

**Review of the doctoral dissertation of Corentin Heusghem, M.A., titled:  
„Philosophizing Without the In-Itself: Philology, Genealogy, and the Question  
of Method in Nietzsche and Merleau-Ponty”  
written under the supervision of Prof. Paweł Pieniążek, Ph.D.**

### **Introduction**

Let me begin by stating that it's been a long time since I've read a work so original and intellectually bold, I'd even say "audacious," in its purpose and method. The author aims to bring together philosophers who have until now been read separately, and who, at first glance, even belong to separate schools of philosophical thought. Friedrich Nietzsche is, after all, the creator of genealogy, which—in Michel Foucault's words—"is gray, meticulous, and patiently documentary." Maurice Merleau-Ponty is a continuator of phenomenology, which, in Edmund Husserl's terms, seeks the eidetic structures of consciousness, revealed after phenomenological reduction (*epoché*). Nietzsche enjoins us to avoid the source; phenomenology, on the contrary, seeks it. At first glance, nothing could be further apart than phenomenology and genealogy. The author's bravado lies in attempting to connect philosophical figures that have been separated for years. The author aims to unite two streams that have, until now, flowed completely separately, almost ignoring each other. Corentin Heusghem attempts to extract and identify similarities in the views of Nietzsche and Merleau-Ponty that overcome apparent differences. According to the author, a philological approach to philosophy can demonstrate that different authors can share a community of thought, interests, and even perspectives, despite a lack of direct influence and temporal, cultural, and linguistic separation. It's an incredibly attractive perspective, a wonderful invitation to a great intellectual adventure.

Despite this, I must confess that I began reading the work with considerable skepticism and distrust, and over time, I became entangled in arguments I had initially only defended myself against. I won't say I was convinced of the similarity of Nietzsche's and Merleau-Ponty's intellectual methods. Still, I was convinced of the author's immense intelligence, who, with exceptional analytical, systematic, and precise, demolishes all the apparent barriers separating the work of Nietzsche and Merleau-Ponty, building not so much bridges between them as common ground, but a community of philological method. The answer to the question, "What is philological method?" is the central problem of the work. This is a great effort and intellectual feat on the part of the author, who, despite prejudices accumulated throughout the history of philosophy, dared to undertake an intellectual movement that was, in a sense, forbidden. I cannot find enough words to praise the author's boldness, decisiveness, consistency, persistence, and inquisitiveness.

## **Structure of the dissertation**

The doctoral dissertation consists of two extensive parts, titled "The Philological Flaws of the Hypothesis of the Will to Power" and "Merleau-Ponty's Dimensional Ontology and Values as Levels," respectively. These two parts are preceded by a critical, dense, conceptually developed, and well-thought-out introduction, which reveals a highly sophisticated research program – that is, it allows for an understanding of the main research goals and strategies of intellectual conduct. This introduction is a crucial part of the work, immediately eliminating any doubts regarding the comparison between Nietzsche and Merleau-Ponty, and allowing for a quick understanding of the non-obvious connections between philosophy centered on the will to power and philosophy centered on the phenomenology of perception and the eye.

The work finishes with a "Conclusion" that summarizes and restates the main theses and explores their far-reaching implications. The work totals 365 pages (including the bibliography). It is remarkably erudite, with references to original works in French for Merleau-Ponty and to French and English translations for Nietzsche. It should also be noted that another important figure in the book is the philosopher Henri Bergson, who constitutes a link between the philosophy of the will to power and the phenomenology of perception.

The author of the works is undoubtedly correct when he reminds us that philosophical kinship is by no means automatic. For the author, this kinship is not genealogical or purely conceptual either; I would say it is methodological. In this sense, the author is remarkably classical in his choices, giving primacy to a "treatise on method" over all other treatises. Only a shared method is evidence of intellectual kinship.

The author, therefore, explicitly states that he aims to prove, with this thesis, that there is a deep philosophical bond between Nietzsche and Merleau-Ponty (despite the lack of textual references), to such an extent that they can be perceived as philosophical brothers or as persons connected by their "star friendship". The star-spangled friendship between Nietzsche and Merleau-Ponty –according to the author of the dissertation—is even stronger than the friendship between the author of "The Will to Power" and authors who have commented on it extensively, such as Heidegger, Foucault, and Deleuze. This is a powerful thesis based on the reclaiming of the method, rather than the concept itself. The question is therefore: is the proof of the star friendship between Nietzsche and Merleau-Ponty presented in the work? Or perhaps the conclusion of the work or some silent or articulate implication forces us to think about the fundamental difference between the two philosophers?

## **Evaluation of the substantive aspects of the dissertation**

The author of the work is aware of the difference between genealogy and philology. Corentin Heusghem declares that Merleau-Ponty shares a philological method with Nietzsche, which brings him closer to the author of "Phenomenology of Perception", but Nietzsche adds a genealogical method to his research that separates him from his "friend". This statement is crucial because, if it could be proven that Nietzsche's genealogy, in some sense, annuls

philology or even problematizes it, the question of the closeness of Nietzsche and Merleau-Ponty would be more than troublesome.

The key question seems to be: what is the philological method? The term "philological" can be somewhat misleading, because it's not just about terms, nor is it just about a method of reading, strictly to the letter or immanent meaning of words. This time, the point is to bypass the problems of excessive intellectualism, conceptualism, and the dualism of intellect and experience. For Corentin Heusghem, radical philology strives to overcome dualism, to demonstrate that the opposition between idealism and empiricism (or realism) is superficial and that, in fact, they share a common prejudice against dualism, the fragmentation of experience into two parts. A philological approach to experience grasps it in its entirety, simultaneously encompassing all its aspects. This conviction unites Nietzsche, Bergson, and Merleau-Ponty. All three – Nietzsche, Bergson, and Merleau-Ponty – showed that empiricism and idealism share a common bias, and that radical philology must overcome it to remain faithful to experience. Here, however, a doubt arises. What doubt?

Well, a doubt about what the text of reality is? Does the text of the world possess any autonomy, or is it merely a multiplicity of interpretations? Bergson, Merleau-Ponty, and Nietzsche strive to describe experience, but if experience is simply an internal, a posteriori, constructed, subjective, and erroneous interpretation, what would be the value of a "faithful description"? How can we determine or decide what the text of reality is? How do we know what reality is made of? Can we truly know its nature with complete certainty? The impossibility of a credible answer to this question led Nietzsche to state: "There are no facts, only interpretations." And the will to interpretation is the will to power. At first glance, such a conclusion would not seem likely to please a phenomenologist, including Merleau-Ponty.

Corentin Heusghem answers this doubt as follows: in the case of experience, defended by the philological method, there is one world and plane of reality, whereas in the hypothesis of Being-itself, there are two ontological spheres, objective and subjective, and there is an infinite number of worlds in the subjective sphere, as many as there are living beings. Does this convince us? The author argues that philology, only thanks to the principle of economy, avoids falling into absolute relativism: no interpretation is absolutely true, certain, or superior due to its objectivity, but this does not mean that all interpretations are equal, since they can be hierarchized according to the number and metaphysical weight of their principles or axioms. This argument does not seem definitive to me, because the choice of axioms or the reduction of metaphysical overload, and therefore, in some sense, the principle of simplicity, is not self-evident. Every choice, and especially the eliminative choice, entails arbitrariness. Corentin Heusghem forgets this arbitrariness of elimination and recognizes the principle of economics as a principle decided a priori.

I fully agree with the suggestion that we should not accept multiple modes of causality until the attempt to satisfy just one has been pushed to its limits. However, choosing a model of causality that will guide both – the facts of consciousness and material facts – is a choice that carries a multitude of consequences. Whether to opt for "semantic rationality" alone and describe the world in terms of symptoms, entanglements of meanings, signifiers that imply and multiply semiotically, or to think of the world in purely physical terms, not necessarily

even mechanical, but in terms of the electromagnetic field, is a decision with quite serious consequences. Here and there, we have monism, but in a completely different sense.

The author declares that the goal of philological reduction is to oppose transcendental reduction, which leads from experience to the world of essences. Philological reduction, on the contrary, is an attempt to liberate all aspects of experience. The author further argues that philology is possible because the original text of reality as experience can never be destroyed and that philological effort can thematize it. What is more, what we get from philological reduction is not only an interpretation that would still be opposed to or detached from the text, but a perspective that appears "inside" the text, in a context in which this strict ontological and epistemological opposition between text and perspective no longer holds. Corentin Heusghem claims that the philological approach does not impose knowledge (i.e., it does not assume what knowledge should be like), nor does it impute any form or required nature to the evidence of experience, but instead accepts it as it is, respecting it with all honesty. I wonder if such a declaration isn't a declaration of naive realism, which, after Kant's critique, appears to be so. I'm not calling for a return to Kant, but I am warning against a regression to naive philosophy "after Kant."

For Nietzsche, Bergson, and Merleau-Ponty, reduction allows them to return to the given and interpret the totality of experience accordingly, as an economic and unique principle and sphere of being. The world becomes one again, without the dichotomy between "being in itself" and "being for itself." The question arises again: did Nietzsche truly remain faithful to experience, to the principle of economy, and to phenomenological reduction? Did he not ultimately subordinate his philological approach to another task, that of genealogy, and pursue philological knowledge only insofar as it is a means to a more active, less resentful life?

In essence, Merleau-Ponty defended the philological method, holding to a single principle that respects all aspects of experience. In this specific sense, his fidelity to the philological principle is purer. Nietzsche, on the other hand, abandons the philological method in favor of genealogy, which is supposed to demonstrate the birth of difference or the lineage of origin of a value, a concept, a force, or even an epistemological order. Genealogy begins with the recognition that knowledge is rooted in experience and that we have only interpretations. Finally, genealogy is not only a search for the source of value but also an attempt to assess the value of this source in terms of life, which is the only ultimate reference. In this sense, Nietzsche's project is not so much epistemological as ethical. Finally, genealogy is not only a search for the source of value but also an attempt to assess the value of this source in terms of life, which is the only ultimate reference. In this sense, again Nietzsche's project is not so much epistemological as ethical which does not mean, however, moralistic, because the author of *On the Genealogy of Morality* sees a significant difference between ethics and morality. This is a crucial observation that we must remember. Ultimately, Nietzsche is not concerned with truth, but with getting rid of ascetic ideals, to which truth also belongs, i.e., with considering whether truth and other ascetic ideals are a trick for the preservation of life, and to what extent they are an obvious deformation of life, leading to the stunting (weakening) of life.

Corentin Heusghem responds to these doubts not so much by reducing genealogy to philology, but by making it dependent on philology. The author writes, *inter alia*, that philology rejects the "God hypothesis" because of its ontological extravagance, while genealogy selects interpretations and values that lead to the most "unspoiled life." Consequently, however, it also rejects the "God hypothesis" because it leads to a presupposed, devotional "being," to a life in fear of God, debt, and punishment. This alleged atheism of both methods, however, does not settle the matter.

Here is my key insight. I argue that this particular way of comparing the philosophies of Nietzsche and Merleau-Ponty is, in a sense, unfair and non-neutral (for both sides of the comparison). It is simply biased, that is, from the outset, it privileges Merleau-Ponty's philosophy as the exemplary one, the reference point against which Nietzsche is compared and against which Nietzsche is judged. It is Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception, not the genealogy of morality, that is exemplary and paradigmatic for the author. In some sections of the work, the author acknowledges this, writing, for example, that the aim of the work is to rethink the relationship between philology and genealogy in a new way, attempting to consider them as two distinct and autonomous methods that do not share the same goal or the same criterion, to verify whether an understanding of philology subordinated to genealogy does not constitute a reduction of its potential scope.

If we were to reverse the criteria for a moment and impose genealogical criteria on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, I don't know whether the phenomenology of perception would withstand the genealogical test of providing us with non-degenerate forms of life or providing us with stories that allow us to understand the historical, cultural, and religious context in which these degenerate forms of life came into being, that is, appeared here on earth. This is my primary concern about this work; it is not an epistemological concern, but a strategic one.

If genealogy (with life as the criterion of value), and genealogy alone, becomes the criterion for evaluating interpretation, then philology is reduced to the role of genealogy's servant, performing only the necessary, preliminary work of establishing the text of culture and values. However, the author notes that the very division into good and bad interpretations is based on the principle of economy: an interpretation is better if it takes into account all phenomena, which is the case with the will-to-power hypothesis, provided it contributes to the intensification, not the weakening, of life. The concept of will-to-power, therefore, becomes central. Here, however, we encounter a problem. What is the will-to-power? We don't know what the will-to-power is and what its status is. Is the will-to-power a metaphysical or ontological position, or epistemologically radically different from all other interpretations, or is it a clever metaphor, one interpretation among many? Nietzsche's desire is an expression of the all-encompassing will to power, that is, the pure, untainted positivity of growth and development. The author of the dissertation forgets that before we can think, we must live, and life is growth and self-preservation and not creating the best possible figure, according to the laws of Gestalt psychology. Assuming that the principle of *pragnanz* in Gestalt psychology refers to the perceptual tendency in which the organization of stimuli strives for the simplest and most understandable form.

Despite this diagnosis, Corentin Heusghem concludes that Nietzsche was unable to justify the distinctiveness of his own philosophy because he did not make a sufficiently radical revolution in the very understanding of epistemological categories, including, above all, truth. Nietzsche did not specify what epistemology or ontology we obtain after overcoming the distinction between being-in-itself and being-as-appearance, so it is not certain that he himself was fully aware of all the consequences that this overcoming implies. Nietzsche refused to reify any concrete object as a reality in itself; nevertheless, he did not eliminate the structure of being-itself per se; it is maintained as the extrasensory source of our interpretations, of which the will to power is one of the prefigurations. This leads to the conclusion that Nietzsche repeats the Kantian framework and postulates a different in-itself, namely the body, chaos, drives, and, finally, the will to power.

Here again lies the main threat to the author's project, who wants to deprive Nietzsche's genealogy of its main weapon: cultural criticism. The author declares that the distinction between philology and genealogy allows him to preserve the autonomy of both methods and to introduce us to areas of thought in which the primary goal is no longer to help us live a better life, but simply to describe the entire text of reality, without omitting or adding any aspect. However, the point is that purely descriptive or purely epistemological goals are utterly unsatisfactory for Nietzsche. Nietzsche's critical method tries its best to avoid easy dogmatism and easy skepticism. Nietzsche's critical method, like Marx's, is to reach the roots of a thing, not its essence. The roots are precisely genealogical, not essential, growths.

The accusation of "injustice" against Nietzsche is not even an accusation or a reproach in the strict sense; it is merely my profound conviction that comparing philosophers as disparate as Merleau-Ponty and Nietzsche is always fraught with the risk of asymmetry, i.e., preferring a more general insight shared by one side. The epistemological perspective of phenomenology is incommensurable with Nietzsche's ethical perspective. And any attempt to distinguish the will to power as the will to the constant recovery of life forces and the will to perception as the will to recover the lost world is doomed to the failure of partiality, i.e., programming this comparison along the lines of epistemology or ethics. It is difficult to meet these demands simultaneously.

I would say that the work as a whole ultimately gives the impression of an attempt to critique Nietzsche's philosophy from the perspective of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception. The author himself will undoubtedly deny this and correct this judgment, saying that it is not a critique but a correction or supplementation. Well, he would perhaps be right in this judgment, but it is an addition and correction so significant that it overturns Nietzsche's views on most key topics, such as the will to power, drives, language, the world, value, and, finally, the relationship between immanence and transcendence. It is interesting that in the work, we do not hear a single word about the eternal return or the overcoming of humanity or even "gay science" (*Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*) with a very specific (non-epistemological) meaning.

In return, Corentin Heusghem argues that Nietzsche's genealogical ontology is not fully philological because, by claiming to exhaust all reality, it omits significant dimensions of Being, which allows all dimensions to exist simultaneously, not in opposition to each other, but in

complementarity. Corentin Heusghem, therefore, argues that Merleau-Ponty proposes a much broader concept than Nietzsche's. The author of "The Will to Power" completely ignores the intersubjective dimension, and, as a nihilist, he does not accept consciousness, language, perception, or the logic of relationships; rather, he accepts all of this, but in an erroneous interpretation.

As an ethicist, Nietzsche failed to realize that values are merely a cross-section of Being, a region of the world, which resulted in an attempt to reduce all reality to them. It is a caricature of being, not being; it is a reduction of the world, not its proliferation. Nietzsche's question concerns the governing body, the leading subject, i.e., "from where does one speak, judge, act, etc.?", but his answer is limited solely to values; yet there are many dimensions and levels from which one can perceive, act, or think. Corentin Heusghem adds that it is these other dimensions that Nietzsche ignores. Nietzsche claims that everything can be reduced to drives or the play of forces, but the categories of force do not exhaust the world's meaning and being. There are countless other levels or dimensions through which we can perceive the world, equally important as values.

It is precisely in this multilevel, multilayered analysis that Merleau-Ponty's advantage lies. Merleau-Ponty's multidimensional ontology, which takes into account more aspects of experience and does not require the position of being in itself or a realm of reality that escapes experience, is therefore a far more attractive philosophy than Nietzsche's seemingly pluralistic philosophy. However, the author does not ask whether this advantage is not apparent or empty, since this multiplicity of levels is often merely virtual. Ultimately, what matters is the dimension to which the living belong. That's why Nietzsche maniacally repeated – "Remain true to the earth. Do not trust in extra dimensions, beyond dimensions. Do not trust in depth!"

Does the principle of perception and the concept of totality truly falsify Nietzsche and vindicate Merleau-Ponty? In my opinion, the author sees no fundamental incompatibility between the two philosophies. Again: Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is epistemological in nature, Nietzsche's ontological and ethical. This results in the author's strong preconceptions, for example, when he exaggerates that the source of most of Nietzsche's prejudices (concerning language and transcendentalism) lies in his atomism or empiricism regarding perception (and therefore in his idealism) and in his refusal to acknowledge wholeness. The point, however, is that there is no such thing as the Whole; the Whole is always imaginary, for the cosmos remains constantly unfinished, and only the heat death of the world could be the end of all things on this planet.

Interestingly, these fundamental differences consistently allow the author to perceive common ground. This common ground is, for example, the body. According to the author, both Nietzsche and Merleau-Ponty criticized Kant's transcendental ego and instead postulated the body as the source that constitutes experience, making it a tacit condition, a prerequisite for reflective consciousness. The only difference between them is that Nietzsche viewed the body as a multiplicity, while Merleau-Ponty viewed it as a unity (as the "coherence of life"). This difference has unexpectedly dramatic effects. As Corentin Heusghem correctly concludes – "Multiple Being, is not Nietzsche's Will to Power". And I readily agree with this simple

conclusion. However, I also ask: what should we do with this stellar friendship from which we have start?

## Conclusion

I cannot possibly enumerate all the author's brilliant analyses and assertions concerning language, the body, intersubjectivity, and life. The author brilliantly traces all the aporias in Nietzsche's thought and seeks solutions, i.e., ways to overcome the impasse.

This is the case with language, for example. According to Corentin Heusghem, Nietzsche perceives language as already given, once and for all, always after an operation of stabilization. Nevertheless, in doing so, Nietzsche ignores and undermines the nascent state of speech, in which it is alive and expressive, hence the necessity of supplementation. Merleau-Ponty thus argues that languages, that is, constituted systems of vocabulary and syntax, that is, the various existing "means of expression," are the deposit and sediment of speech acts [parole], in which unformulated meaning not only finds a means of external expression but also acquires existence for itself and is created as meaning. Hence, the need to distinguish between "speaking speech" and "spoken speech".

Everything I find in this work on the aporia of language in Nietzsche and Merleau-Ponty's attempts to overcome it is excellent. These fragments alone would allow me to write an apology for Corentin Heusghem, yet they do not exhaust the content of the dissertation. Equally remarkable are the passages concerning the idea of chaos, where the author, following Bergson, argues that the idea of chaos corresponds to the disappointment of expecting a different order and does not signify the absence of any order, but merely the presence of an order that currently arouses no interest. This is a wonderful question that I have been thinking about all day: what was so disappointing about Nietzsche that he had to postulate the existence of absolute chaos, which, if perceived by us, would make us insane?

Considering the evaluation elements outlined above, the dissertation by Corentin Heusghem, M.A., constitutes a non-trivial presentation and solution to the problem. The manner in which it is solved indicates the doctoral student's broad general theoretical knowledge in the discipline. It proves that the author undoubtedly can conduct scientific work independently. Given the above, the reviewed work meets the requirements for doctoral dissertations outlined in the Law of July 20, 2018, Law on Higher Education and Science (Ustawa z dnia 20 lipca 2018 r. Prawo o szkolnictwie wyższym i nauce). Therefore, I request that MA Corentin Heusghem be admitted to the following stages of the proceedings for the doctoral degree award. I would also like to propose honouring the dissertation I reviewed. This is undoubtedly a doctorate that deserves distinction (*summa cum laude*).

