

Body and the Metaverse: A Critical Reading in Light of Nietzsche and Merleau-Ponty

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Abstract

This article examines how the emergence of the metaverse challenges classical philosophical conceptions of the body, taking Friedrich Nietzsche's notion of the body as will to power and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the lived body (*le corps propre*) as critical benchmarks. It argues that virtual environments do not simply extend embodiment but reconfigure it through avatars, digital presence, and algorithmically mediated perception. Drawing on posthumanist thought (Braidotti, Hayles, Haraway, Floridi) and on critical theory (Byung-Chul Han), the study asks whether Nietzschean and phenomenological frameworks remain adequate to interpret digital embodiment, or whether the metaverse calls for a new ontology of the “digital body.” The article concludes that while Nietzsche's affirmation of bodily creativity illuminates the avatar as a site of self-fashioning, Merleau-Ponty's insistence on the lived, sensing body exposes the limits of disembodied digital presence, and that a genuinely new philosophy of embodiment is needed to think through this hybrid condition.

Keywords: Body; Metaverse; Nietzsche; Merleau-Ponty; Phenomenology; Will to Power; Avatar; Posthumanism; Digital Embodiment.

Introduction

The body, in the history of Western philosophy, has never been a neutral subject; since Plato, it has been associated with a strict dualism that considers it a prison of the soul or an obstacle to pure rational knowledge. This dualism was later reinforced by the Cartesian cogito, which distinguished between the thinking substance (*Res Cogitans*) and the extended substance (*Res Extensa*).

However, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries witnessed a profound philosophical shift in thinking about the body, most clearly manifested in Friedrich Nietzsche, who regarded the body as a thinking subject par excellence and as the locus of the will to power, and in Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who restored significance to the lived body as the condition of possibility for every perception and every relationship with the world.¹

¹ See: Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, Penguin, New York, 1978; Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith, Routledge, London, 1962.

If this philosophical shift restored the body to the heart of the philosophical question after centuries of marginalization, the contemporary digital revolution, particularly the emergence of metaverse technologies, places this philosophical achievement before a new and unprecedented test. The metaverse is not limited to generating virtual spaces for interaction; rather, it enables the user to assume a digital body (Avatar) that is capable of being shaped, multiplied, and redesigned, partially independently of the spatial and temporal constraints of the biological body.

Hence stems the significance of this research: it seeks to undertake a critical philosophical inquiry into the phenomenon of the metaverse based on two distinct yet complementary critical frameworks: Nietzsche's philosophy of the body as will to power, and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the lived body, with the aim of determining the extent to which these relatively classical philosophical conceptions are capable of accommodating the transformation of the concept of embodiment in the digital age.

Research Problem

To what extent does the metaverse reshape the concept of the body as conceived by philosophy? And can the Nietzschean and phenomenological conceptions of Merleau-Ponty explain the transformations experienced by the body in virtual environments, or do these transformations call for the development of a new philosophical conception of embodiment?

This central question gives rise to several subsidiary questions: Can the virtual body (Avatar) be regarded as a genuine expression of the Nietzschean will to power, or is it a reduction of the body to merely a replaceable digital image? Does embodied perception, in the sense developed by Merleau-Ponty, remain possible in the absence of the actual lived body, or does digital interaction impose a new form of perception that transcends the limits of classical phenomenology?

Research Hypotheses

The research proceeds from a main hypothesis stating that the metaverse does not constitute a complete rupture with the history of philosophical thinking about the body; rather, it represents a development that brings the concepts inherited from Nietzsche and Merleau-Ponty into a gray area that calls for their reformulation rather than their complete abandonment.

This hypothesis gives rise to two partial hypotheses: the first is that the virtual body accommodates the Nietzschean dimension of the will to power more than it accommodates the phenomenological dimension of the lived body, because free design and shaping are closer to the logic of creative power than to the logic of complete sensory immersion in the world; the second is that the current limits of digital embodiment, which are more technological than philosophical, make it premature to declare Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology entirely transcended.

Research Method and Structure

This research adopts the analytical-critical method in reading the original philosophical texts of Nietzsche and Merleau-Ponty, while employing the comparative method to approach these two conceptions through the concepts of contemporary posthumanist philosophy, with the aim of developing a coherent critical reading of the phenomenon of the metaverse that does not remain confined to the limits of technical description but goes beyond them toward philosophical interpretation.

The research is structured into three sections: the first is concerned with constructing the conceptual framework of the body in modern and contemporary philosophy in general, and in Nietzsche and Merleau-Ponty in particular; the second examines the phenomenon of the metaverse and the transformations it imposes on the body; while the third is devoted to a comparative critical reading that tests the validity of the two aforementioned philosophical conceptions and paves the way toward a new conception of digital embodiment.

Chapter One: The Body in Modern and Contemporary Philosophy: The Conceptual Framework

Section One: The Concept of the Body in Philosophical Thought

The Body in Classical Philosophy

In Platonic philosophy, the body is regarded as a tomb for the soul or a temporary prison from which the soul is liberated at death to return to the world of Forms, which is its original abode. As for Plotinus and Neoplatonism, this disparaging conception of the body became more profound, as the body came to occupy a lower ontological rank within the hierarchy of emanation proceeding from the One.²

This Platonic view found a broad resonance in Christian theological thought, which transformed the disdain for the body into an ethical and spiritual principle by associating bodily desire with original sin and bodily asceticism with virtue and proximity to salvation. This dual theological-Platonic position remained dominant in Western philosophy for many centuries, until the seeds of a different conception began to emerge among Renaissance philosophers, who partially restored recognition of the sensory nature of the human being.

The Body in Modern Philosophy

With René Descartes, the dualism of mind and body acquired a new epistemological formulation: the body is a machine subject to the laws of extension and mechanical motion, while the identity of the self is confined to thought (*Cogito*). This sharp separation between the two substances would later be referred to as the “Ghost in the Machine,” and it laid the foundations for a scientific-empirical conception of the body as an object that can be measured and controlled.³

The Shift from the Mind/Body Dualism to the Philosophy of Embodiment

The radical overcoming of this dualism began only with Nietzsche’s critique of Western metaphysics, followed by phenomenology, which restored significance to lived experience. This philosophical movement is known as the “Philosophy of Embodiment,” which views the body not as an object among objects, but as the knowing subject itself in its living interaction with the world. This paves the way for a deeper understanding of both Nietzsche and Merleau-Ponty in the following two sections.

It should be noted that this shift was not an isolated rupture, but rather a gradual accumulation in which other philosophies also participated, either paving the way for or accompanying this development: from Spinoza, who rejected the Cartesian separation between thought and extension, considering them two attributes of one substance, to Bergson, who connected the body with lived time and intuition, and to Husserl himself, who developed the concept of Leib (the lived body) in contrast to Körper (the objective body), before Merleau-Ponty developed it

² Plato, *Phaedo*, trans. G. M. A. Grube, Hackett, Indianapolis, 1981.

³ Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1949, p. 15.

in a more systematic manner. This historical accumulation explains why Nietzsche and Merleau-Ponty, despite the differences between their projects, constitute an extension of a deeper philosophical movement rather than merely two isolated individual endeavors.

Section Two: The Body in Nietzsche

Critique of the Platonic–Cartesian Dualism

Nietzsche directs his strongest critique toward what he calls the “contempt for the body” inherited by Western philosophy and Christianity from Plato, considering this contempt an expression of vital weakness and of a hostility toward life that he calls “nihilism.” The separation between a sublime immortal soul and a base mortal body is not, in his view, a metaphysical truth, but rather a value judgment arising from a degenerate will to power that is incapable of affirming life as it is.⁴

Nietzsche calls this philosophical position of contempt for the body “Platonism” in the broad sense, and considers Christianity to have been nothing more than “Platonism for the people,” that is, a simplified and popular form of the same philosophical contempt for the senses, the body, and instinct in the name of another, higher and illusory world. From this perspective, his overall philosophical project is an attempt to dismantle this long legacy of contempt by restoring value to everything earthly, sensory, and bodily in human existence.

The Body as Will to Power

In contrast to this contempt, Nietzsche presents, through Zarathustra, his famous statement: “The body is a great reason” (Der Leib ist eine grosse Vernunft), as he argues that what we call the “soul” or “mind” is merely a small instrument in the service of the body, which is a multiplicity of contending and hierarchically ordered forces. For Nietzsche, the body is the original locus in which the will to power manifests itself as the fundamental interpretive principle of every vital phenomenon.⁵

The Body and the Concept of the Übermensch

For Nietzsche, the body is closely connected to the project of the “Übermensch,” which represents a transcendence of the present human being, constrained by nihilistic values, toward a being capable of affirming its body, life, and will to power without the mediation of metaphysical illusions. The Übermensch is therefore not a transcendence of the body, but rather the fullest realization of its creative potential.

It is noteworthy that Nietzsche associates this transcendence with the image of “dance,” which recurs throughout his writings as a symbol of the body reconciled with its lightness and freedom, in contrast to the “heaviness” of the soul exhausted by centuries of self-contempt. In this sense, the Übermensch is, first and foremost, a dancing body, capable of transforming every weight into lightness and every constraint into a driving force. This meaning will have a direct resonance when questioning the digital avatar’s ability to embody this lightness or merely imitate it.

The Body and the Revaluation of Values

This new consideration of the body falls within Nietzsche’s broader project, namely the project of the “revaluation of all values” (Umwertung aller Werte), which calls for reconsidering

⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, Vintage Books, New York, 1966, §230.

⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, Penguin, New York, 1978, “On the Despisers of the Body,” p. 34.

everything built upon contempt for instincts, the senses, and the body, and establishing new values that arise from the affirmation of life itself in its multiplicity and creative struggle. This makes the body both an ethical and an ontological criterion.

Section Three: The Body in Merleau-Ponty

Phenomenology of Perception

In his book *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty criticizes both the empiricist position, which reduces perception to merely the mechanical reception of sensory data, and the rationalist (Cartesian) position, which considers perception to be a purely intellectual construction. He proposes a third alternative that views perception as an embodied act that precedes any distinction between subject and object.⁶

The Lived Body (Le Corps Propre)

Merleau-Ponty distinguishes between the “objective body” (*corps objectif*), which physiology and medicine study as a thing among things, and the “lived body” (*corps propre / corps vécu*), which is the self itself in its living openness to the world. The lived body is not an instrument used by the self; rather, it is the self itself insofar as it is a being-in-the-world (*être-au-monde*).⁷ One of the essential characteristics of the lived body is that it is not ordinarily perceived as an explicit object of consciousness; rather, it recedes into the background as the silent condition of every experience. I do not usually think about my hand as it holds a pen; rather, my hand “knows” how to hold it without the mediation of explicit thought. This “withdrawal” or practical “transparency” of the lived body is what makes it the condition of possibility of every perceptual activity, rather than merely an instrument among other instruments.

Embodied Perception

From this distinction, Merleau-Ponty develops the concept of “embodied perception,” which means that all knowledge of the world necessarily passes through a bodily schema (*schéma corporel*) that gives things their practical and sensory meaning prior to any explicit intellectual conception. The body “understands” the world through its movements, habits, and skills more than thought “knows” it through its representations.

Merleau-Ponty supports this view with classical examples that have become references in the cognitive sciences, most notably the phenomenon of the “phantom limb” (*membre fantôme*) among amputees, which reveals that the lived body retains its motor schema even after the absence of the actual limb, and the phenomenon of learning by a driver or a pianist who integrates the instrument into their bodily schema to such an extent that they act as though it were a natural extension of their body. This philosophically paves the way for understanding how the body can incorporate new technological tools, including the digital avatar, into its motor and sensory schema.

The Relationship between the Body and the World

In his final unfinished work, *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty develops the concept of “flesh” (*la chair*), which makes the body and the world a single, reciprocal fabric: the seeing body is at the same time a visible body, and the world that I perceive is itself what embraces and surrounds me. This fundamental intertwining between the body and the world is what gives

⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith, Routledge, London, 1962, pp. 3–63.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 82–92.

phenomenology its explanatory power, and it is also what will be put to the test when confronted with the reality of the metaverse.⁸

Merleau-Ponty provides the example of “the hand touching the other hand” to illustrate this intertwining: when my left hand touches my right hand, it is at the same time touching and being touched, seeing and being seen. This reveals that the sharp distinction between the knowing subject and the known object is a subsequent abstraction from a more unified and ambiguous primary experience, the experience of “flesh,” in which the body and the world share a single fabric of reciprocal visibility and tangibility. This concept will be crucial in the third section when questioning the capacity of virtual space to reproduce this profound sensory intertwining.

Chapter Two: The Metaverse and the Transformations of the Body

Section One: The Metaverse and the Reconstruction of Bodily Experience

The Concept of the Metaverse

The concept of the “Metaverse” (Metaverse), as an extension and transcendence of the concept of “cyberspace” developed literarily by William Gibson, refers to permanent and interactive three-dimensional digital environments that enable users to experience presence and social and economic interaction through symbolic representations of their bodies, with an increasing degree of immersion made possible by virtual reality and augmented reality technologies.⁹

The metaverse, compared with previous forms of digital space (such as text-based forums or two-dimensional games), is characterized by three essential features: persistence, whereby the virtual space does not cease to exist when the user disconnects; synchronicity, whereby a large number of users share the same temporal moment within the same space; and interoperability, which, theoretically, allows digital identity and virtual assets to move across different environments and applications. These three features are what make the metaverse a distinctive phenomenon worthy of independent philosophical inquiry, rather than merely a quantitative development of previous technologies.

The Virtual Body (Avatar)

The virtual body (Avatar) is not merely an aesthetic visual representation; rather, it is the interface through which the user is perceived and perceives others in the virtual world. It is a “body” in a functional sense, insofar as it possesses movement, simulated sensation, and interaction, while at the same time being modifiable, replaceable, and capable of multiplication in ways that transcend any fixed identity traditionally assumed of the biological body.

It should be noted that the root of the word “Avatar” itself has a noteworthy philosophical significance. It is derived from the Sanskrit concept “अवतार” (avatāra), meaning “descent” or divine “incarnation” in a limited earthly form, as in the incarnations of Vishnu in Hindu mythology. This etymological origin carries a highly significant implication: the digital avatar, like divine incarnation, is a partial and limited presence of a broader entity (the user with their entire history and actual body) within a narrower and more malleable domain. This symbolic similarity deserves particular philosophical examination.

⁸ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1968, pp. 130–155.

⁹ Luciano Floridi, *The Fourth Revolution: How the Infosphere is Reshaping Human Reality*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2014, pp. 40–45.

Digital Presence

The concept of “digital presence” raises a precise philosophical question: can I “be here” virtually in the sense that the lived body guaranteed in classical phenomenology? Presence in the metaverse is partial and dual, whereby attention and emotion are divided between the biological body situated in front of the screen or inside the virtual reality headset, and the symbolic body moving within digital space.

Researchers distinguish in this regard between varying degrees of “immersion,” ranging from interaction through a two-dimensional screen, which represents the lowest degree of presence, to full virtual reality headsets that simulate movement and visual depth in a manner approaching natural perception, and ultimately to future conceptions of direct brain-computer interfaces that could, at least theoretically, eliminate the perceptual distinction between actual and virtual presence. Each of these degrees raises a different philosophical question concerning the concept of “here and now” upon which classical phenomenology of presence was founded.

Digital Bodily Identity

Digital bodily identity is based on the possibility of choosing the features, gender, race, size, and even motor abilities of the virtual body. This opens unprecedented emancipatory possibilities for those who experience physical or social limitations in the actual world, but it also raises the question of the relationship between this freely chosen identity and the lived bodily identity that is not chosen.

For a person living with a physical mobility disability, for example, the avatar provides the possibility of “moving,” walking, and dancing virtually with complete freedom. This could be read in Nietzschean terms as the actual realization of a will to power that had been physically constrained. However, from a Merleau-Pontian perspective, this virtual liberation does not eliminate the actual bodily condition experienced by the person outside the virtual space; rather, it may deepen the tension between the actual lived body and the desired, imagined body, a tension that in itself deserves an independent philosophical-psychological study.

Section Two: The Body Between Reality and Virtuality

Digital Embodiment

The concept of “digital embodiment” refers to the phenomenon whereby the user, through psychological-perceptual mechanisms known in cognitive psychology (such as the “rubber hand illusion” and its digital extensions), comes to feel that the virtual body is their own body, such that sensations of bodily ownership (body ownership) and agency are transferred to it.

Experiments in cognitive psychology, such as the “rubber hand illusion” and its extensions in virtual reality (such as the full-body illusion), reveal that this sense of bodily ownership does not require actual physiological correspondence. Rather, sufficient sensory-motor synchrony is enough (for example, when what the eye sees is synchronized with the movement performed by the actual body) to produce this perceptual illusion. This opens the way to a precise philosophical question concerning the nature of bodily ownership itself: Is it a fixed given or a perceptual construct capable of being reshaped through technological means?

The Hybrid Body

The concept of the “hybrid body” (hybrid body) proposes an intermediate conception between the purely biological body and the purely digital body, based on a continuous interconnection between the two through technological media (sensors, brain-computer interfaces, haptic suits),

such that it is no longer possible to draw a strict distinction between what is “natural” and what is “manufactured” in the contemporary experience of the body.¹⁰

Artificial Intelligence and the Body

Artificial intelligence technologies add a new layer to this intertwining, as machine-learning algorithms control the behavior, appearance, and responses of the virtual body, and even predict the user’s preferences and guide their interactions, such that the digital body becomes, in part, the product of an algorithmic calculation rather than a free expression of its owner’s will.

This intertwining reaches its utmost extent with the development of “intelligent virtual agents” capable of interacting socially independently of any human user, making it sometimes difficult, within virtual space, to distinguish between an avatar controlled by an actual human and an avatar controlled by an artificial intelligence program that simulates human behavior. This intersection raises a sharp philosophical question: from a phenomenological perspective, what distinguishes my interaction with a digital body controlled by actual human consciousness from my interaction with a digital body that is identical in appearance and behavior but devoid of any genuine lived embodiment?

Posthumanism

This transformation falls within what Rosi Braidotti calls “Posthumanism,” a philosophical movement that reconsiders the centrality of the human being in terms of its fixed “natural” characteristics and proposes an understanding of subjectivity as a network of relationships between the biological body, technology, and the environment, thereby moving beyond classical humanism, which conceived of the human being as an isolated and self-contained entity.¹¹

Section Three: The Body and Identity within the Metaverse

Digital Identity

Digital identity within the metaverse poses a challenge to the concept of personal identity as developed in modern philosophy by John Locke, which is based on the continuity of memory and consciousness through a single continuous body. In what sense, then, does identity remain “one” when its possessor is distributed across multiple avatars that may differ fundamentally from their actual body?¹²

Multiplicity of Bodies

The metaverse enables a single individual to assume several virtual bodies simultaneously or alternately, a possibility that is not biologically available. This consequently dismantles the traditional philosophical assumption that the unity of the body is a condition for the unity of the self, and opens the way toward conceiving of a “multi-bodied self” that is difficult to contain within the categories of classical personal identity.

This multiplicity is not limited to the formal dimension (changing the avatar’s features, gender, or apparent age), but extends to the possibility of simultaneous presence in multiple virtual spaces governed by different social and ethical rules, such that an individual can “be” characters

¹⁰ N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1999, pp. 1–24.

¹¹ Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2013, pp. 13–54.

¹² John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1975, Book II, Ch. 27.

with divergent values and behaviors at the same time. This calls for questioning the very concept of “responsibility”: to which avatar should responsibility be attributed for an act committed within virtual space, and does the original biological body remain the ultimate bearer of responsibility, as current legal systems assume?

The Body as a Technical Project

In this sense, the body in the metaverse is transformed from a received biological given into a “technical project” capable of being designed, updated, and commercialized, governed by aesthetic and economic considerations rather than being a natural extension of the living organism. This calls for a profound philosophical inquiry that returns to Nietzsche and Merleau-Ponty in the following chapter.

It is evident that this “commodification” of the digital body is subject to the logic of the digital market, based on the sale of virtual clothing, features, and accessories (NFTs and others), such that the enhancement of the digital body becomes dependent on the user’s purchasing power. This reproduces actual social and economic inequalities within a space that was theoretically supposed to transcend these material constraints. Thus, the philosophical question concerning the digital body intersects with an economic-political question regarding who possesses the power to define the “desirable” body within these spaces.

Chapter Three: A Critical Reading in Light of Nietzsche and Merleau-Ponty

Section One: A Nietzschean Reading of the Digital Body

Does the Virtual Body Represent an Expression of the Will to Power?

From a Nietzschean perspective, the avatar can be interpreted as an expression of the will to power in one of its creative dimensions: it represents a free shaping of the self, a transcendence of the limits imposed by the biological body, and a possibility for self-affirmation and continuous self-reinvention. This corresponds to Nietzsche’s call to “become what you are” through the continuous creation of the self rather than through adherence to a fixed given.

For Nietzsche, the artist is the ideal model of the creative will to power, because the artist transforms sensory chaos into form and value through an act of free shaping. From this perspective, the designer of an avatar who sculpts the features of their digital body, chooses its movements and gestures, and determines its manner of presence, performs an act similar to artistic creation. They transform a neutral technological given (programming code and three-dimensional models) into a personal expression of their taste, values, and vision of themselves, recalling Nietzsche’s famous idea of the necessity of “giving style” to one’s character, just as an artist does to their raw material.

Freedom and the Reshaping of the Body

However, this optimistic reading requires a precise Nietzschean distinction between two forms of freedom: positive freedom arising from an outpouring of inner strength that creates its own values, and negative freedom that is merely liberation from an external constraint without any self-creation. Here the question arises: Is the modification and continuous enhancement of the avatar an expression of an ascending will to power, or a nihilistic escape from the actual body and from the pain and limitations that, for Nietzsche, constitute the condition of all greatness?¹³

¹³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, Vintage Books, New York, 1967, First Essay.

Critique of Reducing the Body to a Digital Image

From another perspective, reducing the body to a replaceable digital image may conflict with Nietzsche's profound conception of the body as an organic unity of instincts, emotions, and internal struggles, rather than as a purely visual surface. The Nietzschean body "suffers," "desires," and "resists," whereas the digital body is often presented as polished and liberated from pain and weakness, bringing it closer to the model of the ideal body that Nietzsche himself criticized in classical metaphysics.

Here, a subtle paradox emerges that deserves consideration: Nietzsche, who called for the affirmation of the body in its entirety, including its pain, illness, and weakness (and who himself suffered from illness throughout his life and transformed it into a source for deepening his philosophy), might strongly criticize a digital avatar that seeks to erase every trace of pain, weakness, and limitation. From his perspective, such erasure is not an affirmation of the will to power but an escape from it; for him, the true will to power is manifested in the ability to transform pain into creative strength, not in avoiding or virtually eliminating it.

Section Two: A Merleau-Pontian Reading of the Metaverse

Can the World Be Perceived Without the Lived Body?

If perception, for Merleau-Ponty, is fundamentally an embodied act, then the central question posed by the metaverse is: Can we perceive a virtual world without having a lived body within it in the full sense, or does the avatar, with its partial sensory-motor feedback (primarily visual and auditory), constitute a miniature and limited form of embodiment?

The proposed answer here is that the avatar does not create embodiment out of nothing; rather, it derives its perceptual intensity from the biological body, which remains, throughout the period of virtual interaction, the actual bearer of perception, albeit in parallel and indirect form. What appears to be "purely virtual perception" is, in fact, a dual perception: the perception of the actual body through its senses and its position in physical space, and a parallel perception redirected toward the avatar through a visual-auditory medium. This duality is what prevents, from a Merleau-Pontian perspective, speaking of digital embodiment as independent in itself.

Limits of Digital Embodiment

Merleau-Ponty's analysis of the bodily schema reveals fundamental limitations of current digital embodiment: the lived body encompasses a multidimensional sensory unity (touch, balance, proprioception, temperature, and pain) that current metaverse interfaces, relying primarily on sight and hearing, cannot fully simulate. This makes digital embodiment an incomplete form of embodiment in comparison with the richness and multidimensionality of the lived body.¹⁴

This limitation is not restricted to the absence of chemical and deep bodily senses; it also extends to the absence of what Merleau-Ponty calls "sensory reciprocity between persons" (*intercorporéité*), that is, the shared bodily presence that allows two bodies to affect each other directly without mediation, as occurs in an embrace or a handshake, or even simply by standing in the same room and being affected by the warmth and physical presence of the other's body. This absence explains the widespread feeling of distance or emotional "coldness" experienced by many users of virtual environments, even in their most immersive experiences.

¹⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith, Routledge, London, 1962, pp. 98–147 (the body schema).

Critique of the Separation Between Perception and the Body

From this perspective, any attempt to conceive of a “pure digital consciousness” separate from the density of the biological body falls into the same Cartesian error that Merleau-Ponty originally criticized, namely, the separation of thought from the body. The discourse that advocates the possibility of “uploading” consciousness onto a computer or fully transferring it into digital existence is, from a phenomenological perspective, a continuation of the mind/body dualism in a new technological form, rather than a genuine overcoming of it.

The paradox lies in the fact that this “post-corporeal” discourse, which sometimes presents itself as the ultimate liberation of the human being from the constraints of bodily biology, essentially reproduces the same Platonic-Cartesian illusion that both Nietzsche and Merleau-Ponty have long criticized: the illusion that a complete and independent “self” or “consciousness” can exist independently of its body. This reveals that the critique of the mind/body dualism has not yet been completely accomplished; rather, it takes new forms that call for renewed philosophical vigilance in every technological age.

Section Three: Toward a New Philosophy of the Digital Body

Points of Convergence and Divergence between Nietzsche and Merleau-Ponty

Nietzsche and Merleau-Ponty share a common principle, namely the rejection of contempt for the body and the affirmation of its existential centrality, but they differ in their starting points: Nietzsche approaches the body from the perspective of power, struggle, and value creation, whereas Merleau-Ponty approaches it from the perspective of perception and passive-active openness to the world. This relative complementarity between the two perspectives makes their synthesis fruitful in approaching a complex phenomenon such as the metaverse.

It can be said that the difference between them is a difference between a “dynamic-hierarchical” perspective in Nietzsche, which views the body as an arena of struggle between unequal forces, each seeking control and superiority, and a “relational-integrative” perspective in Merleau-Ponty, which views the body as a fabric integrated with the world rather than as an arena of internal conflict. This difference is not so much a decisive contradiction as it is a complementarity in their perspectives: the digital body simultaneously requires an understanding of the dynamics of power governing its reshaping (Nietzsche) and an understanding of its perceptual-relational structure in relation to its digital environment (Merleau-Ponty).

A Philosophical Assessment of the Metaverse

In light of this synthesis, it can be said that the metaverse simultaneously carries a liberating potential (from a Nietzschean perspective: expanding the scope for self-creation and the shaping of the body) and a reductive risk (from a phenomenological perspective: stripping embodiment of its sensory and emotional density). This intersects with Byung-Chul Han’s critique of the digital society, which transforms the self into an exhausted “achievement-subject” constantly seeking to improve its image.¹⁵

The Possibility of Establishing an Ontology of the Digital Body

It appears from this analysis that neither Nietzsche nor Merleau-Ponty, individually, provides a sufficient conceptual framework to accommodate all the dimensions of the digital body. This

¹⁵ Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society*, trans. Erik Butler, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2015, pp. 1–19.

calls for, building on Donna Haraway's proposals concerning the "cyborg" as a transcendence of classical dichotomies (natural/technological, male/female, human/machine), the construction of a new ontology of embodiment that takes into account the hybrid, distributed, and networked nature of the contemporary body.¹⁶

Prospects for a Philosophy of Embodiment in the Digital Age

This new ontology opens up multiple avenues for research: from reformulating the ethics of the body in light of the theoretically unlimited possibilities of digital modification, to thinking about digital justice and inequalities in access to advanced embodiment technologies, to questioning whether the future philosophy of embodiment will remain a "humanistic" philosophy in the traditional sense or become fully engaged within a posthuman horizon.

Perhaps the most important thing that the future philosophy of embodiment should retain from the legacy of Nietzsche and Merleau-Ponty together is the rejection of every easy and definitive solution: neither blind celebration of absolute digital liberation from the constraints of the biological body (which, on a superficial reading, may appear to be a Nietzschean triumph), nor the absolute rejection of all forms of digital embodiment in the name of the authenticity of the lived body (which, on a rigid reading, may appear to be a phenomenological defense) does justice to the complexity of the phenomenon. What is required is a balanced and vigilant critical position, attentive simultaneously to both the possibilities of liberation and the risks of reduction.

Conclusion

Main Findings

Through the critical approach that brought together Nietzsche's philosophy and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, and which confirmed the main hypothesis proposed in the introduction that the metaverse represents a development of inherited philosophical concepts rather than a rupture with them this research reached the following conclusions:

- First, the metaverse does not eliminate the philosophical question of the body but revives it in a more complex form, whereby the body is transformed from a fixed biological given into a technical project capable of continuous shaping.
- Second, the Nietzschean conception of the body as will to power provides a fruitful approach to understanding the creative and emancipatory dimension of the avatar experience, but it requires critical examination in order to distinguish genuine creativity from a nihilistic escape from the limitations of the body.
- Third, although Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology reveals fundamental limitations of current digital embodiment in comparison with the richness of the lived body, it remains essential for avoiding a slide into a new dualism that separates consciousness from the body on the pretext of digitization.
- Fourth, although both frameworks are important, neither is sufficient on its own to encompass the phenomenon of the digital body in all its complexity. This calls, as demonstrated by the conclusion of the third chapter, for openness to the propositions of posthumanist philosophy in order to construct a new ontology of hybrid embodiment.

¹⁶ Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, Routledge, New York, 1991, pp. 149–181.

In conclusion, the future of the philosophy of the body in the digital age is not a matter predetermined in advance, but rather depends on technological, ethical, and political choices that are currently taking shape. These choices call upon philosophy to adopt a renewed critical position that draws upon its profound heritage of thinking about the body without becoming confined by it.

Future Research Perspectives

This research opens the field for numerous future studies, the most important of which include: a comparative study between Arab-Islamic phenomenological philosophy of the body (as found among certain Sufis or philosophers of Islamic medicine) and the Western approaches examined here; a joint empirical-philosophical study with cognitive and neuroscientists on the limits and possibilities of “digital bodily ownership”; as well as a study of the legal and ethical dimensions of responsibility for actions committed through avatars in light of the multiplicity of digital bodies available to a single individual.

The question of digital justice also remains strongly relevant: those who possess the technical and material capacity to develop more immersive and freer digital bodies will occupy a new position of philosophical and political privilege. This calls upon contemporary political philosophy to engage as well in thinking about the implications of this profound technological transformation for the concept of equality among individuals.

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