the inner controller. The emerging organic relationship between Brahman and the world is called *śarīra śarīri bhāva*, a relationship between the body and the indwelling inner controller of the body. Because Brahman is the principal and the body, with its all layers of

¹³ *Vedārthasamgraha*, § 20, in BUITENEN, *Vedārthasamgraha*, 196.

¹⁴ *Śrī Bhāṣya* I.1.1. as in THIBAUT, *Vedānta Sūtras*, 138.

¹⁵ Cf. *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*, III.1.1.

¹⁶ Cf. *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, VI.2.3.

existence, is only an accessory, this is also called, *śeṣa śeṣi bhāva*, a relationship of the principal and the accessory.

The entire universe consisting of the *cit* and *acit* are wholly dependent upon Brahman for their existence. The sentient and non-sentient beings are totally controlled by the Supreme Person. He is their Lord and they are supposed to subserve His purpose. Hence, on the basis of Rāmānuja's definition of the body and the theory of the body-soul relation, the entire universe of the finite self and non-intelligent matter stands in a body-soul relation with respect to Brahman. On the other hand, the Supreme Person is regarded as the soul - the *atman* or *śarīrin* - of the entire universe as He is the Ground (*ādhāra*) of the universe, the Controller (*niyanta*) and the self subsistent entity (*śeṣi*) upon whom everything else is dependent. Thus the universe of sentient and non-sentient beings exists in an organic relationship with Brahman and thus there exists a body-soul relationship between them.

Brahman is the soul of the entire universe, the entire universe constitutes His body. The world and the selves, though they are the effects, remain united to him in the soul-body relationship. While the idea of a soul-body relationship between Brahman and the world can be traced already in the *puruṣasūkta* of *Ṛgveda* and is deeply rooted in the Indian tradition, it was indeed the Viśiṣṭādvaita of Rāmānuja which provided the philosophical justifications for it. Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭādvaita is a creative synthesis of different traditions of Indian philosophical thinking. His theory of body plays a central role in his philosophy. Body in Rāmānuja becomes an essential modality of Brahman. His interpretation of body safeguards the unity and difference between the individual self and the Brahman. With the help of the theory of causality, his understanding of Brahman as creator, supporter, controller and redeemer brings out well the interwovenness of Brahman and universe in terms of Body. As man stands revealed in his body, so does Brahman stand expressed and extended in his body, which is the universe. Thus in Rāmānuja, the term body has much wider meaning and more religious implications. His doctrine of body is developed, drawing inspiration from religious scriptures, varied religious traditions and opposing philosophical schools. Thus Rāmānuja, critically accepting the previous traditions and creatively synthesizing them, made a significant contribution by explaining the body as the essential mode of Brahman's being.

Consciousness Incarnate: Converging and Diverging Points

Having seen the conspectus of the thoughts of both Merleau-Ponty and Rāmānuja regarding the reality body, it will be befitting to consider the areas where their thoughts converge and diverge, without prejudice to the real difference between them as heirs of entirely different traditions, as well as men of very original thinking. Both Rāmānuja and Merleau-Ponty are followers of their traditions, but with a critical attitude. Thus for Merleau-Ponty, 'the return to things themselves' was not the same as it was for Husserl. It was rather a return to the world of lived experience. Similarly, the Husserlian intentionality gets a new orientation and meaning in Merleau-Ponty. The preconscious already embedded in the conscious surges to the forefront in Merleau-Ponty's understanding of intentionality. In similar way, Rāmānuja's Advaita is different and courageously bids farewell to the then dominant Advaita school of Śankara. This is Viśiṣṭādvaita, a new way of interpreting and safeguarding the reality of Brahman and this world.

There is a thrust of synthesis that pervades both Merleau-Ponty and Rāmānuja, though the way this is made is very different. Merleau-Ponty weaves his world of experience centred on the ensouled body, the individualized consciousness. Rāmānuja, on the contrary, sees the last link of the all-pervading synthesis in the absolute consciousness, Brahman which is for him characterized by a world body, containing both sentient and non-sentient beings, all of which are his attributes. They, both Merleau-Ponty and Rāmānuja, stand for a human and divine synthesis, respectively. Correspondingly, the body becomes central to the thinking of both of them. The body is the locus of consciousness for Merleau-Ponty. It is through this human body that man expresses everything and also builds up his living world. It is an ongoing synthesis of space and time. For Rāmānuja, however, the world is the very body of Brahman. For both of them, the body and consciousness, human or divine, exist in an intrinsic interrelationship.

They both agree, but they both differ greatly. The array of differing notes strongly points to one question: What is the ultimate ground of this world, man or God? Merleau-Ponty thinks that this ground must be man himself who is the locus, inspiration and creator of the world. The contemporary hero is man. For Rāmānuja, doubtlessly, Brahman is this ultimate ground. His world, including himself, is grounded on Brahman. Here

we must bear in mind that a clear-cut distinction between philosophy and faith is not so much at home to the Indian style of thinking.

Merleau-Ponty as a thinker of the body takes us further into the depth and breadth of meaning that the body unveils. Merleau-Ponty presents the body as if all-pervading. The body is not just a thing in an isolated space. Accordingly, the human being becomes an embodied subject, unique and integral, who is capable of meeting other subjects and communicating with them in a language which emerges from his primordial openness to the other. The human body, he maintains, is inherently a dynamic synthesis of intentionalities. Merleau-Ponty tries to establish our existential roots in corporeality and in the perceptual world. "Intersubjectivity is intercorporeality."¹⁷ Man is an incarnate subject and is constantly in dialogue with an intersubjective world. This intersubjectivity intends a system of "self-others-world"¹⁸ where the world is constituted by the self and the other, yet the world is something more than the sum of the self and the other. Dialogue "expresses the total subject's fundamental way of being in the world."¹⁹

Relatedness is the central theme, which Merleau-Ponty develops. This is a healthy trend to see how interrelated we are, how each and every action of ours affects others and our universe. For Merleau-Ponty, the earth is "the ground of experience." The reality of our rootedness in the earth is the basis of the interrelatedness that exists among all the creatures of the earth. Such a vision would naturally contribute towards the philosophical grounding for a more existential ecology. Here reason becomes not a tool to subjugate and dominate over nature, but the healthy path to enter the heart of nature. However, Merleau-Ponty's world is limited and it is through and through a human and finite world. Obviously, Merleau-Ponty remains silent about the possibility of an enquiry into a Consciousness, which is neither time-bound

¹⁷Cf. MERLEAU-PONTY, MAURICE, "Husserl et la notion de Nature (Notes prises au cours de Maurice Merleau-Ponty)," *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, 70e année, juillet-septembre 1965, no. 3, 257-269, p. 264.

¹⁸MERLEAU-PONTY, *Phenomenology of Perception*, *op. cit.*, p.60.

¹⁹MERLEAU-PONTY, MAURICE, *Sense and Non-Sense*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964, p.108.

nor world-bound. Indeed, our world must be human. But this is not contrary to the fact that it is also divine. The divine dimension of this world is practically left in oblivion by Merleau-Ponty as it is in many other existential philosophers.

A significant contribution of Rāmānuja in the field of philosophy was his defence of reality against the onslaught of a *māyā* theory which denied it. Vehemently attacking Śankara who promoted absolute non-dualism or monism, Rāmānuja renounced the *māyā* theory, the distinction between the absolute Brahman and the personal Brahman, the higher and the lower Brahman and established a personal God as the centre of the soul and of the world. The mutual relationship between Brahman and the world is, then, termed as the principal and accessory, both real, though the accessory is naturally and totally dependent on the principal. While the universe, which is, the expression of Brahman is real and not a mere illusion as the Advaita of Śankara presents it, Brahman is not identical with the universe. While the souls and matter, the modes and expressions of Brahman, are in constant flux and are undergoing modifications, Brahman remains the eternal, changeless single reality. The Supreme Brahman is both transcendent and immanent. Reality is, therefore, neither absolute monism nor dualism, but qualified non-dualism.

Consciousness Incarnate: Creative Synthesis

Every human being is an embodied consciousness. It is through the body that man gets contextualized and localized. It is through the body that man builds the world. The body is a meeting point of consciousness and matter, *cit* and *acit*. Merleau-Ponty draws our attention to this wonder in the world: embodied consciousness, its creation of the world and its capacity to transcend the world it has created in virtue of its openness to create new worlds. Rāmānuja starts with Brahman who is Absolute consciousness. But this Brahman also ensouls a body of his choice. This body which is cosmic includes all the bodies and spirits in this world and in all possible worlds. In faith, he wants to hold together these two aspects of the Ultimate Reality: an absolute God having the world as his body, in the sense that the world is internally controlled and directed by Him and is totally dependent on and rhythmically moving around him.

Both Merleau-Ponty and Rāmānuja consider body as organic and not mechanical. Consciousness and the body together build up an organism. The entire creativity proceeds from this organic harmony of the body. Merleau-Ponty makes this clear when he says that the body we are dealing with is "an animated living reality". Rāmānuja considers the world body with which Brahman is qualified (*viśiṣṭa*) animated or ensouled and innerly controlled by Brahman. Merleau-Ponty analyses the body of man whom the traditional Indian philosophy calls the microcosm. Rāmānuja, on the other hand, describes the whole macrocosm as the body of Brahman. Consciousness incarnate is a central theme that is common to both of them. A series of ensoulments, moving from wider to inner circles is seen in the world conceived by both Merleau-Ponty and Rāmānuja.

The body, whether cosmic or personal, is a sacred entity. Indian thinkers have always approached the beauty and greatness of nature with a sense of wonder and awe. This marvellous nature serves as the background of human drama and as scaffolding for divine intervention in history. The *Moksha-dharma-parva* of great Indian epic, *Mahabharata* makes a vivid presentation of this cosmic body of Brahman: "Mountains are his bones, earth is the flesh, sea is the blood, sky is his abdomen. Air is his breath, fire is his splendour, and rivers are nerves. The sun and moon, which are called Agni and Soma, are the eyes of Brahman. The upper part of the sky is his head. The earth is his feet and directions are his hands". As God said to Moses in the Old Testament, the earth on which man is placed is sacred. It demands a basic acceptance of the earth as God's body, and the human being is also part of God's body and hence both sacred. "We do not *have* bodies.... We *are* bodies, "body and soul"²⁰. The dignity and divinity of nature and human body is to be preserved and protected since they all form integral constituents of the organic whole, as 'the wine and the branches', the body of God. We are now striving after the reestablishment of the perfect rhythm of the universe, which is the body of Brahman. By discarding the sacredness of the universe, which is the body of Brahman, by boosting our ego, forgetting the divine self abiding therein, we have disintegrated and destroyed the world, neglected and wounded the human individual and finally left out our own divine centre in

²⁰MCFAGUE, SALLIE, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*. London: SCM Press Ltd., 1993 p. 14

complete oblivion. The misery of this meaningless vacuum, the agonizing pain of the disorder of this universe is now our predicament. Therefore we suffer. The hue and cry for an eco-spirituality is in reality a cry for the reestablishment of the rhythm and harmony emanating from the innermost centre of this universe. This centre is not a material spot, but a conscious centre of inner control, the ultimate *bindhu* (point) of divine consciousness within the cosmos, which the *Viśiṣṭādvaita* understands as God. The innermost spirit abiding within us will characterize our own human consciousness and become our awareness leading to one inner voice and establishing an undisturbed rhythm. In this reestablished rhythm God will be the ultimate centre of all centres of life in the world, in our body and in our soul. The soul, ensouled by God, will be spontaneously related to God who is the one and non-dual (*Advaita*) supreme Being, the *śeṣin*, holding all things together in Him. The soul together with this universe, forming the body of Brahman is the *Seṣa* surrendered to Brahman, the *śeṣin* and all together they form one reality, the Brahman qualified by his own attributes *cit* and *acit* comprising his world body (*Viśiṣṭa+advaita*).

Both Merleau-Ponty and Rāmānuja are highlighting the different aspects of wholeness within the very human and the Divine. The human world, the historical, is certainly characterized by contingency, which is well emphasized by Merleau-Ponty. In fact, because of this contingency factor of human life, Merleau-Ponty declines to acknowledge a God as absolute transcendence, unrelated to the cosmos. However, the human self contains itself a deeper profundity, in virtue of the very consciousness that has been embodied, which makes it ever seeking and self-transcending. The wonder of subjectivity and the splendour of consciousness, embedded in the body and ever in dialogue with the world, if understood exhaustively, and interpreted with an inner openness, will certainly lead us to new meanings of the Human and the Divine.