

Article

Is Conscience Best Understood as a Particular Form of Consciousness? Theological and Ethical Reflections Inspired by the Phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty

Martin McKeever

The Alphonsian Academy, 00185 Roma, Italy; mmckeever@alfonsiana.org

Abstract: Since its emergence after the Council of Trent, moral theology as a discipline has had an intimate but problematical relationship with philosophy. It is not rare, even today, to hear or read moral theologians expounding their views with no explicit acknowledgement of the importance of the philosophical terms and theories they use in the formulation of their positions. All this would seem to be particularly the case with a term that has gradually become quite central to moral theological discourse: conscience. The purpose of this article is to suggest that phenomenology, as a relatively new and profoundly revolutionary branch of philosophy, has become an indispensable resource for moral theological reflection on conscience. In particular it will be argued that the thought of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961) constitutes a profound -unintentional- critique of traditional conceptions of conscience and simply cannot be ignored (as it normally is!) in contemporary discussions of this theme. What follows, then, divides into four sections: the first on a traditional vision of conscience; the second on consciousness in the thought of Merleau-Ponty; the third on conscience as a form of consciousness; and the fourth on the potential contribution of this line of thought to ethics and fundamental moral theology.

Keywords: conscience; consciousness; phenomenology; ethics; fundamental moral theology; Merleau-Ponty



Citation: McKeever, Martin. 2023. Is Conscience Best Understood as a Particular Form of Consciousness? Theological and Ethical Reflections Inspired by the Phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. *Religions* 14: 10. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14010010>

Academic Editor: Fáinche Ryan

Received: 4 November 2022

Revised: 6 December 2022

Accepted: 13 December 2022

Published: 22 December 2022



Copyright: © 2022 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

The phrase “obeying your conscience” merits careful, critical reflection. Whom or what do I obey when I obey my conscience? God? (*Ipso facto*? And what about those who do not believe in God?). The moral law? (Which one? And why not just say “obeying this moral law”?). Myself? (Who? And the self who examines my conscience, and who instructs me as to what I should do, does he/she have a conscience? Or is there perhaps a kind of conscienceless self who examines consciences?). The list of such questions could continue almost indefinitely suggesting that “conscience” is in great need of clarification.

It is not uncommon, in fact, that the seemingly most obvious of ideas are in the end the most inscrutable. What St. Augustine said about time¹ might be applied to a whole range of seemingly banal ideas such as “being”, “good”, “self”, “body” and, we might add, “conscience”. Section 2 below will focus briefly on this issue as the necessary background to our specific theme.

The purpose of this piece is to ask if phenomenology,² as a radical, revolutionary and still relatively recent branch of philosophy, can help to elucidate the idea of conscience thanks to its rigorous attention to human “consciousness”. Is, perhaps, conscience best understood as a particular form of consciousness? If so, and it is hard to see *prima facie* how it could be otherwise, then is what phenomenology has taught us about consciousness applicable *mutatis mutandis* to conscience? The thought of Maurice Merleau-Ponty will serve here as the chosen source³ for articulating a phenomenological understanding of consciousness. The key question will then be posed: do these key phenomenological

characteristics of consciousness apply to conscience? It will emerge, paradoxically, that an author who had a limited interest in ethics and none at all in moral theology proves to be a valuable and potent ally to both disciplines in their efforts to broach the conceptual quandary of conscience.

So what follows divides into four sections: 1. A Preliminary Note on the Term “Conscience”; 2. Consciousness in the Thought of Merleau-Ponty; 3. Conscience as a Form of Consciousness; 4. Broader Ethical and Theological Reflections on Conscience as a Particular Form of Consciousness.

2. A Preliminary Note on the Term “Conscience”

It would be folly in an article of this kind to attempt to review the vast literature on conscience in classical and contemporary moral theology. Some useful efforts along these lines have already been made and serve very well to confirm that the term is in profound need of clarification.⁴

For the specific and limited purposes of this article, it will be helpful to draw attention to a number of (illustrative) mile-stones along the torturous course of this term’s history. For the sake of brevity and clarity we will limit these references to the *Summa Theologiae* of St. Thomas, the *Theologia Moralis* of St. Alphonsus and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*:

“I answer that, Properly speaking, conscience is not a power, but an act. This is evident both from the very name and from those things which in the common way of speaking are attributed to conscience. For conscience, according to the very nature of the word, implies the relation of knowledge to something: for conscience may be resolved into “cum alio scientia”, i.e., knowledge applied to an individual case. But the application of knowledge to something is done by some act. Wherefore from this explanation of the name it is clear that conscience is an act.” (Summa Theologiae, I, q. 79, a.13)

“There are two rules for measuring human actions. One is more distant; the other is more immediate. The distant or material way of determining is from divine law. However, the immediate or formally correct way is through conscience . . . We will firstly consider the proximate rule which is conscience, and then the remote one which obviously concerns laws . . . Conscience can be defined: it is the judgement or practical instruction of reason by which we judge what is to be done here and now because it is good or avoided because it is evil.” (Gallagher 2019, pp. 9–10)

“Conscience is a judgement of reason whereby the human person recognizes the moral quality of a concrete act that he is going to perform, is in the process of performing, or has already completed. In all he says and does, man is obliged to follow faithfully what he knows to be just and right. It is by the judgement of his conscience that man perceives and recognizes the prescriptions of the divine law . . . ” (Catholic Church 1994, in Catechism of the Catholic Church 1994, para. 1778)

The reader is invited to note a number of points on these statements with a view to following the argument on conscience as a particular form of consciousness. What the statements most clearly have in common is an emphasis on the cognitive dimension of human existence (knowledge, reason). The various authors will in other texts refer, at times extensively, to other dimensions of human existence but when it comes to defining conscience they tend to focus on the role of reason. A second point to note is that conscience is a term with a history, it is not univocal because various meanings have been attributed to it over time. Indeed, one could say that the term has suffered a certain conceptual conflation in the course of centuries: from a quite marginal position in the Thomistic system it has come to be associated with many other concepts and has moved to the centre of the vocabulary of moral theology.⁵ A third point, particularly important for our purposes, concerns what is absent—for obvious historical reasons—from these definitions of conscience: the body, the world, emotional life, the experience of time . . . all matters of primary importance to the view of consciousness in phenomenology which we will now proceed to examine.

3. Consciousness in the Thought of Merleau-Ponty

Any reflection on consciousness in Merleau-Ponty must begin with an important linguistic premise. To speak of consciousness, Merleau-Ponty employs the French term “*la conscience*”. This term in French has no particularly moral nuance, so much so that when the French-speaker wishes to refer to conscience (as an English-speaker generally understands it) he/she must resort to a phrase such as “*la conscience morale*”. What follows is an attempt to outline very briefly the main lines of Merleau-Ponty’s thought on consciousness (“*la conscience*”) with particular attention to his monumental *Phénoménologie de la perception*.⁶ Only after having done so will we attempt, in the following section, to illustrate the pertinence of his thinking on consciousness to our understanding of conscience.

Merleau-Ponty’s thought on consciousness is not presented systematically in *Phénoménologie de la perception* but is expressed *en passant* while discussing themes such as the body and the world. Studying the many references to consciousness in the text, four main characteristics emerge: consciousness, for Merleau-Ponty, is embodied, reflexive, intentional and transcendent. A word of explanation on each of these terms, accompanied by some relevant texts, should provide us with a sketch of his thinking on this theme adequate to our purposes.

3.1. Consciousness Is Embodied

In discussing phenomenology in general and consciousness in particular there is probably no author who has put more emphasis on the body than Merleau-Ponty (Peters 2019; San 2012). More precisely, one might say more emphasis on the body, the world and the relationship between the two. Consciousness, for him, may be understood as the way in which the body relates to the world.⁷

A key idea here is that of openness.⁸ The physical, organic, empirical human body occupies a certain amount of space in the world. The skin and other surface elements such as hair and nails mark a border between the body and the rest of the world. Merleau-Ponty insists that this is an open border. Due to the senses and related factors such as perception, sentiment, memory, language and desire, the body is not simply a closed physical mass but an open subject of experience, a body-subject.⁹ I, in and through my body, see, touch, hear, smell and taste the world. And I, in and through my body, am capable of perceiving the world around me, of responding affectively to this environment, of retaining and “protending”¹⁰ my experience of the world in time, of expressing my understanding of this world in language and of pursuing identified goals in the world. All of this together and contemporaneously constitutes human consciousness of the world as a dynamic embodied act rather than a static state.¹¹

3.2. Consciousness Is Reflexive

Human consciousness of the world is inevitably also consciousness of self. The prefix “con-” is already an indicator of this bipolar nature of consciousness.¹² Consciousness is not usually itself a direct object of our consciousness but the means by which we are conscious, via the body, of objects and events in the world.¹³ Even though consciousness is not normally the intentional object of consciousness it nevertheless includes a certain un-thematized consciousness of itself. So there are two, non-symmetrical, poles in every act of consciousness: the primary pole which is the direct object of consciousness and the secondary pole which is the subject’s contemporaneous, often unnoticed, consciousness of himself/herself.

3.3. Consciousness Is Intentional

Merleau-Ponty, like Husserl, places great emphasis on the intentionality of human consciousness. This means that consciousness cannot take in the whole world in the same way at a given point in time but must focus on some specific elements and then move on to others.¹⁴ Intentionality, for Merleau-Ponty, also refers to the fact that the relationship between

the subject and the world is not (only) one of contemplation but rather of engagement. The body-subject acts in the world on the basis of certain projects which arise from basic survival needs, from various desires and from aspirations for the future. Moving away from the Cartesian idea of consciousness as essentially cognitive, Merleau-Ponty thinks of consciousness primarily as an “I can” . . . an “I can” of which the body-subject becomes conscious in his or her dealings with the world.¹⁵

3.4. Consciousness Is Transcendent

For our author, following Husserl, there is something ineluctably “egological” about human consciousness.¹⁶ I and only I have direct access to my (limited) experience of the world. This does not mean that we are condemned to live as isolated monads, but it does mean we have to explain how communication is possible between such individuals, in other words we have to explain how inter-subjectivity is possible. The core of Merleau-Ponty’s explanation of this possibility is his idea of transcendence.¹⁷ One way of grasping the meaning of this term¹⁸, as Aristotle suggests we do with “justice”, is to consider its opposite. The opposite to a transcendent consciousness would be a closed, isolated, solipsistic consciousness: no sky, no trees, no space, no others . . . no world in the end. The body-subject is transcendent in that it moves out of itself into the world, it penetrates the world through its many capacities and functions. Transcending myself I make sense of the non-me that surrounds me and in making sense of the world I become myself.¹⁹

4. Conscience as a Form of Consciousness

Having thus examined, however hurriedly, Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of conscience, we will now attempt to grasp its pertinence for our understanding of (moral) conscience. We will attempt to do this through a thought experiment in which we try to eliminate from our minds all preconceptions that we might have of conscience as a voice, a place, a tribunal or whatever and try to access it (*die Sache selbst*, Husserl would say) as directly as possible in concrete (imagined) experience. (This experiment is somewhat like Husserl’s famous “reduction” by which he attempts to approach objects as they are in themselves by laying aside all prior theorizations about them).

Let us imagine a subject S situated in the world at a certain point in time. We will take S to be conscious, that is to say embodied, reflexive, intentional and transcendent as explained above. Imagine the following scene:

S., a 24 year old mechanic, is going about his business in the world: sleeping, getting up, going to work, eating, talking, thinking, dreaming . . . He is in the natural attitude, vaguely aware of the world about him and vaguely aware of himself in his habitual behaviour. All of a sudden, passing in front of a school, he hears cries and screams and, turning, sees three full-grown boys beating up a younger boy. S. feels shock, indignation, horror, fear . . . he thinks about intervening . . . but there are three of them! . . . about seeking help . . . it would be too late . . . “no” he says to himself “I must”, and he intervenes . . .

The reader will be relieved to hear that as S., shouting loudly, approached the boys, they ran off, maybe because they were so close to their school . . .

Asked to analyse this scene, a moral theologian would probably say that this is a classical case of “obeying one’s conscience”. That may well be, but our interest here is in how the phenomenology of consciousness that we have studied above might enrich and deepen such an analysis of what happened. So let us consider how each characteristic of consciousness has its pertinence for our understanding of conscience in this scene.

4.1. Conscience Is Embodied

This scene can help us appreciate the profound significance of the fact that we are bodies. From beginning to end the scene is about the interaction of bodies: the body of the beaten boy, the bodies of the bullies, the body of S. These bodies are not isolated one from

the other but are actively involved in all kinds of inter-corporeal and affective relations (inter-subjectivity).

What can this dimension of the scene help us to understand about conscience? To be open to the world through our bodies is to be open also to what is distressing, painful and wrong in the world. Confronted with such a situation, S.'s first reaction is "affective", he feels compassion for the younger boy, feels angry reactions at the older boys and feels his own vulnerability. Observing violence is not the same as contemplating a sunset. It imposes a choice: shut down my openness, run away, seek help, intervene or some other possibility. The key moment in this scene is when S. says to himself "I must". Where does this imperative come from?²⁰ It is surely reductive to think of his conscience as some kind of autonomous, cognitive faculty that commands him to act. The least that we can say is that there was indeed an imperative but that it was born of various forms of consciousness (shock, repulsion, anger . . .) that combine with faculties such as reason to produce his decision which issues in an act. In this sense we might think of conscience here as an imperative form of consciousness, a form of consciousness that compels to act.²¹

4.2. *Conscience Is Reflexive*

Before he turned the corner and came upon this scene S. was, as we said, vaguely aware of the world around him and of himself as a protagonist in that world. All of a sudden the intensity of his affective reaction to what he witnesses moves him into a higher level of consciousness. His eyes become wide-open and sharp, his body becomes tense, he feels horror, fear, shock, all simultaneously.

What does all this help us to understand about the relationship between consciousness and conscience? It brings out, for one thing, the bipolar nature of consciousness, but this time the accent is on the secondary pole, that of the self. The consciousness of S. is inherently inter-subjective. When the object of consciousness is seen to be in grave distress the subjective pole becomes more conscious of itself, on account of the emotions, the fear, the risks, etc.

All of this can be perfectly well described in terms of consciousness without any immediate appeal to the idea of conscience. It is when this general consciousness drives S. to act that we can usefully talk of conscience as a particular form of consciousness.

4.3. *Conscience Is Intentional*

As S. walks toward the school he is full of intentional ties with his world: these take the form of a general flow of consciousness in which he casually shifts attention to various elements in the world (the traffic light, the noisy traffic, the smell of smog) and a specific form of an awareness of why he is walking, let's say, to the supermarket. He suddenly becomes conscious of cries and screams and he acts in the way he does. What interests us here is the form of the intentionality that causes him to intervene.

A key term in the vocabulary of phenomenology, and a favourite of Levinas²², is exteriority. Against a tradition of philosophical and theological reflection that put a strong accent on the inner life of the subject, this line of thought insists that consciousness is outside itself, aware of something other than itself.

If this is true of consciousness in general we must ask ourselves how it applies to consciousness in the form of conscience. Against this same emphasis on interiority, phenomenology encourages us to think also of conscience as exterior to the subject. The conscience of S., like the rest of his consciousness, is just as much (or more?) over there among the entangled bodies of the boys as it is in his mind or heart or elsewhere within him.

4.4. *Conscience Is Transcendent*

The body is not primarily an "it" but a he or a she, or better still, an I. The body is somebody. S. like other bodies in the course of life has transcended himself in the sense of moving out toward what is other and greater than himself. This experience has formed him into the person he is, with his habits, attitudes and character. Suddenly he finds

himself in the scene described above. The scene causes him, in a certain sense compels him, to transcend himself in a different manner. So conscience can be understood as a particular form of consciousness that emerges in response to certain kinds of circumstances. Not all forms of intentionality are of the same kind or at the same level: some forms of intentionality demand heroic engagement with the world.

Taken together (as they always go together in life), these characteristics of conscience as a form of consciousness serve both as a warning against simplifications and an invitation to further reflection.

5. Broader Ethical and Theological Reflections on Conscience as a Particular Form of Consciousness

It is time to broaden the optic of our discussion and consider the import of this line of thinking for ethics and fundamental moral theology. One way of doing this will be to consider the main challenges that this vision of things poses to more traditional conceptions of conscience in ethics and fundamental moral theology.

We will limit ourselves here to five of the more obvious of these challenges.

One major challenge concerns a question of some importance for a line of enquiry about anything: where do we begin? One of phenomenology's main accusations against the epistemology dominant in the empirical sciences was that it started much too late in the sense that it took for granted many things that require reflection such as the world, the body and consciousness as the way in which the body relates to the world. This accusation can surely be applied also to ethics and moral theology. Both have a tendency to begin with a ready-made moral agent in a ready-made world. Phenomenology, without usually having this as a specific intention, constitutes a challenge to these disciplines to push back their point of departure to include the vital questions about consciousness that have been discussed above. In other words the challenge is to re-examine in the light of the phenomenology of consciousness the most basic presuppositions of these disciplines on conscience and indeed on much else.

A second major challenge, closely tied to the first, is to declare the philosophical vision operative in a given theory of conscience. The fact is that behind or beneath every conception of conscience there is a, usually undeclared, broader philosophical vision. One of the original purposes of phenomenology was to question the classical philosophical vision of Western thought precisely in its neglect of consciousness and in the excessive weight it gave to instrumental rationality.²³ It is to be suspected that ethics and fundamental moral theology have assimilated, maybe unknowingly, at least some of the presuppositions of this "classical" line of thought in their thought about conscience.²⁴ Phenomenology's radical critique of this vision as reductive relative to the complexity of human experience can surely also be applied to ethics and moral theology.

A key specific example of this problem is the role of affectivity in consciousness and in conscience understood as a form of consciousness. As we have seen, this dimension is certainly present in Merleau-Ponty but it has been taken up and radicalized by Michel Henry (Henry 2000). A key theme in the thought of Henry is what he calls "*auto-affection*" which is not easily translated into English but refers to the feelings a subject has toward himself or herself at any given time. Like Merleau-Ponty, Henry does not develop this line of thought by explicitly discuss moral conscience. The least that can be said, however, is that their thought on the affective side of human experience could healthily complement thinking on conscience that cuts itself off from its base in affective consciousness. To be conscious that something is good or consider oneself obliged to avoid something evil is not simply a cognitive affair, it is not merely a question of knowledge.

Another specific thematic challenge posed to ethics and fundamental moral theology by phenomenology concerns time. In most moral theology, if this theme is broached at all, time is treated as a simple matter of past, present and future. Another major contribution of phenomenology, which constitutes another challenge for ethics and moral theology, is that these three forms of time are intricately connected and always actively interacting.²⁵

Of particular importance in this regard is the realization on the part of phenomenology that the determining dimension of time is the future.

Aristotle tells us that the point of doing ethics is not simply to understand the good but to become good as persons and citizens. In his own way, Husserl followed a similar line of thought when defining the purpose of phenomenology.²⁶ The same could be said *a fortiori* of moral theology. This being the case, it would seem that phenomenology is a resource for moral theology that remains largely unexploited. If phenomenology has taught us much about consciousness then this needs to be integrated into thought on conscience that will otherwise be operating with a reductive vision of the human being and the world. Getting the world wrong is hardly a morally irrelevant question when it comes to helping people to live well.

These are but a few reflections aimed at illustrating the potential richness of a vision of conscience that integrates the insights of phenomenology into our understanding of conscience. Something similar could be said about other key categories of phenomenology that are often neglected in ethical and moral theological theory such as the body, the other, sentiment, language, etc. The difficulty of integrating phenomenological thought on such themes into ethics and moral theology is not to be underestimated, but to continue to practice these disciplines as if phenomenology had never happened is a matter of serious neglect.

6. Conclusions

So, after all that has been said, is conscience best considered as a form of consciousness? The most important word here is *best*. To answer this question positively in no way entails claiming that conscience can *only* be considered as a form of consciousness. Neither does it commit one to rejecting or contradicting many more traditional approaches to understanding conscience. It does, however, entail giving a certain priority to consciousness over against other possibilities, especially as the most appropriate point of departure for thinking about conscience. To explain why this is so we will now examine the perils that arise when one begins one's reflection on conscience elsewhere . . . perils that are all too obvious in the history of ethical and moral theological reflection.²⁷ Then, more positively, we will note the clear advantages of this approach. Finally, assuming that conscience may be considered a particular form of consciousness, we will attempt to identify the specificity of this form in the sense of explaining what precisely makes a particular act of consciousness an act of conscience.

Among the perils of thinking about conscience by beginning elsewhere (with God, nature, the natural law, the cosmos . . .) is the tendency to make of conscience a category apart, a reality *sui generis*, relative to consciousness. This often takes the form of reifying conscience, conceiving of it as a faculty in its own right rather than an act of the faculty of practical reason. In the end, the most serious peril in this approach is that it often fails to take into adequate consideration in the specific case of conscience such fundamental categories as embodiment, intentionality, reflexivity and transcendence. Any explanation of conscience that prescind from these categories is an impoverished version because, as we have seen, each of these categories has a particular bearing on conscience.

Apart from avoiding these perils, there are certain clear advantages in thinking of conscience as primarily a matter of consciousness. Not least of these is the fact that the phenomenology of consciousness brings to the discussion of conscience a conceptual freshness that traditional approaches often lack. Even more so, it brings to the discussion an immediacy in terms of describing human experience: the objective of a phenomenology of conscience is not so much to produce another theory but to give us better access to our experience of conscience (*die Sache selbst*).

If we say that conscience is a particular form of consciousness we must attempt to explain the nature of this specificity. At least part of the answer lies in what we have called the imperative mood of consciousness. Conscience is not simply an awareness that reality is so and so but an awareness that if reality is so and so then I must respond in

a certain manner. Conscience in this case is that form of consciousness that carries an imperative edge, telling me what I must do. The key point is that it is my consciousness of myself, others, the context and (possibly) of God that imposes the obligation and not some heteronomous or indeed autonomous authority.

To close on a more general note, the relationship between consciousness and conscience may be seen as a specific example of the more general relationship between phenomenology and ethics/moral theology. It is hoped that the specific issue we have studied here will convince the reader of the potential fecundity of this form of interdisciplinary study in researching similar themes.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

¹ “What then is time? If no one asks me I know; if I want to explain it to a questioner, I do not know.” (Augustine 2006).

² For those who feel the need of deepening their understanding of this term the introduction to Moran’s book (Moran 2000) on phenomenology provides an excellent, lucid and, above all, brief overview. Italian-readers will greatly benefit from the synthetic but profound study of Carlo Sini (Sini 2012), which takes the original form of numerous, short, thesis-like statements on key phenomenological themes. For a deeper and more extensive overview of contemporary phenomenological literature see Claude Romano’s impressive study (Romano 2010) or Carla Canullo’s specific study of Jean-Luc Marion, Michel Henry and Jean-Louis Chrétien (Canullo 2004). The vast question of the relationship between phenomenology and the cognitive sciences is well beyond the scope any one article and certainly of this one: those wishing to pursue this related but distinct question will find much of value in Natalie Depraz (2014).

³ Almost any major phenomenological thinker could be taken up in this same way, Merleau-Ponty is proposed here as a case in point to demonstrate the fecundity of examining traditional views of conscience in the light of phenomenology.

⁴ To mention but a few examples: Schockenhoff (2007), Fumagalli (2012), Reichlin (2019). Of particular interest for our specific theme is Curran (2004): it is disappointing to note that not one single phenomenological source is quoted in the entire bibliography published in this, otherwise valuable, collection. Thus more than a century after Husserl, esteemed moral theologians discuss conscience seemingly oblivious of a revolution that questions the philosophical adequacy of their ways of understanding this key moral category.

⁵ For the general historical background of this term and for a devastating critique of how the thought of Aquinas has been distorted on this point see (Lamont 2009).

⁶ The first edition of this work (1945) was published at the end of the Second World War. All references to the work in this article are to the collected works (Merleau-Ponty 2010).

⁷ “Ainsi la permanence du corps propre, si la psychologie classique l’avait analysée, pouvait la conduire au corps non plus comme objet du monde, mais comme moyen de notre communication avec lui, au monde non plus comme somme d’objets déterminés, mais comme horizon latent de notre expérience, présent sans cesse, lui aussi, avant toute pensée déterminante.” (Merleau-Ponty 2010, p. 772).

⁸ Merleau-Ponty’s use of “ouverture” in this context follows Heidegger’s idea of “Erschlossenheit” as not just a feature of *Dasein* but as its defining characteristic.

⁹ To help avoid the strong temptation to fall back into thinking of the body as an object we will use the, admittedly cumbersome, term “body-subject”.

¹⁰ This terminology, not particularly happy in English, goes back to Edmund Husserl, usually considered the “founding father” of phenomenology.

¹¹ “Le monde n’est pas un objet dont je possède par-devers moi la loi de constitution, il est le milieu et le champ de toutes mes pensées et de toutes mes perceptions explicites.” (Merleau-Ponty 2010, p. 661).

¹² As we saw in Section 1, Aquinas (*ST*, 1, q. 79, a. 13) makes a similar linguistic point in his brief discussion of “*conscientia*”.

¹³ “En tant qu’il voit ou touche le monde, mon corps ne peut donc être vu ni touché. Ce qui l’empêche d’être jamais un objet, d’être jamais <<complètement constitué>>, c’est qu’il est ce par quoi il y a des objets.” (Merleau-Ponty 2010, p. 771).

- 14 “Disons donc plutôt . . . que la vie de la conscience—vie connaissante, vie du désir ou vie perceptive—est sous-tendue par un <<arc intentionnel>> qui projette autour de nous notre passé, notre avenir, notre milieu humain, notre situation physique, notre situation idéologique, notre situation morale, ou plutôt qu’il fait que nous soyons situés sous tous ces rapports.” (Merleau-Ponty 2010, p. 818).
- 15 “Ces éclaircissements nous permettent enfin de comprendre sans équivoque la motricité comme intentionnalité originale. La conscience est originellement non pas un <<je pense que>> mais un <<je peux>>.” (Merleau-Ponty 2010, p. 820). (The author explains in a footnote on this page that this latter term is common in the unpublished works of Husserl).
- 16 “Il y a là un solipsisme vécu qui n’est pas dépassable.” (Merleau-Ponty 2010, p. 1058).
- 17 “Nous appellerons transcendance ce mouvement par lequel l’existence reprend à son compte et transforme un situation de fait.” (Merleau-Ponty 2010, p. 856).
- 18 James Mensch offers this lucid explanation of this slippery term: “The most basic sense is that of <<surpassing>> or <<going beyond>>. It comes from the Latin, *transcendere*, which combines the sense of <<beyond>> (*trans*) and *scandere* <<to climb>>. The sense here is that of <<surmounting>> or <<overstepping>>. As such, it involves both limits and their surpassing.” (Mensch 2017, p. 478).
- 19 Levinas expresses this connection between intentionality and meaning, which stems from Husserl, with a certain profundity: “L’analyse intentionnelle est la recherche du concret. La notion, prise sous le regard direct de la pensée qui la définit, se révèle cependant implanté, à l’insu de cette pensée naïve, dans des horizons insoupçonnés par cette pensée; ces horizons lui prêtent un sens—voilà l’enseignement essentiel de Husserl”. (Levinas 1961, p. XVI).
- 20 An interesting answer to this question (based on the coherence of a life-narrative), that to a certain extent converges with our line of thought here, is presented by Alasdair MacIntyre in his important essay “Epistemological crises, dramatic narrative, and the philosophy of science” (MacIntyre 2006, pp. 3–23).
- 21 The imperative component, in a more cognitive fashion, is present in Aquinas’ version of conscience (*ST*, 1, q. 79, a. 13), particularly in the verbs *ligare* (bind) and *instigare* (goad).
- 22 This term even makes its way into the title of his work: *Totalité et Infini. Essai sur l’Exteriorité* (Levinas 1961).
- 23 This was the declared purpose of Edmund Husserl (Husserl 1954) in *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie*, first published in 1936.
- 24 A close reading of the definitions of conscience in Section 1 will suffice to confirm this tendency.
- 25 “C’est moi qui donne un sens et un avenir à ma vie, mais cela ne veut pas dire que ce sens et cet avenir soient conçus, ils jaillissent de mon présent et de mon passé et en particulier de mon mode de coexistence présent et passé.” (Merleau-Ponty 2010, p. 1153).
- 26 For an exhaustive account of Husserl on the intimate relationship between phenomenology and ethics see (De Gramont 2014, pp. 164–84).
- 27 As indicated in footnote 5 above, see (Lamont 2009).

References

- Augustine. 2006. *The Confessions*. Edited by Michael P. Foley. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company.
- Canullo, Carla. 2004. *La fenomenologia rovesciata. Percorsi tentati in Jean-Luc Marion, Michel Henry e Jean-Louis Chrétien*. Torino: Rosenberg & Sellier.
- Catholic Church. 1994. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. London: Geoffrey Chapman-Libreria Editrice Vaticana.
- Curran, Charles. 2004. *Conscience: Readings in Moral Theology 14*. New York: Paulist Press.
- De Gramont, Jérôme. 2014. *L’Appel de la Loi*. Louvain-Paris: Éditions Peeters.
- Depraz, Natalie. 2014. *Attention et vigilance. À la croisée de la phénoménologie et des sciences cognitives*. Paris: PUF.
- Fumagalli, Aristide. 2012. *L’eco dello spirito. Teologia della coscienza morale*. Brescia: Queriniana Editrice.
- Gallagher, Raphael. 2019. *Conscience. Writings from Moral Theology by Saint Alphonsus*. Ligouri: Ligouri Publications.
- Henry, Michel. 2000. *Incarnation: Une philosophie de la chair*. Paris: Éditions de Seuil.
- Husserl, Edmund. 1954. *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie*. Haag: Martinus Nijhoff.
- Lamont, John. 2009. Conscience, Freedom, Rights: Idols of the Enlightenment Religion. *The Thomist* 73: 169–239. [CrossRef]
- Levinas, Emmanuel. 1961. *Totalité et Infini. Essai sur l’Exteriorité*. La Haye: Martinus Nijhoff.
- MacIntyre, Alasdair. 2006. *The Tasks of Philosophy. Selected Essays, Volume 1*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mensch, James. 2017. Transcendence and Intertwining. *Bogoslovni vestnik* 77: 477–87.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 2010. *Œuvres*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard.
- Moran, Dermot. 2000. *Introduction to Phenomenology*. London: Routledge.
- Peters, Meindert. 2019. Heidegger’s embodied others: On critiques of the body and ‘intersubjectivity’ in Being and Time. *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 18: 441–58. [CrossRef]
- Reichlin, Massimo. 2019. *La coscienza morale*. Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Romano, Claude. 2010. *Au cœur de la raison, la phénoménologie*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard.
- San, Emre. 2012. Corporéité et existence: Patočka, Merleau-Ponty, Maine de Biran. *Studia Phaenomenologica* 12: 133–56. [CrossRef]

Schockenhoff, Eberhard. 2007. *Wie Gewiss ist das Gewissen? Eine ethische Orientierung*. Freiburg: Herder Verlag.

Sini, Carlo. 2012. *Introduzione alla fenomenologia*. Milan: Shake Edizioni.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.