

A Phenomenological take on the Problem of Reification

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Abstract

This article attempts to provide a new look at an old idea within Marxist discourse. *Reification*, as first imagined by Marx and later Lukacs, describes a process by which capitalism transforms human beings and social relations into things. Although the concept has been subjected to much abstraction and reinvention over the years, this article attempts to address a foundational problem that has remained unsolved since its inception: Close analysis reveals that the concept of reification has never been developed to include an example of an alternative or non-reified state of being. To solve this foundational problem, I look beyond Marxism and to the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. For Merleau-Ponty, the body is our primary vehicle for being-in-the-world, but what makes his philosophy unique is his emphasis on embodied subjectivity, as well as his dialectical conception of corporeality and being-in-the-world. From this view, the social and material worlds can best be understood as dynamic realms of intersubjectivity, while sentient beings always exist as subjects prior to the reifying effects of capitalism. Building upon an ongoing dialectic between the ideas of Marx, Lukacs, Merleau-Ponty and others, I will ultimately reframe the concept of reification as a objectifying tendency, precipitating from capitalism's ability to obscure the lived experience of the phenomenal body.

Keywords: Reification; Phenomenology; Marxism; Georg Lukacs; Maurice Merleau-Ponty

1. Introduction

Perhaps no other concept in Marxist discourse has been subjected to as much conjecture, abstraction, and rethinking as reification. Despite the foundational problems of its early conception, a diverse array of contemporary thinkers—from “queer” Marxists such as Kevin Floyd¹, to more prominent figures like Fredric Jameson—still use it as a catch-all term for describing a variety of phenomena. Perhaps this is because upon first glance, reification appears to be a fairly simple, yet malleable concept that most people can relate to? After all, anyone who has traded a substantial amount of their time and labor might remember at least a moment during their work-day when they felt like a mere cog in the machine. Although Marx was originally criticizing the totalizing effects of 19th century industrial capitalism, we can still see examples of this phenomenon in the world today—e.g., soldiers are often indoctrinated to become mindless robots, then are used as mere cannon fodder;

¹ See Kevin Floyd's, *The Reification of Desire: Toward a Queer Marxism*, published by the University of Minnesota Press

women's bodies are commodified and exploited to sell everything from cars to clothing; despite the success of labor laws, children in developing countries are forced to work in sweatshops to produce cheap commodities for Western consumers, while citizens in even the most progressive nations like Sweden are reduced to faceless number-identifications with price-tags attached to them. Simply put, the capitalist system and its commodity relations have the tendency to transform human beings and social relations into things. Although labor-reforms and progressive politics have helped assuage some of the harsher effects of capitalism, the phenomenon first described by Marx over a century ago remains highly visible today.

In its most unconvoluted form, reification seems to be a very accurate way of describing how under capitalism, people and human relations take on the objective, calculable properties of things. However, closer analysis reveals two major problems with this concept: First, as I will show in greater detail later on, the concept has not been fully developed to include an example of an alternative or non-reified state of being. This is extremely important from a discursive standpoint, for only a subject that exists *prior* and independently of the objective world could be wronged by being made into a thing, but a century's worth of Marxist thinkers have failed to describe a non-reified state of being. This failure to provide an alternative (which is often one of the major criticisms of Marxism) I characterize as the "Spectre of Eden."

The second problem facing the concept of reification is that in my opinion, it has been subjected to too much abstraction and misuse over the years. For example, Axel Honneth's book *Reification*(2008) seems to conflate the sexual objectification of women with reification, while philosophers like Gillian Rose have even gone so far as to write that reification is not a concept, and that "to conceive of it as such is to reify it" (Rose, 1978: 45). In the case of Honneth, we see a misuse of the term as a synonym for what should be understood as an effect of patriarchy, while in Rose we see it abstracted to the point where virtually everything becomes reified. Although both thinkers might be correct to a certain extent, (there are certainly instances where sexual objectification and reification converge, while concepts that are sold on the market can certainly undergo a reifying process) their different usages of the term strips it from its specific function as a critique of capitalism.

It is my hope to help further develop this concept while avoiding the superfluous abstractions that tend to dominate the world of higher thinking. After all, it was Marx who said "philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, the point, however, is to *change* it" (Marx, 1845: accessed online); but how can we ever hope to change the world when fairly straight-forward concepts are made too abstract or esoteric?

To accomplish this, I turn to what might seem to be an unlikely source: the Phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. For Merleau-Ponty, the body is our primary vehicle for being-in-the-world, but what makes his philosophy unique is his emphasis on embodied subjectivity, as well as his dialectical conception of

corporeality and being-in-the-world: According to Merleau-Ponty, the *phenomenal body* is an organic unity, existing ambiguously as both subject and object, thus undermining the popular Cartesian dualism of mind and body, as well as Sartre's notion of for-itself and in-itself. While Merleau-Ponty's conception of the body has deep ontological and epistemological implications, what is most important to this study is his meticulously argued notion that the body cannot be conceived as a mere object or thing-in-itself. In addition to this, Merleau-Ponty also shows how both the social and material worlds are dynamic realms of intersubjectivity, thus resources and concepts that are typically reified under capitalism do not originate as pure objects-in-themselves.

In facilitating a dialectic between phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and a century's worth of Marxist discourse, I will ultimately reframe the concept of reification as an objectifying tendency, precipitating from capitalism's ability to obscure the lived experience of the phenomenal body.

2. Reification and the Spectre of Eden.

The concept of reification first makes its appearance in Marx's analysis of commodity relations found in volume one of *Capital*: "There is an antithesis, immanent in the commodity, between use-value and value, between private labour which must simultaneously manifest itself as directly social labour, and a particular concrete kind of labour which simultaneously counts as merely abstract universal labour, between the conversion of things into persons and the conversion of persons into things" (Marx, 1990: 209). Here Marx is referring to how the capitalist mode of production endows commodities with almost human-like attributes while transforming actual people into objects—i.e. the laborers who produce commodities, and the consumers of commodities. Although the actual word reification only appears (in name) as a footnote to the above quote, the concept will reappear in later volumes of *Capital*, and is even found in earlier writings such as Marx's essay on estranged labor from *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*: "The devaluation of the world of men is in direct proportion to the increasing value of the world of things. Labor produces not only commodities; it produces itself and the worker as a commodity – and this at the same rate at which it produces commodities in general" (Marx, 1844, accessed online). We even see the reification of the family alluded to when Marx proclaims in *The Communist Manifesto* that "The bourgeoisie has torn away from the family its sentimental veil, and has reduced the family relation to a mere money relation" (Marx, 2002: 222).

To use a biblical analogy, Marx seems to be suggesting that human beings have been reduced to working and living in a fallen state of false consciousness; a post-Eden dystopia where our true relationship with ourselves and the world has been obscured by commodity relations, capitalism, and its ideologies. Neither Marx nor Engels really develop their conception of an alternative, original, or unfallen state

beyond their notion of primitive communism, however, the specter of Eden haunts much of their writings, as well as the writings of later Marxists. From this view, reification can be framed as one of the symptoms of living in this fallen state of being.

It is not until Georg Lukacs' *History and Class Consciousness* that this concept really begins to develop. The chapter "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat" incorporates Marx's writings in *Capital* with Lukacs' own interpretations and abstractions, creating the most comprehensive work on the subject, as well as a classic moment for Western Marxism. Lukacs begins his essay with the simple question of "how far is commodity exchange together with its structural consequences able to influence the total outer and inner life of society?" (Lukacs, 1971: 84) and concludes that:

It stamps its imprint upon the whole consciousness of man; his qualities and abilities are no longer an organic part of his personality, they are things which he can "own" or "dispose of" like the various objects of the external world. And there is no natural form in which human relations can be cast, no way in which man bring his physical and psychic "qualities" into play without their being subjected increasingly to this reifying process. (Lukacs, 1971: 100)

According to Lukacs, as the commodity becomes the universal category of society as a whole, it transforms human consciousness, creating a second nature in the process (Lukacs, 1971: 86). With this second nature, comes the tendency to (a.) treat objects in the world as mere things for exploitation and profit making, (b) regard other people solely as the objects of profitable transactions, and (c.) see one's own abilities as supplemental resources that can be bought and sold.

Lukacs finds a real life example of reification in the theories of Frederick Taylor, a mechanical engineer who advocated a popular form of labor management that synthesized workflows to assure labor productivity and economic efficiency. Under what would later be called *taylorism*, workers and managers became mere cogs in the machine: "In the past the man has been first; in the future the system must be first. This in no sense, however, implies that great men are not needed. On the contrary, the first *object* of any good system must be that of developing first-class men; and under systematic management the best man rises to the top more certainly and more rapidly than ever before" (Taylor, 1919: 7). Frederick Taylor's *The Principles of Scientific Management* (1919) influenced everyone from Henry Ford to Lenin (Want, 2002: 161), and advocated a form of total reification that at times reads like pure satire:

Now one of the very first requirements for a man who is fit to handle pig iron as a regular occupation is that he shall be so stupid and so phlegmatic that he more nearly resembles in his mental make-up the ox than any other type. The man who is mentally alert and intelligent is for this very reason entirely unsuited to what would, for him, be the grinding monotony of work of

this character. Therefore the workman who is best suited to handling pig iron is unable to understand the real science of doing this class of work. (Taylor, 1919: 59)

This form of labor management represented Marx's worst fears coming into fruition, as physical bodies and even human mental faculties become objects for industrial labor and exploitation.

For contemporary Marxists such as Fredric Jameson, the phenomenon of reification has become so penetrative in today's society that it has even gone so far as to colonize the unconscious. In *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*, Jameson writes that reification and commodification have become so universalized as to seem like "well-nigh natural and organic entities and forms" (Jameson, 1995: 212). This seems like a rather bold claim, for it suggests a certain totalizing effect that is perhaps too simplistic and reductive, however, there is no doubt that the mode of production plays a large role in determining how society is arranged, resources are allocated, time is divided, and human-value is determined. Considering this, it is highly probable that this same mode of production creates a certain reifying *tendency* that bleeds into other areas of daily life. Take this hypothetical, yet realistic scenario as an example:

Most able-bodied adults spend the majority of their waking hours working to create profit for their employers. In turn, the employer must see his workers as means to an end, rather than ends in themselves. The employer establishes a work-schedule with the creation of surplus value in mind, and the typical week is structured greatly after this grueling, 5-day, 40-hour a week schedule. Children—who are now seen as assets and expenses rather than mere bundles of joy—are sent to daycare or school during the hours that mom and dad are at work. In school, they are evaluated and indoctrinated so that they can one day join the workforce or perhaps even become entrepreneurs. In the evening, tv-shows and commercials are carefully placed in timeslots, carefully geared at reinforcing the system and making the alienated workers believe that consumption equals happiness. Weekends are thus spent buying the commodities that have been carefully marketed to their target audiences as status symbols, while one's own career and ability to accumulate things becomes an identity-marker and status symbol in itself.

In such a society, we sometimes view the people around us as career first, person second: There goes "Joe the Plumber" and "Nancy the Lawyer." Human value is thus contingent upon a person's commodified abilities, their career, and their objective status as either a taker or maker. As a result, we sometimes glorify those who create jobs and wealth through unethical practices, while demonizing the beggar who has perhaps just fallen on hard times. The social sphere becomes a hostile environment of individualized destiny, greed, and trickle down economics, while the material world is treated like a mere thing for private exploitation, consumption, and ownership. As our sense of community and being-in-the-world is eroded by the capitalist mode of production, sentient beings and the social sphere begin to take on

the objective, calculable properties of mere things. The complexity of human existence is forgotten and people are seen as social assets and/or liabilities, exploiters and exploited, producers and consumers, us and them. As we become even more polarized and alienated from each other, extreme forms of reification, such as sex-trafficking, dwarf tossing, and sweatshop labor become more acceptable. The reifying gaze will of course vary from person to person, but what is implicit here is the role capitalism plays in influencing and obscuring our true relationship with the other, the material world, and ourselves, thus creating what Lukacs describes as a *second nature*.

The question never adequately answered by Marx, Lukacs or later thinkers is "what is this first nature, or unfallen/unreified state of being?" In fact, the failure to answer this question—i.e. the question of Eden—has been the source of much criticism over the years. For example, according to Louis Althusser, reification is an extension of Marx's theory of alienation, but he finds this problematic since something can only be described as being alienated by comparing it to some kind of unalienated state of affairs:

The whole, fashionable, theory of 'reification' depends on a projection of the theory of alienation found in the early texts [of Marx], particularly the 1844 Manuscripts, on to the theory of 'fetishism' in 'Capital'. In the 1844 Manuscripts, the objectification of the human essence is claimed as the indispensable preliminary to the re-appropriation of the human essence by man. Throughout the process of objectification, man only exists in the form of an objectivity in which he meets his own essence in the appearance of a foreign, non-human, essence. This 'objectification' is not called 'reification' even though it is called inhuman. Inhumanity is not represented par excellence by the model of a 'thing': but sometimes by the model of animality (or even of pre-animality—the man who no longer ever has simple animal relations with nature), sometimes by the model of the omnipotence and fascination of transcendence (God, the State) and of money, which is, of course, a 'thing'. In 'Capital' the only social relation that is presented in the form of a thing (this piece of metal) is money. But the conception of money as a thing (that is, the confusion of value with use-value in money) does not correspond to the reality of this 'thing': it is not the brutality of a simple 'thing' that man is faced with when he is in direct relation with money; it is a power (or a lack of it) over things and men. An ideology of reification that sees 'things' everywhere in human relations confuses in this category 'thing' (a category more foreign to Marx cannot be imagined) every social relation, conceived according to the model of a money-thing ideology. (Louis Althusser, 1965: 230)

In their book *The Marxist Theory of Alienation*, George Novack and Ernest Mandel are able to answer this criticism in regards to alienation:

The alienation of the worker and his labor means that something basic has changed in the life of the worker. What is it? Normally everybody has some creative capacity, certain talents lodged in him, untapped potentialities for human development which should be expressed in his labor activity. However, once the institution of wage labor is prevalent, these possibilities become nullified. (Mandel & Novack, 2010: 25)

Following the logic of Althusser, reification can be viewed as a symptom of alienation, which according to Mandel and Novack's reading of Marx, is a symptom of wage labor. From this view, alienated labor entails mechanical and schematic work activity that leads to a man giving up his life in order to insure his material existence (Mandel & Novack, 2010:57). This, in turn, leads to people viewing others through the lenses of whatever economic relations they have with them (Mandel & Novack, 2010:28) According to Mandel and Novack, this form of labor suppresses the subjective and creative side of the worker, however, this view fails to account for the many jobs that actually exploit the creativity of the worker. Furthermore, like Lukacs, Mandel and Novack fail to give an example of an idealistic or non-reified state of being.

Jurgen Habermas echoes a similar sentiment in *The Theory of Communicative Action*, claiming that Lukacs theory of reification appeals to the "totality of a rationally organized life-context" using it as a standard for the "irrationality of societal rationalization" (Habermas, 1984: 357). For Habermas, Lukacs is making a normative judgment that presupposes an idealistic notion of subjectivity. In other words, only a subject that exists *prior* and independently of the objective world could be wronged by being made into a thing, but Lukacs does not provide an example of this prior or idealistic state, opting instead for what Habermas calls "rational-life relations" (Habermas, 1984: 363) achieved through proletarian revolution.

So once again, the spectre of Eden seems to be haunting the concept of reification. Whether the term is being used for making a normative judgement or not, to reify something implies some kind of prior, non-reified condition. Solving this foundational problem is important in my opinion, for any discussion that implies what *should be* must first begin with an accurate approximation of who we are and what our relationship with the world is. To find an example of this unreified state of being, I would now like to turn to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's notion of the phenomenal body.

3. Almost Eden: Maurice Merleau-Ponty and the Phenomenal Body

In Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), the human body is shown to be the permanent condition through which we gain access to a material reality that we are unable to transcend. It is from this primordial base that I believe we can derive the ontological foundation needed for a fully developed concept of reification.

The main objective of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology can best be described as the rediscovery of lived experience through what he calls the *phenomenal body*. To illustrate this, Ponty argues for the primacy of perception in human experience, going to great lengths to prove his fundamental assertion: the body perceives, thus the body is our medium for being-in-the-world.

The body is our general medium for having the world. Sometimes it is restricted to the actions necessary for the conservation of life, and accordingly it posits around us a biological world; at other times, elaborating upon these primary actions and moving from their literal to a figurative meaning, it manifests through them a core of new significance: this is true of motor habits such as dancing. Sometimes, finally, the meaning aimed at cannot be achieved by the body's natural means; it must then build itself an instrument, and it projects thereby around itself a cultural world. (Ponty, 2002: 169)

The phenomenal body cannot be separated into mind, body, or spirit, for it is the dialectical amalgamation of all three. It is the means by which we grasp at reality as it is already given to us by our very involvement in the world. This conception of corporeality, as we will see, is very important from an ethical standpoint because it raises the status of the human body above the level of a mere object without completely disengaging it from the physical and cultural world.

In fact, Merleau-Ponty dedicates much of the opening chapters of *Phenomenology of Perception* to demonstrating just how the human body cannot be conceptualized as an object (in-itself), but rather as something that constitutes a third kind of being between subject (for-itself) and object: "In the first place it was stated that my body is distinguishable from the table or the lamp in that I can turn away from the latter whereas my body is constantly perceived. It is therefore an object which does not leave me. But in that case is it still an object?" (Ponty, 2002: 103). Merleau-Ponty elaborates further, "But I am not in front of my body, I am in it, or rather *I am it*. [. . .] We do not merely behold as spectators the relations between the parts of our body, and the correlations between the visual and tactile body: we are ourselves the unifier of these arms and legs, the person who both sees and touches them" (Ponty, 2002: 173). In other words, we are not mere objects or a collection of parts, but rather embodied subjects who perceive and experience the world through our bodies. Although we can behold and imagine the individual parts of our body, we can never fully transcend it in its totality, for our embodiment is our permanent condition that makes perception possible and reality accessible. We are *it*, and it is already immersed in the world.

Merleau-Ponty's conception of the body differs greatly from the more popular conception outlined in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*. Unlike Merleau-Ponty, Sartre maintains that we experience the body of the other as an object, while our own body is experienced as a psychic projection: The body is the psychic object par excellence—the only psychic object. (Sartre: 1995: 347) Whereas Merleau-Ponty argues for an organic unity between mind and body, Sartre claims there is a separation of mind and body that makes us experience ourselves from the view of another: "I am the other in relation to my eye. I can see my eye as a sense organ, but I cannot see the seeing" (Sartre: 1995, 304).

In his reimagining of the body, Merleau-Ponty situates his own ontological position

in relation to what he calls the empiricism of the hard sciences, and the intellectualism of psychology and traditional philosophy. Although these positions occupy two different spaces, both share one fundamental characteristic in Merleau-Ponty's view: Intellectualism and Empiricism have adopted the Cartesian dualism that separates the rational from the material, the mental from the physical, the subject from the object, the mind from the body. Merleau-Ponty writes, "we have become accustomed, through the influence of Cartesian tradition, to disengage from the object: the reflective attitude simultaneously purifies the common notions of body and soul by defining the body as the sum of its parts with no interior, and the soul being as a being wholly present to itself without distance" (Ponty, 2002: 230). In the case of intellectualism, it raises reality to the status of an idea, whereas empiricism reduces reality to the material or physical. From both positions, the human body becomes a mere object (in-itself): either a concept or mental projection that can be known like other objects in the world, or a biological entity that can be dissected and reduced to mere parts like a machine. According to Merleau-Ponty, both perspectives put man above himself, above experience, and above the world. Although arising out of lived perception, these positions cannot give an accurate account of reality as it is *lived* and *experienced* in the world:

There are two senses, and two only, of the word 'exist': one exists as a thing or else one exists as a consciousness. The *experience* of our own body, on the other hand, reveals to us an ambiguous mode of existing. If I try to think of it as a cluster of third person processes—'sight', 'motility', 'sexuality'—I observe that these 'functions' cannot be interrelated, and related to the world, by causal connections, they are obscurely drawn together and mutually implied in a unique drama. [. . .] Whether it is a question of another's body or my own, I have no means of knowing the human body other than of *living* it, which means taking up on my own account the drama which is being played out in it, and losing myself in it. (Ponty, 2002: 230-231)

For Merleau-Ponty, being-in-the-world is too dynamic and ambiguous to be reduced to the interpretations of intellectualism and empiricism. In his view, the phenomenal body overcomes the imaginary divide between physical and mental, object and subject, material and rational, in-itself and for-itself. It is here that he finds an overall organic unity in the phenomenal body, an idea that he returns to throughout *Phenomenology of Perception*.

In Merleau-Ponty's view, objects in the world come to us as unstable meanings or structures (Ponty, 2002: 68-73), while the environment consists of "a collection of possible points which [. . .] bodily action may operate"(Ponty, 2002: 121). Objects in the environment exist prior to language or knowledge, and can only be grasped in a limited way through their interaction with the phenomenal body. This means that our perceptions of certain objects can be influenced by the historical and cultural contexts in which they are encountered, however, at the primordial base, the body seems to have an almost unspoken understanding that exists prior to cultural influences.

To demonstrate this, Merleau-Ponty refers constantly to various tactile phenomena in blind patients and even infants. For example, by referencing Gelb and Goldstein's accounts of psychic blindness, he shows how concrete movements like grasping holds an almost "privileged position" over sight in regards to our interaction with objects (Ponty, 2002: 118). It is almost as if Merleau-Ponty is suggesting that we are on a need to know basis with the world. The phenomenal body, as a totality, gives us just what we need to navigate through this reality, but navigating through and rising above are two very different things. Merleau-Ponty puts it best in his article entitled *The Primacy of Perception* when he says that there is a "paradox of immanence and transcendence in perception. Immanence, because the perceived object cannot be foreign to him who perceives; transcendence, because it always contains something more than what is actually given" (Ponty, 1964: 16)

This brings me to the final element of Merleau-Ponty's dialectical reimagining of corporeality as it pertains to being-in-the-world: In Merleau-Ponty's view, the phenomenal body is always a part of the world, thus engages in a constant, ambiguous dialogue with it; this includes physical reality, truth, freedom, time, the environment, physical objects, and other sentient beings. Merleau-Ponty writes, "my personal existence must be the resumption of a prepersonal tradition. There is, therefore, another subject beneath me, for whom a world exists before I am here, and who marks out my place in it. This captive or natural spirit is my body" (Ponty, 2002: 296). In other words, all aspects of being-in-the-world must be brought back to the experience that precedes all knowledge—i.e. the lived experience of the phenomenal body. Once this is accomplished, we can then have a better understanding of how our perceptions give rise to the interpretations of empiricism and intellectualism. However, Merleau-Ponty also wants us to realize the limitations of our own perceptions as we reflect back on lived experience: "I cannot understand the function of the living body except by enacting it myself, and except in so far as I am a body which rises to the world" (Ponty, 2002: 87). In other words, we are not pure consciousness projecting ourselves out to the world; our very embodiment is what grounds us in it, thus preventing us from fully transcending a world that we are already immersed in.

From this view, the natural world as a totality is not a pure object (in-itself), but rather a *communal horizon*, "pregnant with its form" (Ponty, 1964:15); existing to be engaged and perceived by other embodied subjects. Merleau-Ponty writes, "the world itself, which (to give a first, rough definition) is the totality of perceptible things and the things of all things, must be understood not as an object in the sense the mathematician or the physicist give to this word - but as the universal style of all possible perceptions" (Ponty, 1964: 16). Once again, Merleau-Ponty is showing us how the ambiguity of lived experience gives rise to objectifying positions like empiricism, and how this position, on its own, cannot give a full account of what it

means to actually live in the world. Such a position, when adopted by a political regime, can lead to a society of unequal social relations and false consciousness. For example, if we see the world as being a pure object (in-itself), we might be more likely to treat it merely as a means for creating profit rather than a communal horizon existing for all who perceive it. Furthermore, much like empiricism and intellectualism, historical formations can remove us from lived experience, contributing to the *reification* of the material world and our social relations.

For Merleau-Ponty, the social world is best described as a dynamic realm of intersubjectivity. He does not see society as being a pure object, often warning against the influence of Cartesian dualism in our social formations: "It is false to place ourselves in society as an object among other objects, as it is to place society within ourselves as an object of thought, and in both cases the mistake lies in treating the social as an object" (Ponty, 2002: 421). In other words, we are not machines interacting with other machines in a world of pure objects. Nor are we pure consciousness, lost in a matrix of mental projections and hallucinations. Human experience, as it is lived through the phenomenal body, tells of a very different story: We are embodied subjects, mutually engaged in a world with other embodied subjects. We are not above the world or outside of it, but equal participants in an ongoing drama that is so overwhelming that we sometimes lose sight of its true nature. The truth may come to us in perception, however, it is influenced by historical/cultural factors, as well as our body's limited capacity to attain it at any given moment.

Contrasted with Sartre's focus on personal freedom, Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on embodiment and intersubjectivity is considered to be more compatible with Marxism (Miller, 109: 1976), and both Marx and Merleau-Ponty seem to agree on the notion of *relative autonomy*. In other words, our freedom is curtailed by our own body and its involvement in the world. Even though we sometimes have the illusion of being free, closer analysis reveals that we are limited by our own material reality, as well as social formations that force us into adopting certain roles while engaging with others in reified social relationships. It is Merleau-Ponty's goal to help us rediscover social relations beyond the confines of this false consciousness.

As we project ourselves towards the other in society, we identify their *otherness* while recognizing their *sameness*:

It is thus necessary that, in the perception of the another, I find myself in relation with another "myself," who is, in principle, open to the same truths as I am, in relation to the same being that I am. And this perception is realized. From the depths of my subjectivity I see another subjectivity invested with equal rights appear, because the behavior of the other takes place within my perceptual field. I understand this behavior, the words of another; I espouse his thought because this other, born in the midst of my phenomena, appropriates them and treats them in accord with typical behaviors which I myself have experienced. Just as my body, as the system of all my holds on the world, founds the unity of the objects which I perceive, in the

same way the body of the other - as the bearer of symbolic behaviors and of the behavior of true reality - tears itself away from being one of my phenomena, offers me the task of a true communication, and confers on my objects the new dimension of intersubjective being or, in other words, of objectivity. (Ponty, 1964: 17-18)

Thus, the ethical treatment of the other begins with a type of recognition: As I observe the other, I recognize his or her status as an embodied subject engaged in the world. Despite an array of superficial differences, I should not treat the other as an object, for my own lived experience tells me that I am not an object. Instead, I recognize in the other the same characteristics of embodied subjectivity that I also possess, and as I engage them, their ability to speak and interact confirms my observations. Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on embodiment, as well as his recognition of both similarity and difference, is very important as we attempt to find a practical application for his philosophy in the real world.

Perhaps it is through Ponty's non-Cartesian, dialectical reimagining of being-in-the-world that we can begin to locate a sense of ethics worthy of lived experience. Although ethics is not the primary focus of *Phenomenology of Perception*, it is at least implied that "value begins with life and sentience, with the capacity to feel pleasure and pain; while morality begins with the capacity to sympathize and empathize with other humans [. . .] Ethical values, then, are rooted in life and sentience, which are rooted in, are a part of, and which emerge from nature" (Low, 2012: 60). Once this is acknowledged, we can then discuss what conditions best supports life and reduces suffering.

Following this logic, we must reimagine social relations as they pertain to being-in-the-world. As mentioned earlier, the material and the social worlds should not be seen as mere objects. Ponty writes, "we must therefore rediscover, after the natural world, the social world, not as an object or sum of objects, but as a permanent field or dimension of existence: I may well turn away from it, but not cease to be situated relatively to it" (Ponty, 2002: 421). If human life and embodiment are intimately connected to our permanent engagement with this dimension of existence, then what we do to the other, we do to ourselves, and what we do to the world, we do to all living things.

Ethics begins with the recognition of the other as an embodied subject, who, like me, is engaged in a dialectical relationship with the world. Thus, the social and material worlds are dimensions of existence that all living things depend on, interact with, and are bound-to via their embodiment. This does not mean that we should treat a rock the same way that we treat a human, however, it does mean that all of our actions have an ethical dimension via their connection to the other in a *non-reified*, social setting. However, as Merleau-Ponty suggests, we must first acknowledge our status as embodied subjects before we can even attempt to implement ethics in the world. This means subverting the influence of Cartesian dualism and capitalism by

bringing human experience back to the realm of the phenomenal body.

4. A New Look at Reification

Before I come back to the issue of reification, I would like to reestablish my position, which can best be described as a synthesis between the political discourse initiated by Karl Marx and the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty: From a phenomenological viewpoint, human beings are best described as embodied subjects interacting with others in a world that they are unable to transcend in everyday perception. We are not mere machines on an assembly line, nor is the world a pure object for private exploitation. However, as Marxism reveals, this phenomenological experience is often forgotten as we are interpolated by the capitalist system. In the process, we begin to see the material world as mere object for exploitation, while social relations and even our own conceptions of ourselves become more thing-like. Thus, reification can best be understood as a form of forgetting that precipitates from our participation in the system.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the phenomenal body overcomes the subject/object dichotomy, so to reify an individual is to *forget* a vital element of lived experience—i.e. embodied subjectivity. Furthermore, social relations cannot be viewed as mere objects either, for they are derived from what Ponty describes as a dynamic realm of intersubjectivity. From this view, the skills and attributes that are typically bought and sold on the market are not mere things that can be completely separated from the individual or society that helps cultivate them, but are instead seen as being part of an intricate dialectical web. This holistic conception of the social sphere might strike some as being too naive, idealistic, or even a bit strange, but such apprehensions might be evidence of just how far removed from lived experience we have become.

What we see in capitalism is the complete antithesis of Merleau-Ponty's notion of being-in-the-world, as workers and their skill sets are treated as a commodities or things, while so-called new inventions and ideas are estranged from the very society that helps cultivate them. From Ponty's perspective, human beings are not mere cogs in the machine, but rather individual sentient beings, mutually engaged with others in the social and material world. Although we sometimes tend to forget this as we participate in the system, this phenomenal, or non-reified state of being is hard to deny.

In his book *Reification: A New Look at an Old Idea* (2007), Axel Honneth uses recognition theory to frame reification as a form of forgetting:

It is this element of forgetting, of amnesia, that I would like to establish as the cornerstone for a redefinition of the concept of reification. To the extent to which in our acts of cognition we lose sight of the fact that these acts owe their existence to our having taken up an antecedent recognitional stance, we develop a tendency to perceive other persons as mere insensate

objects. By speaking here of mere objects or "things," I mean that in this kind of amnesia, we lose the ability to understand immediately the behavior expressions of other persons as making claims on us - as demanding we react in an appropriate way. (Honneth, 2008: 57-58)

Although I disagree with a few minor things in Honneth's book, I agree wholeheartedly with his primary thesis of reification being a form of forgetting because this makes room for there being different levels of reification, as well as there being moments when we do *recognize* the subjectivity of the other. After all, even the most hardened capitalist must sometimes recognize the fact that his workers are more than just machines, or that social relations are too complex and dynamic to be completely objectified.

Building upon this ongoing dialectic between the ideas of Marx, Lukacs, Ponty, and Honneth, I would like to frame reification as a tendency to forget that precipitates from our involvement capitalist system. But what exactly are we forgetting and what does this tendency entail?

What we really see at work in the concept of reification is how capitalism's hierarchal systems commodity relations creates a tendency to forget the lived experience of the phenomenal body. This means forgetting the embodied subjectivity of ourselves and the other, thus falsely identifying people as static, material things existing independent of human will or agency.

This tendency manifests at varying degrees and in different areas of the workplace and in daily life, but unlike sexual-objectification, reification is primarily connected to capitalism's ability to opaque the lived experience of the phenomenal body. In the process, our way of viewing the other is fundamentally transformed, as human beings are reduced to the objective, calculable properties of things. This transformation has been described by many, but I leave you with a more subtle and lighthearted example to ponder:

Here is an example of this transformation which I witnessed the other day in this country. The waiters and waitresses in restaurants are poor working people who are the victims and not the authors of this process of reification. They are even unaware of the nature of their involvement in this phenomenon. While they are under heavy pressure to serve the maximum number of customers on the job imposed upon them by the system and its owners, they look upon the customers solely under the form of the orders they put in. I heard one waitress address herself to a person and say, "Ah, you are the corned-beef and cabbage". You are not Mr. or Mrs. Brown, not a person of a certain age and with a certain address. You are "corned-beef and cabbage" because the waitress has on her mind the orders taken under stress from so many people. (Mandel & Novack, 2010:28)

5. Conclusion

This article has provided an overview of the concept of reification, discussing both the strengths and weaknesses of its original conception, as well as later attempts at reinvention. Reification has been identified as a very old concept within Marxist

discourse, first appearing in volume one of *Capital*, but mostly associated with Georg Lukacs *History and Class Consciousness*. In its most unconvoluted form, it is described as a process, precipitating from commodity relations, whereby human beings are reduced to the objective, calculable properties of things. The major problem with this concept appears to be that over a century's worth of thinkers have failed to describe an alternative or non-reified state of being. To solve this foundational problem, this article has looked beyond Marxism and to the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

This study has shown how the phenomenal body of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy represents humankind prior to the reifying effects of capitalism. Merleau-Ponty argues that human beings are embodied subjects rather than objects, and that our freedom is curtailed by our body's very involvement in the material world. From the position of lived experience, the social and material worlds can best be understood as realms of intersubjectivity, however, this is sometimes forgotten when social and historical forces come into play. In the process, we begin to see the natural world as a mere object for exploitation, while social relations and even our own conceptions of ourselves become more thing-like.

In facilitating a dialectic between Merleau-Ponty's *phenomenology* and a century's worth of Marxist discourse, reification has been redefined in this article as a form of forgetting precipitating from our participation in the capitalist system: As people are interpolated into the system, the lived experience of the phenomenal body is obscured, cultivating an objectifying tendency that penetrates many aspects of daily life. From this view, to reify someone is to forget their status as an embodied subject, while the reification of the material world means forgetting how it is a dimension of existence that all living things depend on, interact with, and are bound-to via their embodiment. Making moral judgements about this tendency is beyond the scope of this study, however, before we can discuss what *should be*, we must first properly identify *what is*, then approximate the reasons why.

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