The Academic
International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research

An Online Peer Reviewed / Refereed Journal
Volume 4 | Issue 10 | October 2026
ISSN: 2583-973X (Online), SJIF IF(2026): 5.6
Website: www.theacademic.in

Felt Attunement and Embodied Love: Intercorporeality in Merleau-Ponty

Sourav. C. S

Research Scholar, Department of Philosophy, University College, Thiruvananthapuram, Keralam, India,

Mail: souravcssecond@gmail.com, souravchandrasekhar2000@gmail.com

DOI : https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.24417018

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Received: 29-10-2026

Accepted: 04-11-2026

Published: 20-11-2026

Keywords:

Embodied Love, Felt Attunement, Intercorporeality, Lived Body, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology

ABSTRACT

Maurice Merleau Ponty holds no account on love. But his analysis on lived body and intercorporeality explains how perception and action implies intimacy and so rejects love as a private state of mind which the body signals later. Merleau-Ponty offers an idea of perception, in which the body is lived through, intertwining history and dynamism. Here, love is not a feeling which is expressed through habitual actions—rather a constant construction of mutuality which is embodied through perception, responsiveness and reformation. Understanding love from Merleau-Ponty's ideas demands a reconstructive approach with its own interpretation. The felt attunement: a historically sedimented, pre-reflective and malleable responsiveness through which the person embodied becomes intimate to one another's conduct- not as a Merleau-Pontyian term, but an interpretative concept. The paper primarily intends to have a phenomenological outlook on love through the ideas of Merleau-Ponty, addressing embodied love through constant intertwining and reformation. Hence, love can be understood as a mutual perception of reformation with its own history of people involved, rather than a fixed pattern formed through habitual action. By felt attunement, it is not meant to construct a perfected structure of love. As the later ontological analysis explains, reversibility is never a coincidence. So, attunement is open to ambiguity, asymmetry and misconduct, which is not a threat but

Disclaimer: The opinions, interpretations, conclusions, recommendations, analyses, and statements expressed in this research article are solely those of the author(s) and do not reflect the views, policies, or positions of the Publisher, Chief Editor, Editors, Editorial Board, Reviewers, or their affiliated institutions. The author(s) are solely responsible for ensuring the originality, authenticity, and integrity of the manuscript and for ensuring that it is free from plagiarism, AI-generated content, copyright infringement, data falsification, and any other form of academic misconduct.

an understanding limitation and is corrected through communication and reformative actions.

Introduction

The conventional philosophical accounts of love assume that the gestures and words communicate a feeling or a thought which is already constituted within an individual. A phenomenological approach instead asks a crucial question: how love is lived- how another person becomes significant in perception, how bodily conduct acquires relational meaning, and how a shared history alters what an expression can mean. It doesn't mean that love lacks affective or reflective dimensions; rather, it exposes the limitation in understanding these dimensions when the body is treated as an external instrument of a self-contained mind.

Challenging the Cartesian dualism of mind and body, Merleau-Ponty offers a promising framework through his accounts of the lived body (corps propre), challenging the conventional differentiation between consciousness and body; motor intentionality (intentionnalité motrice) and expression describe how meaning is enacted in practical engagement. Finally, his later ontology- the flesh (chair) explains the intertwining of perceiving and perceived. As he did not summarises these concepts into a theory of love; we have to go through recent scholarly studies to establish an authentic reading of Merleau-Ponty's concepts through the grounds of love. Todd May (2019) has devoted a chapter of "The Oxford Handbook of the Philosophy of Love" to the topic, and Megan M. Burke (2017) argues that "Merleau-Ponty advances a queer notion of love", understood as a lived openness.

To describe a dimension of embodied intimacy, the paper introduces a reconstructive concept, felt attunement- the pre-reflective, historically sedimented, and corrigible responsiveness through which persons become sensitive to one another's gestures, rhythms, and practical orientations. Felt means it occurs within bodily and affective experiences. Attunement means it involves reformative responsiveness. This is not an original term by Merleau-Ponty, but a reconstructive interpretation formed through the reading of his original concepts.

Looking forward, three neighbouring ideas should also be kept apart. Intercorporeality (intercorporéité)-the embodied openness that another person becomes available perceptually and practically (Walsh, 2020). Affective reciprocity, studied by Katila and Cekaite (2023) in couples' kissing trajectories concerns the mutual exchange of affection in interaction. Bodily synchronisation which specifically refers to the observable coordination of movements. Felt attunement is synthesised, complementing all three without reducing them.

The claim is deliberately limited because the bodily responsiveness itself cannot separate different forms of love such as friendship, care or cooperation and it's not a purpose to show the ethical aspects of a relationship. Rather, the article isolates one phenomenological dimension of love through Merleau-Ponty's own analysis, the interpretations of recent scholarly studies and reconstructive interpretations of original ideas.

The Lived Body and Motor Intentionality

Merleau-Ponty rejects the conventionality that the body is an observed object or directed by a mind which is independent, in his classic work- Phenomenology of Perception. The body is the subject's practical perspective on the world, the means through which situations, objects, and possible actions become available. The argument point toward s two ideas: an intellectualism where meaning making depends on acts of judgements and an empiricism which treats experiences as an output of casual inputs (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, Part 1, Chapters 1–3). In ordinary experience we do not first calculate the body's position and then infer what can be done. We live a world is structured already by bodily capacities.

Corps propre- the lived body hence should not be understood as a mental realm situated in a physical body. Colin Smith translated this French term as "one's own body," distinguishes the body as inhabited within from body as object (Merleau-Ponty, 2002). This insight contrast that descends from Husserl's distinction between Leib and Körper. Daniel Wehinger (2025) establishes reading Merleau-Ponty as a pairing of physical dimension with consciousness through an analysis of being in the world, which even exceeds the pre-reflective consciousness. "Pre-reflective" does not means that the lived body is a lower stratum of mind. Rather, it describes the responsiveness that precedes explicit reflection.

Motor intentionality (intentionnalité motrice) is the corresponding practical character. Merleau-Ponty writes, is "not a matter of 'I think that' but of 'I can'" (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p. 159). A doorway is perceived as passable, a cup as graspable, an outstretched hand as inviting a response, before any deliberation formulates these possibilities. They rest on acquired capacities that settle into a body schema (schéma corporel), a practical unity of the body's powers that is not a representation of the body (Merleau-Ponty,2002, Part 1, Chapter 3).

This can be analysed through the intimacy of interpersonal life which is developed through habitual engagements and interactions. People in relation with each other adjusts and reform their pace through learning the changes in rhythm of posters, gestures and tone. They became meaningful even before becoming the object of reflection. The responses need not to be deliberate or simply unconscious either. So,

a change in one's pace of interaction is felt by other before one can say why. For instance, when two people walking together, one slows down if the other falls behind. Here, the bodily movement not alone make a meaning (such as the expression of care, love and intimacy). Rather the meaning depends on the context and the history of the relationship.

Even though the history plays a major role, it tends to make errors too. Familiarity can sharpen the attention towards other. But it may also encourage the assumption towards a particular gesture which assumes a fixed meaning to it. Habitual actions can create conditions for understanding; hence it cannot guarantee accuracy. Here, the insights of lived body and motor intentionality support a limited claim, that is love is lived. Both habitual and changing bodily orientations signifies another person in dependent to the history of the relationship. But they don't claim that love is merely limited to bodily conduct, which language comes secondary.

Expression, Gesture and Language

Reading through the account of expression, Merleau-Ponty challenges the assuming gestures as neutral signs of a hidden mental cause by which an observer infers. Merleau-Ponty explains it as "styles of conduct" where love, anger, shame and hate are visible externally. The expression is in the face and gestures, "not hidden behind them" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a, p.52). So, a gesture is not primarily meaningless and then interpreted, but perceived within a meaningful situation (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, Part 1, Chapter 6).

A gesture and its expression are not fixed. Rather, the phenomenological point is that the meaning of a gesture is perceived in accordance with a situated conduct, not through some knowledge about gestures. The same smile can express joy and embarrassment or concealment or politeness. In love, this insight shifts attention from sighs to patterns of responsiveness: listening, noticing, watching and so on. But these acts do not report a complete emotion but take part in a relation where intimacy is established but sometimes questioned. Rather than holding an inherent meaning, gestures' significances depend on the function in a relation.

Language also holds a similarity. Words cannot label a complete thought in the speaker's mind, but speech brings meaning to articulation (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, Part 1, Chapter 6). The situation shapes the context of words, where tone, timing, and interval are all matters in meaning articulation. One cannot judge an apology by its formula alone, because its credibility is affected by timing, tone and previous conduct. Yet neither bodily cues nor words alone settle the question of meaning. Rather, they complement each other. Or else there is always a possibility of misunderstanding a gesture.

The argument doesn't oppose bodily intimacy to language. Their credibility is complementary. The phrase "love language" is credible only as it is free from universal meanings independent of persons, situations and the history of relationships. Therefore, felt attunement is about understanding responsive interpretations rather than decoding the fixed vocabulary of intimacy.

Sexuality and Erotic Perception

Acknowledging sexuality, Merleau-Ponty challenges reducing desire either to a mechanical process or to a mental representation imported onto a neutral body. Rather, sexuality appears as a mode of embodied intentionality intertwined with bodily existence, affective significance, and personal meaning (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, Part 1, Chapter 5). Hence, erotic perception appears within a field of practical and affective possibilities that recognises attention and action, rather than a perception of desire merely directed towards an object.

Love is not always erotic. But it shows how intimate meanings can be embodied within a perception. Bodily existence can be personally meaningful without being a private mental state. So, the claim of love through this concept may be limited but real.

Reading through Burke (2017) unsettles love and invites new ways of being through the understanding of the imaginary existential dimensions. Burke unsettles the fixed ideals of attunement. Since the history of a relationship facilitates its responsiveness while the other's conduct may defy familiar interpretations and demand newer responses, Atunement cannot be a settled harmony. In the accounts of flesh, in later ontology, they offer a broader scope of embodied intertwining and dynamicity, which make the ground of the felt attunement much wider (Merleau-Ponty, 1968).

Flesh, Reversibility, and Intercorporeality

"The flesh is not matter, is not mind, is not substance" (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p.139). Merleau-Ponty, by flesh reconstructs the relation between perceiver and perceived- a touching hand can also be touched, and a seer is visible. The chiasm signifies the intersection of their roles, its dynamicity by its reversibility (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, pp. 130–155). When it comes into reversibility, it is neither an accident nor a coincidence. It is "always imminent and never realized in fact" (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p.147) because the roles only alternate, never combine. Merleau-Ponty is aware of keeping the difference between chiasm and reversibility by subordinating reversibility as imminent within chiasm. Hence, the two are not equivalent (Hughes,2017).

Intercorporeality identifies this interplay specifically in bodily relations. Merleau-Ponty revealed the compresence of two hands in one body. When two hands of two bodies claps, one appears through an extension of that mutual compresence: “he and I are like the organs of one intercorporeality” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964b, p.168). Through this complex analysis, Merleau-Ponty draws a cooperation of two organs which are not identical. His former work- Phenomenology of Perception, already establishes “the other person’s intentions inhabited my body,” and mine his (Merleau-Ponty,2002,p.215). Therefore, the lived bodies engage in extension, and there evolved an intercorporality, so that perceiving one another occurs through shared engagement, so that results a mutual incorporation, rather than an isolated decryption of signs and symbols (Fuchs & De Jaegher, 2009).

Intercorporality exclusively cannot explain love. Incorporation of mutual social life routines through coordination of action and shared engagements has great importance. Intercorporeality explains how embodied subjects respond to one another in shared spaces and circumstances while maintaining their differences (Walsh, 2020).

An important objection made by Beata Stawarska (2002) is that intersubjective relations manifest as a particular instance of the body’s relationship to itself since the uniform dynamic of reversibility reduces the experience of another embodied person to a sort of reflexivity within one’s own body. If this is the case, any comparison between reversibility and love would weaken the distinction that underlies love. There are two sections to the response. First, this reasoning is analogical rather than deductive; it does not infer love from the touching hand. Second, the focus is on what Hughes (2017) highlights and what Merleau-Ponty’s own formula says: reversibility is never finished. Thus, difference is necessary for intimacy.

Through intercorporeality, this work is not combining the former and latter ontologies of Merleau-Ponty to establish a theory of mutual interaction. Rather, this is a comparative work.

Felt Attunement: Reconstructing embodied intimacy

Felt Attunement is a pre-reflective, historically sedimented and malleable responsiveness through which embodied individuals modify their focus and behaviour in response to one other’s expressive acts. Dissecting the very definition: “Pre-reflective” describes the capacity for responsiveness to surface before deliberation without becoming inaccessible for later contemplation. “Historically sedimented” describes how past experiences shape present perception but do not dictate it. “Malleable” describes reactions and viewpoints that are corrigible. “Responsiveness” describes a relational process that doesn’t call for harmony, agreement, or equal involvement.

There are four dimensions to the idea. It is perceptual: during an interaction, tone, posture, rhythm, touch, closeness, and movement become important. Because each person's behaviour can change the other's orientation, albeit not always equally, it has a reciprocal structure. It is historical because perceptions of current behaviour are shaped by familiarity. Additionally, it is flawed since a record of successful interpretation may result in expectations that are no longer appropriate.

These dimensions differentiate between bodily synchronisation and felt attunement. Without caring about one another's needs, two persons could walk in unison. On the other hand, instead of following the partner's movement, a person can become attuned by identifying a partner's reluctance and purposefully generating distance. Affective reciprocity and felt attunement is not the same. According to Katila and Cekaite's (2023) analysis of home video recordings of couples, affective reciprocity develops when partners coordinate their gestures of affection, demonstrating willingness and delight. Their research demonstrates that affection is not a single internal feeling but rather is arranged interactionally throughout time. Their findings provide a point of comparison rather than evidence that all intimacy follows a single pattern, and their emphasis on kissing is not the larger philosophical idea put forward here. Lastly, felt attunement is not the same as intercorporeality. Felt attunement is a more particular, historically established kind of responsiveness within intercorporeality, which refers to a fundamental relational openness. The distinction is analytical: whereas intercorporeal relations are necessary for attunement, not all intercorporeal ties result in attunement.

Now, I would like to have a critical approach towards the concept itself. An individual might accurately identify a known gesture yet still misinterpret its current meaning, as identical silence can convey comfort in one context and anxiety in another. Attunement is temporary and requires validation through the ongoing behavior of the other individual. Asymmetry and agency are related to the second limit. One partner may be more dependent, more attentive, or have a better ability to shape the dynamics of the relationship; reciprocity does not imply equality. Additionally, compliance and responsiveness should not be confused. While a theory that views attunement as solely harmonious adjustment runs the risk of confusing closeness with the repression of disagreement, acknowledging uncertainty may require halting, asking questions, or withdrawing. Stawarska's (2002) criticism above is addressed by the incompleteness of reversibility, which has substantial philosophical weight: someone can be intimately present without being reachable from one's own point of view. This has ethical ramifications since, while biological clues may be worth paying attention to, they do not give one the right to judge the emotions or desires of another. Consent, explanation, or recognition of change cannot be replaced by apparent familiarity. Dialogue is not an addition to a full bodily relationship because speech is embodied expression in and of itself (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, Part 1,

Chapter 6). Although speech can be just as imprecise or deceptive as gestures, it can question an established assumption and make a vague discomfort apparent.

Conclusion

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology provides tools for comprehending love as a relational and corporeal mode of existence. The lived body and motor intentionality demonstrate how bodily abilities and habits give rise to meaningful possibilities. The distinction between a private emotion and its outward manifestation is called into question by his explanation of expressiveness. His later ontology of flesh and reversibility explains how perceiver and perceived are entwined without becoming identical, and his exploration of sexuality demonstrates how bodily existence can be affectively and personally significant.

Felt attunement is historically segregated, pre-reflective, reformative, reciprocal and malleable process through which embodied intimacy took shape is introduced as a reconstructive concept. It is an intersection of bodily synchronisation, affective reciprocity and intercorporeality, but not identical to them. Rather than a knowledge of habitual action and conduct of character, felt attunement offers the dynamicity of the intimacy that is constantly reformed in between a relationship. It is grounded in Merleau-Ponty's classical rejection towards the Cartesian dualism (Merleau-Ponty, 2002) and unifies the body with a chiasm of physical actions and consciousness. Still, there is a necessity for a concept like felt attunement for a better understanding of love through a phenomenological lens. While there is a possibility of misinterpretation of the meaning of habitual actions, felt attunement contributes a distinctive picture of how history enables both individual and mutual responsiveness. Through Felt attunement, history is not only a sense of the meaning of repeated actions, but a personal perception towards the self and other person which is realised through living experiences.

Bodily responsiveness alone does not establish love, mutuality in engagement, or coordination of experiences with one another. Disagreement, distance and refusal are still some unavoidable requirements of intimacy. Moreover, one may remain irreducible to the expectational standard within a relationship irrespective of their age. More than conceptual, these limits are subjective and can vary with individuals. Love does not stay within the limits of felt attunement. It has very socio-political, ethical, psychological and aesthetic aspects. What we explore here is that love is neither an expression of a complete private realm nor the perfect combination of two perspectives. Rather, it is relational and dynamic, achieved through constant reformation by embodied responsiveness.

References

Burke, M. M. (2017). Love as a hollow: Merleau-Ponty's promise of queer love. Hypatia, 32(1), 54–68. https://doi.org/10.1111/hypa.12299

Fuchs, T., & De Jaegher, H. (2009). Enactive intersubjectivity: Participatory sense-making and mutual incorporation. Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences, 8(4), 465–486. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11097-009-9136-4

Hughes, F. (2017). Reversibility and chiasm: False equivalents? An alternative approach to understanding difference in Merleau-Ponty's late philosophy. British Journal for the History of Philosophy, 25(2), 356–379. https://doi.org/10.1080/09608788.2016.1225565

Katila, J., & Cekaite, A. (2023). Trajectories of love: Affective reciprocity during kissing in the everyday life of romantic couples. Journal of Pragmatics, 214, 38–53. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2023.06.010

May, T. (2019). Merleau-Ponty on love. In C. Grau & A. Smuts (Eds.), The Oxford handbook of the philosophy of love (pp. 400–413). Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199395729.013.37

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1964a). The film and the new psychology. In H. L. Dreyfus & P. A. Dreyfus (Trans.), Sense and non-sense (pp. 48–59). Northwestern University Press.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1964b). The philosopher and his shadow. In R. C. McCleary (Trans.), Signs (pp. 159–181). Northwestern University Press.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1968). The visible and the invisible (A. Lingis, Trans.; C. Lefort, Ed.). Northwestern University Press.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (2002). Phenomenology of perception (C. Smith, Trans.). Routledge. (Original work published 1945)

Stawarska, B. (2002). Reversibility and intersubjectivity in Merleau-Ponty's ontology. Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology, 33(2), 155–166. https://doi.org/10.1080/00071773.2002.11007377

Walsh, P. J. (2020). Intercorporeity and the first-person plural in Merleau-Ponty. Continental Philosophy Review, 53(1), 21–47. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11007-019-09480-x

Wehinger, D. (2025). "The union of the soul and the body": Merleau-Ponty on being in the world. Human Studies, 48, 431–452. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10746-024-09740-7