

Co-presence and the ‘Subject as Time’: A Phenomenological Path Toward Organizational Becoming

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An increasing number of persons have experienced long-distance relationships and what it means to feel present with a geographically remote other. This sensation of *being with* a distant partner can be both constant and ephemeral. At times, you feel the other is right near you, either because you think of them or when their name appears on your phone screen. At other moments, the distance seems to widen, as if the space between me and the other had grown suddenly. This common experience reveals that *co-presence* (i.e., the state or feeling of being with another) cannot be reduced to geographic proximity (Grabher, Melchior, Schiemer, & Schüßler, 2018; Thulin & Vilhemson, 2017; Zhao, 2003; Zhao & Elesh, 2008). We can feel profoundly alone in a crowded room, yet intimately connected to someone thousands of kilometers away. The question of what constitutes this sense of togetherness, and what conditions make it possible, has long occupied philosophers concerned with the nature of human existence and sociality. It touches upon the very fabric of our relational lives, upon what binds us to others and what, at times, leaves us feeling irremediably distant from them despite their apparent nearness.

In our organizational life-world increasingly permeated by digital mediations, where remote work, video calls, instant messaging, and now regular interactions with autonomous agents have become ordinary features, it has become more urgent to investigate what it means to be with another. How, then, could we decrypt, describe and organize co-presence when bodies no longer share the same physical space? When our colleagues appear in our daily experiences as faces on screens, voices through speakers, or names on chat platforms? The digitalization of everyday social interactions is accompanied by both continuities and discontinuities with earlier forms of (mediated) presence⁴. And what about sophisticated bots and LLM-based assistants, how are these presences felt and managed within organizations? These emerging conditions invite us to revisit the nature and ontology of co-presence itself and its role in contemporary organizing. For if our capacity to collaborate, to learn collectively, and to build shared meaning has long depended on people gathering in shared spaces, with relatively fixed hours and few questions regarding the humanness of the collaborator we are talking to, things have now evolved. Co-presence in organizational life does not entail only those who work side by side, but, more profoundly, it is the possibility of being affectively present to one another.

In *affective ethnography*, for instance, the researcher’s co-presence in the field and their “*capacity to affect and be affected*” (Gherardi, 2019: 754; see also Bancou, 2024a; Estagnasié, 2025) are central to studying workers’ lives, feelings and collective practices. This suggests that co-presence involves a mutual openness and exposure through one becomes attuned to others and available to be *touched* by their presence, whether it is mediated or not.

This article turns to the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1964 [1960]; 2012 [1945]; 2013 [1968]) to explore what it means to be co-present. Although his work predates our digital age, Merleau-Ponty’s writings on embodiment, perception, and temporality furnish conceptual resources that prove pertinent for grasping everyday experiences of togetherness, whether in physically proximate settings or in technology-enabled or hybrid contexts. His treatment of the subject’s relation to temporality, in particular, and the philosophical dilemma it raises, opens a path toward understanding co-presence not as a static state, but as an ongoing process of becoming together, a living organizational becoming. Tracing the development of his conception of time, space, and subjectivity brings into view what is at stake in experiencing and organizing co-presence. This directly echoes contemporary challenges of communalizing, managing, and learning in organizational contexts where the traditional boundaries between *here* and *there*, *alone* and *together* have become fluid and contested.

1. Understanding co-presence through Merleau-Ponty’s ontology

At the heart of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology is a critique of Cartesian mind-body dualism, which tends to objectify the body (human or animal) and separate it from consciousness. Instead, Merleau-Ponty advances that “*our perception is always rooted in our bodily existence*” (2012: 239). In particular, his later ‘indirect’ ontology conceives relationships as always embedded within the same ‘flesh-of-the-world’ or ‘intercorporeality’ (2012; 2013), emphasizing the constitutive interrelatedness between embodied subjects. A key insight from Merleau-Ponty is that there is no presence without co-presence. For him, our existence is fundamentally intersubjective, implying that our own presence is already intertwined with the presence of others: “*I experience the presence of others in*

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⁴ We acknowledge that mediated presence is not entirely novel. The telephone, for instance, has long enabled a form of co-presence characterized by a voice without a face, a temporal synchronicity without spatial proximity. Similarly, coordinated remote work predates digitalization: teams have collaborated across distances through letters, telegrams, and scheduled coordination without real-time communication. Phenomenologically, these earlier forms raised questions about how presence can be sustained across distance. What distinguishes the contemporary moment is not mediation per se but its intensification, multiplication, and the emergence of non-human agents. This proliferation of modalities through which presence and absence are now experienced constitutes a rather novel phenomenon in itself.

myself or myself in others" (1964: 97). Drawing on this understanding leads us to challenge the notion of individuals as isolated subjects and instead consider that feeling co-present is always a form of being-with-others, hence, co-presence (Mazis, 2016). This is not only a metaphor but an ontological claim: since our bodies are woven alongside those of others, co-presence becomes a homeport of sorts, a time and space anchoring our relationality, our bond with others.

To be present, in this view, means to be bodily engaged in a relational fabric where the body is not merely an instrument but the very medium through which we open ourselves to the world and to others. This embodied co-presence forms the foundation of our affectivity (2012): we understand the gestures, expressions, and intentions of others not through intellectual or deductive reasoning, but through a perceptible bodily resonance. Recognizing this lays the groundwork for an ethical dimension in our relationships, one that is deeply felt. As Merleau-Ponty writes, *"the world is not what I think, but what I live; I am open to the world, I communicate with it indubitably, but I do not possess it, it is inexhaustible"* (2012: xxiv). This reflection on incarnation opens onto another constitutive dimension of our humanity: the question of how we create shared meaning and build something in common. While the body anchors us in a sensory relationship with others, it is through our shared projects, mutual concerns, and the spaces and times we inhabit together that we become present to one another.

Although in *Phenomenology of Perception* (2012), Merleau-Ponty elaborated a spatiality of the body through his understanding of the *body-subject* as always already integrated into a shared corporeality, his later work, *The Visible and the Invisible* (2013), focuses on existence as a form of co-presence. For him, the lived, phenomenal body constitutes a *"primordial field of presence"* (2013: 194) in which the other does not appear as an object, but manifests as a *perspective* of my field, and I of his, because of our shared bodily embeddedness. Such a field is not a container in which we find ourselves placed, but rather the very condition through which the world *appears* to us as meaningful and inhabited. It is through accessing this common field of presence that we can become together and act collectively (Bancou, 2024a). The experience of distance, for instance, is not merely a matter of kilometers or physical separation but is lived relationally and temporally, beyond physical distance. One can feel close to someone far away when they occupy our present concern, just as one can feel distant from someone physically near (2013; see also Chaudhary, 2021). Our experiences of being-with-others thus appear as modalities of a temporo-spatial achievement irreducible to purely spatial coordinates, as in a Euclidean view.

2. Co-presence as a temporo-spatial achievement

Merleau-Ponty's inquiry into temporality – how time is constituted and how we exist within it – leads him to consider the role of spatial and temporal horizons. The unfolding of details from countryside and urban landscapes as one sits in a train, for instance, does not arise from mere visual registration but from one's temporally lived connection to them. Our co-presence, for Merleau-Ponty, thus results from the intentional experience of 'being in the world' (2012), which constitutes a temporo-spatial achievement. Yet, this situatedness implies a tension between two dimensions of existence: the active body that projects a world, and the passive body that finds itself inserted within a world it did not constitute. The problem of unifying these two constitutes an internal tension within Merleau-Ponty's early works, one that temporality will help resolve in *The Visible and the Invisible* (2013), as he explains in this passage:

"Through my perceptual field with its spatial horizons, I am present to my surroundings, I coexist with all the other landscapes that extend beyond, and all these perspectives form together a single temporal wave, an instant of the world (...) through my perceptual field with its temporal horizons, I am present to my present, to all the past that preceded it and to a future" (2012: 381-382)

This passage reveals that temporality is central for conceiving co-presence. The dimensions of 'past' and 'future' present themselves within the 'lived present' of my perceptual field as a 'double horizon' (2012: 277), forming a 'temporal wave' (382). Time is not a linear succession but an immanent flow. Merleau-Ponty's anchorage in a process ontology helps explain why temporality takes precedence in co-presence: it is not about sequential moments but about the continuous becoming that underpins lived experience. Through this development, Merleau-Ponty renews what Husserl called the 'retention' of temporal directions (1992 [1913]), laying the foundation for an inter-subjectivity anchored in the pre-reflective sense of the world. Yet, the transformation that Merleau-Ponty brings to Husserl's theorization of time manifests primarily through a turn toward Heidegger's (1962 [1927]) understanding of the problem of time's unity. This translates into interpreting the synthetic unity of temporal horizons as an ecstatic (from the latin *ek-stasis*: outside oneself) unity, meaning that the present is never self-enclosed but always transcends itself toward a past and a future. In doing so, Merleau-Ponty reaffirms the primacy of the present over the past and the future: *"it is always in the present that we are centered, it is from the present that our decisions depart"* (2012: 489).

This insight proves remarkably relevant for understanding contemporary experiences of working and organizing, for instance, considering hybrid arrangements where workers report ambivalent feelings of presence and absence (Bancou, 2024b). We can be temporally co-present with a distant other who occupies our present concern: temporal synchronicity, shared rhythms, mutual availability, common projects matter in our experiences of co-presence. As Merleau-Ponty writes, “*perception gives me a field of presence in the broad sense*” that extends along two dimensions: “*the dimension of here-there and the dimension of past-present-future. The second dimension clarifies the first. I “hold” or I “have” the distant object without explicitly positing the spatial perspective*” (2012: 277). This passage highlights the evoked primacy of the present: it is from this *now* that we reach toward both the past and the future, and it is through the “*living present*” (2012: 278) that space itself becomes intelligible. Here, Merleau-Ponty does not dismiss space but establishes time as the foundation for experiencing the presence of others *in the moment*. Temporality always operates through our bodily, spatialized hold on/in the world through which grasp and are grasped by our surroundings (see also Chaudhary, 2021). When describing the painter Paul Cézanne, Merleau-Ponty illustrates how the canvas captures not a frozen instant but the very emergence of the visible, here the landscape coming into presence through the painter’s corporeal engagement with it (1960). The relationship between time and space is thus one of integration rather than of opposition: temporal primacy does not negate the role of space in situating ourselves in the world, but rather reveals how space is always experienced through the temporal rhythms that animate it. Co-presence, then, constitutes less a spatial arrangement than a shared inhabitation of time.

3. The dilemma of time: constituted by the subject or objective structure of the world?

The primacy of the present, however, poses a philosophical problem for Merleau-Ponty (2012; see also Li, 2022). As the *living present* takes precedence over other dimensions, a dilemma emerges: how can we think of time without reducing it either to an object already constituted in the world, or to a pure production of consciousness? Time seems to be both what we live directly and what makes all experience possible, thus creating a conceptual tension. On the one hand, if we assert that time is constituted by the subject, as in certain readings of Husserl (Kelly, 2015), we are led to make the subject an instance that would stand somehow outside of time. Indeed, the subject would need to already possess a prior temporality to constitute time. The risk is then falling back into the figure of an a-temporal transcendental subject; precisely what phenomenology (as a method) had sought to overcome. On the other hand, if

we consider time as an objective structure of the world that is independent of consciousness, the subject becomes essentially passive, situated in an already given time without the lived experience of past, present, and future being truly explicable. We would thus lose the phenomenological dimension of time as it is actually experienced.

The dilemma lies in the fact that time can be thought neither as a simple object nor as a simple act. Merleau-Ponty presents time as both a condition of possibility of experience and an element of experience itself, which makes problematic any attempt to place it entirely on the side of the subject or the world. This is all the more risky as the constituting subject might appear to be a-temporal, while the constituted time risks becoming uninhabitable? What, therefore, is needed is a way of thinking time that preserves both its lived character and its constitutive role. It is precisely this path that Merleau-Ponty seeks to open through his concept of temporalization, wherein time and subjectivity are no longer opposed but revealed as two names for the same movement of existence.

4. Merleau-Ponty’s ‘temporalization’ response: The subject as time

Merleau-Ponty’s response to this dilemma consists in thinking time neither as constituted object nor as constituting act, but as a process of temporalization inseparable from the embodied subject itself. In the ‘Temporality’ chapter (2012: 410-469), Merleau-Ponty explains that what he calls a ‘temporalization’ of the perceptual field enables us to grasp how we exist in time, without standing outside of it. The guiding thread, for the philosopher, is thus to understand “*time as subject and the subject as time*” (1945, p. 483). While time is understood only in the movement of existence of the incarnate subject, the synthesis of time is conceivable only through this temporalizing movement.

Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty turns toward Heidegger (1962 [1927]) when affirming that time is a self-affection (see also Holt, 2023; Küpers, 2013). At this stage, he has already “*shifted intentionality to the side of time rather than to the side of the subject or consciousness,*” so that “*the specter of a ‘residual theory of consciousness,’ which haunts the Phenomenology of Perception by Merleau-Ponty’s own admission, seems exorcised*” (Li, 2022: 9). This solution allows him to escape the dilemma as the subject is neither an external spectator of time, nor is it simply carried along by an objective temporal flow. Rather, the embodied subject is the very temporalizing movement through which past, present, and future come to be distinguished and held together. The subject becomes the very place, the “*absolute here*” (2012: 489), where time occurs and unfolds,

a temporalization in itself. The ‘true’ time is not constituted but constituting time, not the events “*but the eventing itself*” that makes possible temporal events according to which we then break time’s relation into discrete parts (Kelly, 2015: 204).

As pointed by Kelly, Merleau-Ponty shows us that it is “*necessary for the subject not to be himself situated in [time] in order to be able to be present in intention to the past as to the future*” (2015: 201). The proposal that “*time is someone*” means considering the possibility of “*time as the subject,*” that is, the “*cohesion of a life given in its ek-stase*” (2015: 202). This cohesion is not abstract but lived through the body’s engagement with the world, indistinctively of plants, trees, rivers, animal and human beings. Time does not flow past us; I – the subject – *am* the flowing of time. Anchoring us in a world shared ‘with’ and ‘among’ others, Merleau-Ponty’s concept of temporalization invites us to understand co-presence beyond co-localisation, by attending to the temporal movement of the subject toward the other. To become co-present thus means to share the same temporalizing movement where we see “*a future going to the past coming to the present*” (Merleau-Ponty, 2012: 480-481); each retention and protention being “*but one aspect of the total bursting forth or dehiscence*” (2012: 480)⁵. But what values does this phenomenological reflection on co-presence, time-space, and temporalization hold for how we approach contemporary forms of work and organizing? When we frame these shifting experiences through Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological ontology, the crucial question is not about the quality of digital tools or the arrangement of physical spaces, but about how common temporal horizons are maintained or disrupted.

5. Conclusion: Implications for contemporary organizing and organizational becoming

Drawing on Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological ontology, this essay has argued that co-presence is best understood as a temporo-spatial engagement, which is grounded in the temporalizing movement of the subject toward the other. This reframing carries particular relevance for an organizational life-world increasingly characterized by fragmentation, digitalization, and multiple forms of presences and absences. Online collaboration platforms, fully remote and hybrid arrangements, and AI-mediated social interactions all challenge conventional understandings of what it means to *be together* at work. Merleau-Ponty’s insight (and response to the dilemma) regarding the *subject as time* offers a path to look at co-presence beyond spatial or representational terms. To be

co-present is not simply to occupy the same location but to share a common temporalizing movement, to have one’s *retentions* and *protentions* interwoven with another’s. The *temporal wave* that envelops us when we genuinely together is not a metaphor but an ontological condition: the primordial *field of presence* through which we become *here* for one another.

This phenomenological account suggests that organizing co-presence is less about managing shared spaces, whether co-located offices or virtual rooms, than about cultivating the conditions for a common temporalizing movement toward one another. Beyond technological or spatial configurations (e.g., office layouts, video-conferencing softwares, virtual reality environments), the focus thus shifts toward inhabiting a *common temporal horizon*, or being enveloped in the *same temporal wave* of becoming together (Bancou, 2024b). A distributed team may achieve a sense of co-presence when its members are caught up in the same temporalizing movement while co-workers in the same office may remain profoundly absent to one another. Furthermore, a Merleau-Pontyan perspective can illuminate our increasingly common interactions with increasingly sophisticated autonomous agents. While these systems simulate our ways of thinking and communicating, they do not exist as beings whose experience unfolds over time through memory and anticipation, which makes it impossible to experience a common *living present* with them. Acknowledging this difference may help us navigate what remains distinctively human about working together. And as AI agents become ubiquitous in organizational settings, the distinction between simulated presence and shared, vulnerable co-presence becomes all the more pressing, affecting the value of human work and altering the ‘cohesion of life’ that precedes the mutual exposure between living beings.

The issues of communalizing, managing and learning, which are all central to organizational becoming, thus appear in a new light. Far from mere matters of information transfer or physical co-location, they become temporal achievements, modalities of *entering into co-presence* with others that sustain collective action. Co-presence, in this sense, is the primordial ground of organizational togetherness, the very condition through which collective ‘I’s and ‘we’s come into being. This invites us, organizational researchers and practitioners, to attend to the rhythms, shared histories, and common temporal horizons through which organizational life unfolds, not as

⁵ These Husserlian distinctions originate in Husserl’s (1992) phenomenology of inner time-consciousness. While ‘retention’ refers to the immediate holding-onto of what has just passed, ‘protention’ designates the anticipatory grasp of what is about to come. Together with ‘primal impression,’ they constitute the threefold structure – or ‘diagram’ – of temporal experience. Merleau-Ponty draws on these distinctions but transforms them by anchoring temporal synthesis in the ‘body-subject’ (2012) rather than in transcendental consciousness.

a series of discrete moments but as a continuous organizational becoming.

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