

Spring 2010

Sensation Rebuilt: Carnal Ontology in Levinas and Merleau-Ponty

Tom Sparrow

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dsc.duq.edu/etd>

Recommended Citation

Sparrow, T. (2010). Sensation Rebuilt: Carnal Ontology in Levinas and Merleau-Ponty (Doctoral dissertation, Duquesne University). Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/etd/1228>

This Immediate Access is brought to you for free and open access by Duquesne Scholarship Collection. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Duquesne Scholarship Collection. For more information, please contact phillips@duq.edu.

SENSATION REBUILT:
CARNAL ONTOLOGY IN LEVINAS AND MERLEAU-PONTY

A Dissertation

Submitted to the McAnulty College and
Graduate School of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

Tom Sparrow

May 2010

Copyright by

Tom Sparrow

2010

SENSATION REBUILT:
CARNAL ONTOLOGY IN LEVINAS AND MERLEAU-PONTY

By

Tom Sparrow

Approved November 19, 2009

Fred Evans
Professor of Philosophy
(Committee Chair)

Daniel Selcer
Associate Professor of Philosophy
(Committee Member)

George Yancy
Associate Professor of Philosophy
(Committee Member)

Silvia Benso
Professor of Philosophy
(Committee Member)

Christopher M. Duncan
Dean, McNulty College and Graduate
School of Liberal Arts
Professor of Political Science

James Swindal
Chair, Department of Philosophy
Associate Professor of Philosophy

ABSTRACT

SENSATION REBUILT:
CARNAL ONTOLOGY IN LEVINAS AND MERLEAU-PONTY

By

Tom Sparrow

May 2010

Dissertation supervised by Fred Evans

The phenomenological approaches to embodiment presented by Levinas and Merleau-Ponty cannot provide an adequate account of bodily identity because their methodological commitments forbid them from admitting the central role that sensation plays in the constitution of experience. This neglect is symptomatic of their tradition's suspicion toward sensation as an explanatory concept, a suspicion stemming from Kant's critique of empiricist metaphysics and Husserl's critique of psychologism and objectivism. By contrast, I suggest that only with a robust theory of sensation can the integrity of the body and its relations be fully captured. I therefore develop—contra Kant and Husserl's idealism—a realist conception of sensation that is at once materialist and phenomenological.

The phenomenologists distort the nature of intercorporeal relations and their most

significant insights prove to be non-phenomenological. I find this useful for rebuilding the concept of sensation on materialist grounds. Merleau-Ponty grants too much control to the lived body, and thereby neglects its passive aspects. His view that relations between bodies are *reversible* is thus inadequate. Levinas endows the body with a substantial passivity, to the point that the *susceptibility* of the body becomes its defining feature. I defend a more balanced position that features the body's *plasticity*—its capacity to give form to its environment while receiving form from that same environment. My theory synthesizes the phenomenologists with other historical figures, from Spinoza to Deleuze, as well as critical race, feminist, and embodied cognition theorists. To conclude, I suggest that only the plastic body adequately describes the subject's aesthetic relations, and can therefore serve as the basis for an immanent ethics of embodiment.

DEDICATION

For my parents, Susan and Joseph, who never once asked me to defend the practicality of philosophy.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The Duquesne University community has been nothing but supportive. Over the past several years, I have been blessed with a number of allies among faculty, staff, and students. Without these friendships (for that is truly what they are) I would not have thrived academically, personally, or philosophically at Duquesne. Fred Evans, my director, advised and guided me through all of my years as a doctoral student. He graciously and patiently considered several dissertation topics and saw the current project through from beginning to end. Without Dan Selcer I would never have come to see the importance of method in philosophical study, and I would now have a much more routine grasp of the history of philosophy. George Yancy offered nothing but encouraging words and careful attention, even when I contacted him without warning at home. I am indebted to Silvia Benso of the Rochester Institute of Technology for agreeing to review my work on Levinas; her responses, even when critical, are always enthusiastic. Graham Harman has also played a crucial role in the formation of my own philosophical position. His generous e-mail correspondence from Cairo is much appreciated. Each of these individuals has left their mark on the present work.

Among the Duquesne graduate students, I must single out Pat Craig, John Fritz, Jacob Graham, Adam Hutchinson, Keith Martel, Ryan Pfahl, and Chris Rawls, all of whom contributed their insight into my project and helped me think through its basic problems. My department chair, Jim Swindal, continues to be a vigilant advocate for me and every one of the graduate students. His letters of support helped me win a dissertation fellowship from the McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts, which

partially funded the completion of this dissertation. I must also thank the Center for Interpretive and Qualitative Research. Their fellowship for the 2007–8 academic year helped get my research off the ground. Since my arrival at Duquesne, the director of the Simon Silverman Phenomenology Center, first Dan Martino and now Jeff McCurry, has supported and promoted my work. The Silverman Center is an indispensable resource and a lovely place to conduct research.

I must acknowledge my grandparents, without whom I would never have come up with enough money to apply to graduate school. And finally, I am especially grateful to my wife, Rachel Shandor, who entered this endeavor *in medias res* and every day cares for me in ways that cannot be paraphrased.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract.....	iv
Dedication	vi
Acknowledgement.....	vii
Introduction: The Site of Sensation and Nondualist Ontology.....	x
Chapter 1: Perceptual Primacy and Synchrony of the Lived Body.....	1
Chapter 2: Sensing, Reversibility, and the Problem of Violence.....	49
Chapter 3: Transcendental Aesthetics and the Susceptibility of the Body.....	85
Chapter 4: On Corporeal Plasticity.....	120
Conclusion: The Integrity of Aesthetics: Toward an Ethics of Embodiment.....	163
Works Cited.....	171

INTRODUCTION

THE SITE OF SENSATION AND NONDUALIST ONTOLOGY

Like a clever thief hidden inside a house, breathing quietly, waiting until everyone's asleep. I have looked deep inside myself, trying to detect something that might be there. But just as our consciousness is a maze, so too is our body. Everywhere you turn there's darkness, and a blind spot. Everywhere you find silent hints, everywhere a surprise is waiting for you.
– Murakami, *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running*

PROBLEM AND METHOD

Daily most of us experience our bodies as supported and resisted by the features of their environments. Occasionally we are given over to the realization that the spaces we move through possess the power to overwhelm or destroy our bodies. Certain bodily transformations never present themselves phenomenally, however: most obviously, the death of our bodies. As Epicurus says: “Death is nothing to us, for that which is dissolved is without sensation; and that which lacks sensation is nothing to us.”¹ The present work is about the prospects and limits of phenomenology as a means of theorizing the identity of the body. In it I ask what constitutes the body's integrity and of what the body is capable. This is accomplished through a critical engagement with the work of Merleau-Ponty and Levinas, both of whom I see as offering directives beyond the body of phenomenology, specifically in their analyses of sensation. Since sensation is not often featured in phenomenological discussions, and because I see sensation as necessary for conceiving the activity and passivity of the body, I take it as my focus. The turn to sensation in Merleau-Ponty and Levinas marks a significant departure from the latent idealism of phenomenology. The revitalization of sensation has ontological and practical

¹ Epicurus, “Principal Doctrines,” II, in *The Extant Remains*, trans. Cyril Bailey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1926), 95.

consequences that are nascent in phenomenology, but which cannot be fully captured by phenomenological analyses. Therefore, I will attempt to move beyond Merleau-Ponty and Levinas in my treatment of the body, its identity, and its ethical significance.

How we should conduct ourselves and treat other entities has always been an issue for moral philosophy. Apart from ethical questions, the problem of how we as individuals actually relate to other individuals, or how it is possible for one person to interact with, act upon, or know another individual raises altogether different questions. These questions are of an epistemological or ontological type and have manifested themselves traditionally as the problem of other minds or, more recently, the problem of intersubjectivity. Such problems underlie the perpetual discussion of corporeal difference and its ethico-political consequences in contemporary continental philosophy. The saliency of these specific problems, however, only really makes immediate sense in a dualist's metaphysical framework. It is of course possible to see the ethical and ontological as articulated or collapsed into each other, as in Spinoza.

Monists like Spinoza must first explain how individuals emerge as such. Only then can they trouble themselves about how individuals can and should interact. The dualist problem of how I come to know the mind of another person, when all I perceive is the behavior of that person, only arises if I actually believe that beyond his or her body lies an ontologically unique thing called a mind. This is of course the ontology of Descartes, but it is also the ontology of Kant, who sees personhood as constituted by the fusion of an extended human body with a nonextended rational ego.

From a practical viewpoint dualist ontology is a brilliant way to safeguard the freedom and responsibility of the individual because it permits the body to be subject to

causal laws while at the same time placing the mind/soul/ego at an infinite remove from the physical world. So, for instance, Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, which is not primarily a work in practical philosophy, makes a point of specifying the dual nature of the self in order to protect the freedom of the will from the determinations of causality.² The body suffers in the empirical realm while the ego enjoys its isolation in the transcendental sphere. The *integrity* (moral and structural) of the person transcends the corporeal world. Some consequences entailed in this distinction permit Kant to refer his ethical and political philosophy back to his epistemological, ontological, and aesthetic philosophy. These provide a firm ontological³ foundation for his critique of practical reason and metaphysics of morals. By entwining the practical and ontological, Kant can assert in the *Critique of Judgment* that it is possible for aesthetic judgment of the dynamically sublime to "consider nature as a might that has no dominance over us" and consequently awaken "in our power of reason, a different and nonsensible standard" which derives from "the superiority [of the mind] over nature itself in its immensity."⁴ Since the Kantian subject sits outside of natural events, it is able to feel pleasure in the face of a terrifying spectacle and even exploit such a moment to reassert its intellectual power over the material effects of nature.⁵ The result is a certain feeling of powerlessness on the part of the subject that is generated by its sensible relation to the sublime. Ironically, this feeling gets translated into a moral sentiment that triggers a supersensible

² Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1996), Bxxvii-Bxxvii.

³ In this respect I am following Heidegger's idiosyncratic interpretation of Kant's first *Critique* as a work in "fundamental ontology," that is, an exploration of the understanding as the pre-ontological condition which gives rise to a theory of being qua being (i.e., ontology). This interpretation is given in Martin Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, 5th ed., enlarged, trans. Richard Taft (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 260, 261.

⁵ Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 261-262.

command which “obligates absolutely”⁶ and evinces the moral superiority of humans over nature. The systematic link between aesthetics and morality is possible, for Kant, because the subject is essentially an intellectual being, not a corporeal being susceptible to the directives of the natural world.

The strength of the dualist position on subjectivity is that it allows the metaphysical and practical realms to rationally reinforce each other while leaving the intellectual or spiritual world uncontaminated by concrete, physical events. Moreover, it opens an ethical space in which the sensible is subject to the judgments of the supersensible, while the sensible as such is afforded no practical value. The abilities and freedoms of the individual are in a strong sense immune to other individuals and the corporeal influences of the natural or social world. The embodied view of subjectivity that I will unpack in the work of Merleau-Ponty and Levinas, among others, contests this dichotomy along with its ethical and political implications. In so doing it not only gives itself the task of accounting for the emergence of the subject, it also raises the difficulty of deriving a nonformal ethical imperative from the sensible realm without committing the naturalistic fallacy.⁷ My conclusion will argue that the formality of Kant’s view neglects the aesthetics of embodiment we find in Merleau-Ponty and Levinas, and that this neglect results from a difference of ontology. From the perspective of embodied subjectivity, we cannot maintain a basic distinction between our aesthetic and moral sensibilities, as though they belong to two distinct capacities or “faculties.” We cannot concur with Kant that our moral sensibility operates at a distance which cannot be

⁶ Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 266-267.

⁷ The naturalistic fallacy is committed when a person tries to derive an “ought” from an “is,” or when they deduce a moral claim from a natural (or ontological) fact. G.E. Moore identifies the naturalistic fallacy in *Principia Ethica*.

traversed by the directives of our corporeal life; or rather, that our affective life is ultimately in the service of our intellectual judgment. Instead, a material form of our moral sensibility and ethical imperatives must be submitted as a replacement for the Kantian model.

Of course, the monist and materialist traditions, from Democritus to Hobbes, Spinoza, Marx and beyond have always contested the dualist's ontology and resolved the intersubjective problem with different solutions. But at least since Hegel the dualist framework has been under attack from a perspective that can generally be called *postdualism* or *nondualism*. Hegel responded to Kant's partitioning of the world into the noumenal and phenomenal by insisting on the superfluity of the noumenal. The *Phenomenology of Spirit* effectively demonstrates that the noumenal realm is unnecessary and cannot be legitimately garnered from the Kantian perspective. Yet it seems odd to apply the monist label to Hegel's philosophy. Likewise, it is not necessarily materialist because it allows for the existence of forces (Spirit, Concept) that are neither physical in nature nor subject to causal laws. Bergson's *élan vital* is an analogous force. Nietzsche, moreover, could also be considered a nondualist/nonmaterialist philosopher. He is too much of a psychoanalyst to be an eliminativist, and his philosophy of the body displays a complex understanding of both the quantitative and qualitative, physical and cosmological, as well as the aleatory dimensions of experience. And yet, he is more than willing to nearly reduce consciousness to a dynamism of forces.⁸ What is the metaphysical status of these immaterial elements or their counterparts in the phenomenological tradition, which worries more about overcoming dualism than it does

⁸ See, for example, Gilles Deleuze's explication of the "Active and Reactive" in *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 39-72.

about fending off charges of monism? If they are neither physical nor spiritual, where do we situate Hegel's Spirit, Nietzsche's force, or Bergson's *élan*? A central challenge for postdualism is to overcome dualism without arresting motion, that is, without reducing animation to mechanism.

It is problematic to situate Merleau-Ponty and Levinas into classical categories. For instance, why does Merleau-Ponty's late notion of "the flesh" not result in a monist ontology, a monism of the flesh, or why does the identification of the self with the body not admit of a monism?⁹ Commentators prefer to cast what would otherwise be his monism as Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of immanence; but it is necessary to see why this label fits him better than does "monist." The primacy of perception thesis begins with things already individuated for perception and ostensibly sidesteps monism; yet, it does not see subject and object as distinct, but rather as internally related. Thus it avoids the standard dualism. On the other hand, there is a pervasive conceptual dualism in Merleau-Ponty's texts, which Renaud Barbaras has catalogued.¹⁰ The ontological situation is no less conflicted in Levinas. Why should we not consider Levinas's elemental ontology in

⁹ Lawrence Hass, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 111, submits that we cannot regard Merleau-Ponty as a monist because there is always a *distance* between the behaving body and the self, as well as between the perceiver and the sensible. But Merleau-Ponty maintains that we *are* our bodies; this identification is one of the most innovative moments in his philosophy. Moreover, it is not enough to cite this distance, it must be also be explained. Otherwise, we preclude monism a priori. So what are we to make of this self? There is either a new dualism or a new monism at play in Merleau-Ponty and it seems we are given a choice: either continue to speak of a mysterious self that operates "in" or "as" the body, or speak of the body as a thing that senses and perceives or a "subject-object," as Merleau-Ponty does in "The Philosopher and His Shadow," in *Signs*, trans. Richard C. McCleary (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 166. The latter is the more radical choice, but preferable. It also puts the burden of accounting for the nonphysical subject on Merleau-Ponty's readers. The language is what is difficult here, but it is better to attempt to speak of the body's subjectivity as a sensing thing, rather than distinguish between the lived body and the physical body, which runs the risk of instituting a dualism or perpetuating a theological element in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy.

¹⁰ See Renaud Barbaras, *The Being of the Phenomenon: Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, trans. Ted Toadvine and Leonard Lawlor (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004). Barbaras writes that Merleau-Ponty's dualism manifests itself "clearly in the final analysis of the body in terms of sensing and sensed, touching and touched, subject of the world and part of the world. Such conceptual pairs are just so many displaced modalities of the duality of consciousness and object" (xxiv).

Totality and Infinity a monism, but then the question of the human Other (*autrui*) as a reformulation of the dualist problem of other minds? What makes these two thinkers nondualist and what resources do they offer us to build theories of subjectivity and intersubjectivity that genuinely challenge the Cartesian and Kantian legacies? I contend that it is their phenomenologically inflected ontology of the body. At the same time, we also see Merleau-Ponty and Levinas reluctant to fully commit to the centrality of the body for fear that such a commitment would result in a fully immanent ontology that is inhospitable to the transcendence of the phenomenon, in Merleau-Ponty's case, and the Other, in Levinas's.

Using Kant as a contrastive perspective, I will elaborate and defend a nondualist *carnal ontology* that I assemble from and against the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty and Levinas. Carnal ontology signifies here a view of the embodied subject as embedded in, immanent to, and continuous with its material environment and the other bodies that populate the world. This is not an endorsement of reductionism; to a large extent it is a phenomenological thesis, and I will use phenomenological evidence to support it throughout. I suggest, however, that we need to move beyond the phenomenological perspective in order to account for the elements of embodied subjectivity which phenomenology's agent-centered methodology often remains blind to. This requires a careful articulation of the materiality of the body and its genesis, one which staves off reduction and ventures certain speculative remarks about the life of the body. In short, the phenomenology of the body requires a nonphenomenological supplement in order to provide a comprehensive picture of embodiment. I provide this supplement by attending

to the sensitive/sensory¹¹ life of the body, by reworking the concept of sensation, and by enlisting a number of critics of phenomenology to build a picture of embodiment that remains nascent in both Merleau-Ponty and Levinas.

Contemporary philosophy has seen a turn to the body that threatens the dominance of dualist ontologies and the practical philosophies they generate. This turn constitutes one of the most recent attempts to develop the nondualist project and complicate our picture of subjectivity, intersubjectivity, and community. This is because the body is now largely regarded as the locus of *all* aspects of subjectivity; the mind is no longer conceived as independent from, and thus invulnerable to, the operations of the corporeal environment.¹² When the subject is conceived *as* a body, as identical to its body, the problems as well as the solutions entailed in dualism begin to dissolve; the problem of how the mind interacts with the body disappears. But the nondualist framework also raises a number new questions, particularly about the nature of the subject and the workings of its mind, its will, and its practical freedom. We moreover see the epistemological problem of other minds morph into the ontological problems of alterity and individuation; intercorporeity rather than intersubjectivity more accurately describes the new problematic. Now, instead of asking how we *know* other beings, we are led to ask how it is possible for other beings *to be* other. What constitutes their difference

¹¹ Throughout this essay I use the terms “sensory,” “sensitive,” “sensuous,” and “sensible” synonymously. I employ “sensual” only where there is a libidinal or erotic connotation.

¹² A notable exception in the phenomenological tradition to the claim that most philosophers of the body uphold a nondualist perspective is Michel Henry. Henry provides a helpful contrast in the context of affectivity and we will use Henry’s notion of “autoaffection” as a foil for later discussions of affection. Indeed, the problem of embodiment as the problem of incarnation is basically theological and calls for a dualistic solution, and Henry is certainly not the only philosopher who offers a theological phenomenology of incarnation. On this issue in general, see Natalie Depraz, “L’incarnation Phénoménologique, Un Problème Non-théologique?”, *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie* 55, no. 3 (1993): 496-518.

and how is it possible to interact with them? What is the nature of this interaction and is it possible to avoid violence as I engage the other? What makes an individual distinct?

The ontological and ethical aspects of these questions cannot be regarded as separate in a nondualist framework. Because the subject is always already embedded in a practical environment and is in many, if not all, ways a product of that environment, what the subject *does* must be seen as identical to what the subject *is*. Ethics and ontology must be seen as maintaining an internal relation. The remarks that follows attempt to stake out a position on this new terrain and to situate this position in both a contemporary and historical context.

THE PERMANENCE OF THE PROBLEM OF EMBODIMENT

Evidence that the embodied subject is currently enjoying great success and will most likely continue to do so in the future can be gleaned from the proliferation of works in feminist philosophy, critical race theory, and environmental philosophy, to name just a few of the places where the body is at the center of analysis. The continuing interest in the work of Merleau-Ponty and the return of Spinoza in disparate disciplines from political philosophy to neuroscience, as well as recent attempts to retrieve the embodied dimension of Kant, Hegel, Husserl, and Heidegger lend further credence to the claim that the body-subject is uprooting the Cartesian subject.¹³ This suggests that the narrative which is premised upon the forgetting or denigration of the body in the Western philosophical tradition has lost some of its timeliness. This is a promising, if modest,

¹³ For Hegel, see John Russon, *The Self and Its Body in Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001); for Kant, see Angelica Nuzzo, *Ideal Embodiment: Kant's Theory of Sensibility* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008); for Husserl, see James Dodd, *Idealism and Corporeity: An Essay on the Problem of the Body in Husserl's Phenomenology* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1997); for Heidegger, see Frank Schalow, *The Incarnality of Being: The Earth, Animals, and the Body in Heidegger's Thought* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007).

victory over entrenched prejudices. Perhaps even more suggestive is the fact that the body has gained momentum in the philosophy of mind, particularly in studies of embodied cognition, a movement driven by thinkers like George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, Evan Thompson, Shaun Gallagher, Francisco Varela, Bernard Andrieu, Antonio Damasio, and Eugene Gendlin. This movement seeks to provide a nondualist, post-Cartesian solution to the mind-body problem that not only takes seriously the progress of cognitive science, but which also honors the first-person or phenomenological perspective.

As Lakoff and Johnson acknowledge in their *Philosophy in the Flesh*, the embodied cognition program owes a tremendous debt to the researches of pragmatism, especially the work of John Dewey, as well as the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty. “We want to honor the two greatest philosophers of the embodied mind,” write Lakoff and Johnson. “John Dewey, no less than Merleau-Ponty, saw that our bodily experience is the primal basis for everything we can mean, think, know, and communicate. He understood the full richness, complexity, and philosophical importance of bodily experience.”¹⁴ Although the challenge to Western dualism expounded in their coauthored text restricts its engagement with Dewey and Merleau-Ponty to introductory remarks, Johnson’s more recent book, *The Meaning of the Body*, delves further into the philosophical debt incurred by embodiment theorists working in cognitive science.

¹⁴ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), xi. Their attention to Dewey and Merleau-Ponty in this text is unfortunately restricted to the Acknowledgements section. It should be noted that their admiration for Dewey and Merleau-Ponty comes from the fact that both thinkers were practitioners of what Lakoff and Johnson call “empirically responsible philosophy,” which I interpret as meaning that it is their *synthetic* methodology—the attempt to wed first-person and third-person perspectives—that Lakoff and Johnson find laudable about the pragmatist and phenomenologist.

The increased visibility of the body in the study of consciousness and subjectivity does not necessarily entail the reduction of the mind to the brain, or consciousness to synaptic or neuronal activity, although this is one possible outcome.¹⁵ The fertile interrogation of the body has produced a variety of diverse approaches to embodiment, which in turn have yielded unforeseeable problems and possibilities for rethinking the constitution of the body, its relations with other bodies, and its place in the order of things, concepts, and meanings. Many approaches to the body can be called materialist, but we must be careful to not assume that this perspective always implies physicalism or positivism. As Johnson insists: “The brain is *not* the mind. The brain is one key part of the entire pattern of embodied organism-environment interaction that is the proper locus of mind and meaning.”¹⁶ This interaction is comprised of several essential dimensions: the biological, social, ecological, cultural, and phenomenological.¹⁷ Indeed, Johnson offers a naturalistic thesis that is difficult to construe as reductive: “Meaning,” he writes,

is not just a matter of concepts and propositions, but also reaches down into the images, sensorimotor schemas, feelings, qualities, and emotions that constitute our meaningful encounter with our world. Any adequate account of meaning must be built around the aesthetic dimensions that give our experience its distinctive character and significance.¹⁸

It would seem that a balanced union of the material and meaningful remains a live option for both analytic and continental philosophers.

In my view, one of the most important efforts made by the embodied cognition folks is their attempt to undo the entrenched prejudice which holds that our qualitative,

¹⁵ Such is the conclusion drawn by the “eliminative materialism” of Paul and Patricia Churchland. See, for example, Patricia Smith Churchland, *Neurophilosophy: Toward a Unified Science of the Mind-Brain* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989).

¹⁶ Mark Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 175.

¹⁷ Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body*, 275-278.

¹⁸ Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body*, xi-xii.

imaginative, affective, and aesthetic experiences are merely subjective. This prejudice, as I have already indicated, only holds up in an ontology that sees subject and object, body and world, as belonging to two distinct ontological realms. What contemporary cognitive science is showing, however, is that the subjective (mental) and objective (physical) worlds are actually continuous with each other.¹⁹ Such evidence has consequences for how we conceive the structure of subjectivity as well as the nature of individuality and relationality. It means that “there is no Cartesian dualistic person” and “there exists no Kantian radically autonomous person, with absolute freedom and a transcendent reason that correctly dictates what is and isn’t moral.”²⁰ Given that this postdualist perspective undermines the basic distinction between internal psychic life and external corporeal life, theories of subjectivity are forced to acknowledge the essentially *liminal* nature of experience: all experience is the product of the body’s transactions with its environment and the other bodies that populate it. To quote Johnson again,

meaningful form comes from the nature of our bodies and the patterns of interaction we have with our environment, and it is therefore shaped by our values, interests, and purposes as active agents. As Dewey insisted—and cognitive science confirms—thought is never wholly divorced from feeling, value, and the aesthetics of our embodied experience.²¹

Merleau-Ponty likewise advocates a transactional view of embodiment that we will explore in Chapters 1 and 2. For now it is enough to note that the classical dualist position not only proves to be prejudicial, it literally becomes senseless since its terms have lost their reference. In order to foster the postdualist perspective, we have to unpack the carnal life of the body in its liminal aspects, that is, at its points of intersection with

¹⁹ Johnson points to Dewey’s “principle of continuity” as the guiding principle of his naturalistic theory in *The Meaning of the Body*, 10.

²⁰ Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, 5.

²¹ Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body*, 103.

other bodies, and to once again see the aesthetics of embodiment as integral to subjectivity. *Aesthetics* here denotes the sensory life of the body and *sensation* is regarded as the currency with which body-world transactions take place.

At least since Heidegger, phenomenology has defended the nondualist thesis as it struggles against the prejudices of objectivism and dualism. Of course, there are countless nonphenomenological precursors to this general perspective: Parmenides and Anaximander, the Atomists, Hobbes and Spinoza, Marx and Nietzsche, the Pragmatists. And while the philosophers working on embodied cognition acknowledge and cite from some of these historical resources, the fruits of their labors are often attributed to the latest research in cognitive science, cognitive linguistics, or emotion theory. This not only obscures the history of the problem of embodiment, it also passes over a rich and conflicted body of literature which has much to contribute to the contemporary debate. Such methodological decisions tend to reinforce the view that phenomenology is only valuable as a supplement to the sciences of the mind, but that it lacks rigor or legitimacy when conducted on its own terms. Thus, Johnson admits that “phenomenology *leads* us to the primacy of movement, but it alone is not enough to prove the case. What is required additionally is empirical research from the cognitive sciences of the embodied mind.”²² While I do feel that phenomenology is best practiced synthetically, that is, in conjunction with the human and natural sciences, I think we need to be careful not to place it in the role of handmaiden or to underestimate its contribution to embodiment research.²³ Thus, my aim here is to excavate the history of phenomenology in an attempt

²² Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body*, 27.

²³ Phenomenological philosophy is at its best when it is “empirically responsible,” as Lakoff and Johnson would say. By the same token, we should not assume that all good philosophy is empirically verifiable. Our philosophical critique, as Kant taught us in the first *Critique*, must always leave a bit of room for

to reveal the affinities and disparities between Levinas's and Merleau-Ponty's contributions to twentieth-century philosophy of the body and their relevance to contemporary research. Although, taken independently, I find their respective views to be incompatible as well as somewhat resistant to more recent theories of embodiment, I find both figures indispensable for developing a conception of embodiment which can reconcile the phenomenologists and nonphenomenologists.

A promising possibility opened up by the corporeal turn in philosophy is the chance to rethink concepts which have hitherto been criticized out of theoretical discourse. One of these concepts is sensation. Sensation is a concept with a confused history and a shifting, equivocal identity.²⁴ It is often conflated with or subsumed by perception. It is a concept which has been left behind because it belongs to an ontological and epistemological model that has been surpassed. The installation of the body at the center of our theories of subjectivity and the apparent collapse of the subject-object divide effected by Kant and post-Kantian idealism, however, has forced us to produce new ontologies and to attend to the new philosophical problems which result from this shift in perspective. Therefore, the question I am particularly concerned with is: *What is the relation between our bodies and their sensory environment?* Entailed in this question is a whole series of ontological considerations which bear on the nature and constitution of the body, the problem of corporeal individuation, the natural-artificial and human-nonhuman distinctions, the ethics of intercorporeal interaction, the reality of violence and death, as well as the problem of how to conceive sensation vis-à-vis perception and

metaphysical speculation. This principle is even more pertinent given the finite perspective afforded us as embodied minds.

²⁴ To my mind, the only text which attempts a thorough philosophical history of the concept of sensation is D.W. Hamlyn's *Sensation and Perception: A History of the Philosophy of Perception* (New York: Humanities Press, 1961).

cognition. If sensation understood in the context of dualism is doomed, what possibilities for revitalizing sensation exist in the postdualist landscape?

Situated at the intersection of the philosophy and science of the body, the fecundity of theories of embodied cognition would be enough to warrant a closer inspection of the history of the problem of the body. At the same time, given the promise of such research it is important to catalogue the nuances of the philosophical history of the body, and to raise and respond to the metaphysical questions it poses to contemporary studies.

THESIS

Phenomenology provides numerous resources for addressing the problem of sensation and for thinking through its place in carnal ontology. Indeed, sensation constitutes the material basis of that ontology. The narrative I will tell is about how the return of the body has enabled the retrieval of sensation as a philosophically rich concept. Claiming Levinas and Merleau-Ponty as allies, I defend the thesis that sensation, since it immanently orients and integrates our bodies, is the basis of our intentional and intercorporeal world. This basis is for the most part preperceptual, preconceptual, and prepersonal. As a consequence of the immanent constitution of the body, the primary relation between body and world becomes methodologically problematic from the phenomenological perspective: without the distance afforded by perception, which opens up between perceiver and perceived, it becomes difficult for the phenomenon under consideration to be apprehended as a proper object of reflection. Sensation lacks the transcendence necessary for the phenomenological observer to figure it against a background; its contours are never entirely defined or apparent—sensations can transpire

as nonphenomenal (nonintentional) events. This notion contests Merleau-Ponty's claim that "a figure on a background is the simplest sense-given [*la donnée sensible*] available to us...."²⁵ Against this, I argue that sensations make sense (*sens*) or give direction (*sens*) to our bodies at a prehorizontal level. I attempt to unfold the sensuous relation and indicate the need for a synthetic (phenomenological/nonphenomenological) view of embodiment. Furthermore, I urge the need to develop an ethics that will cultivate our aesthetic environment in enabling and affirmative ways, that is, according to a standard of integrity that I specify in Chapter 4.

KANT'S AESTHETICS AND CRITIQUE OF SENSIBILITY

To contextualize my project, it is instructive to begin with Kant and Hegel. Kant carries out an analysis of the aesthetic capacity of the subject in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Kant's analysis marks a turning point in the history of the concept of sensation and exemplifies an attitude which still holds considerable influence today. To summarize Kant's impact, it is fair to say that after him the legitimacy of sensation—as a unit of experience—becomes suspect; it is now fine to lay claim to perceptions, but sensations are relegated to an amorphous, unspeakable, and ultimately inaccessible region. Kant cannot afford to discard sensation completely, however.

The Transcendental Aesthetic of the *Critique of Pure Reason* uncovers the a priori and empirical components of sensibility: it shows the pure forms of intuition, space and time, to be contributed by the subject and not objective in themselves, as on Newton's model; it shows the material of our intuition, sensation, to be provided by the objects we intuit directly in the world. In his account of the subject-object relation, as well his

²⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 1962), 4.

understanding of the subject as such, Kant is Cartesian in spirit, but he decisively advances beyond the Cartesian view by endowing the subject with the power to constitute the form of its world. Hegel deploys his own brand of phenomenology to criticize Kant's residual dualism, but at the expense of the autonomy of objects and the sensations they produce. What is missing in all three of these views is the practical or embodied dimension of sensation. It seems that Descartes, Kant, and Hegel are concerned only with the epistemological or cognitive value of sensation, and thus minimize the philosophical consequences of the sensory encounter which takes place between the world and the body of the observer.²⁶ Put otherwise, what they lack is a sense of the *volatility* of sensibility, its capacity to both enable *and* disable the subject. A brief look at Kant's *Transcendental Aesthetic* can reveal this inadequacy and lead us to question the legitimacy of his claim that sensory content is given unsynthesized by objects and informed by the subject. It will also provide a bridge to the tacit idealism of Husserl's phenomenology, against which both Merleau-Ponty and Levinas respond with quasi-realist criticism.

The Copernican revolution effected by Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* has had a lasting influence on the history of philosophy. Its impact on modern and postmodern European philosophy, or the continental tradition, has been foundational. Indeed, it is not inaccurate to cite the critical philosophy of Kant as the origin of continental philosophy.²⁷ Given Kant's general importance in this history and his influence on the phenomenological movement in particular, it is necessary to establish a few key points entailed in his view. I will focus exclusively here on his view of sensation and his theory

²⁶ This claim is perhaps a bit unfair in the case of Descartes, who was certainly interested in the senses, but Descartes' interest is more scientific or physicalist in texts like *Treatise on Light, Optics, Treatise on Man, and Description of the Human Body*.

²⁷ See Tom Rockmore, *In Kant's Wake: Philosophy in the Twentieth Century* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), especially Chapter 5, and Lee Braver, *A Thing of This World: A History of Continental Anti-Realism* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007).

of sensibility since they are the terms that concern us immediately. This will enable us to draw a parallel between Kant and Husserl in order to connect the Kantian revolution, or what might also be called the institution of constructivist epistemology,²⁸ to the institution of phenomenology. Specifically, I am interested in pointing out that subjects and objects retain their autonomous lives even after Kant has fused subject and object irrevocably together at the phenomenal level.²⁹ Although I endorse this idea in one sense, Kant himself is not entitled to it.

Kant's revolutionary position, which holds that the objects of perception receive their form from—and so must conform to—our cognition, rather than our cognition to them,³⁰ takes root in the first *Critique's* Transcendental Aesthetic. Kant is concerned there not with a theory of the beautiful or a philosophy of art, but with the subject's capacity to receive sensory input from the external world.³¹ Kant offers a theory of sensibility which is formulated at least in part as a response to classical empiricist accounts of sense experience, particularly those of the British empiricists.

²⁸ This epistemological view, which sees the world of experience as in fundamental respects constructed by the mind of the observer, opposes the objectivist ontology of empiricism and the representational theory of knowledge it engenders. The world of the empiricist is populated by a multitude of discrete objects which exist in themselves and interact with each other according to causal laws. Humans come to know these objects, their properties, and their laws of interaction by observing their behavior. All of this information, claims the empiricist, is transmitted to our minds by sensations. David Hume, arguably Kant's most provocative predecessor, formulates the empiricist view in the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), 10. Hume holds that, corresponding to the discrete objects of the external world, the mind is constituted such that it receives discrete *impressions* from the world. These impressions are simple, disparate perceptual states that only get connected to one another after the fact. The classical empiricist's perceptual world is not comprised of a "stream of consciousness" like the kind William James and Husserl speak about. Representationalist interpretations fail to adhere to Kant's claim that we can never access the things in themselves to verify the accuracy of our representations. Thus, the constructivist reading is more persuasive than the representationalist, even if Kant calls the objects of perception representations (*Vorstellungen*).

²⁹ On the power, impact, and overcoming of this fusion, which is criticized under the name of "correlationism," see Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2008).

³⁰ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Bxvi-xviii, B62.

³¹ Sensibility, says Kant, is our capacity to be affected by objects; it is how objects are *given* to us. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A19/B33.

Kant is in agreement with the empiricists that cognition must begin with the experience of some object, but he contests the claim that all our knowledge is built up from what is given empirically, that is, from sensations. “There can be no doubt that all our cognition begins with experience,” writes Kant. “But,” he adds, “even though all our cognition starts with experience, that does not mean that all of it arises from experience.”³² He makes this claim to set up a refutation of empiricism, but also because he understands “experience” to be a composite phenomenon built up from impressions received by the intellect, which then applies concepts to *produce* experience. Ordinarily we believe experience to be externally given. But, says Kant, “long practice has made us attentive to [the cognitive element of all experience] and skilled in separating it from the basic material,” provided by sense impressions.³³ Since experience is always more than the reception of sensory content, the given is never received in basic, raw form; that is, sensations are never received as such. How can Kant claim that they are given, then? Or rather, if sensations are always already worked up by the cognitive apparatus, what allows Kant to claim that anything like a pure, unsynthesized sensation exists at all? He requires the concept of sensation, or the sensory manifold, to account for the content of cognition, but beyond its basic architectonic value sensation plays no formative role in the constitution of experience or identity; nor does it hold sway over our *capacity* to constitute experience.

The empiricist position, which Merleau-Ponty thoroughly criticizes and offers a non-Kantian alternative for in *Phenomenology of Perception*, maintains that our knowledge of the world arises out of our firsthand acquaintance with objects as they are

³² Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B1.

³³ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B1-B2.

in themselves. Whereas Kant holds that there is an objective (noumenal) world in itself beyond the reach of (phenomenal) perception, and that this noumenal world is unknowable, Merleau-Ponty eschews the notion of an objective realm in favor of a dynamic theory of object identity. Merleau-Ponty follows Kant to a degree, but transfers the constitutive power of the subject to the body's capacity for "practical synthesis"³⁴ rather than locating the synthetic act in the understanding or imagination.

Kant's epistemological treatment of sensation has a clear ontological significance. Sensation denotes the material to be processed by the understanding into experience. Kant writes: "The effect of an object on our capacity for [re]presentation, insofar as we are affected by the object, is *sensation*."³⁵ This material is provided to the subject from outside; it is given off by the objects which reside in the noumenal realm, the so-called things in themselves. But Kant's epistemology cannot maintain this ontological divide between subject and object, let alone claim any causal interaction between them.³⁶ His constructivism is precluded from making any reference to things in themselves, as things are only knowable via phenomenal experience understood in the composite sense (experience = sensations + concepts). This makes Kant's account of the givenness of sensation either speculative (something the critical project aims to avoid) or a formal, "lifeless schema."³⁷ In either case, he removes the volatility of sensation by keeping it

³⁴ "It is not through an intellectual synthesis which would freely posit the total object that I am led from what is given to what is not actually given; that I am given, together with the visible sides of the object, the nonvisible sides as well. It is, rather, a kind of practical synthesis." Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The Primacy of Perception," in *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics*, ed. James M. Edie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 14. This account of practical synthesis is filled out as "operative intentionality" in *Phenomenology of Perception*.

³⁵ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B34/A20.

³⁶ For Kant, causality is a category of the understanding and therefore applicable only to phenomena. He cannot claim that the noumenal realm has causal power (such as the power to cause sensations) because that would make causality an objective law, which is something Kant rejects.

³⁷ G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 29.

always at a distance from the cognitive subject or transcendental ego. This is effectively what Samuel Todes argues in *Body and World*,³⁸ wherein he defends the thesis that Kant “imaginizes” perception and the ego, and thereby overlooks the materiality of subjectivity. Todes responds to Kant with phenomenological evidence that is meant to show how the subject is not a disembodied, transcendental synthesizer of sensory content, but rather a product of that content itself.

Todes argues for a pre-Kantian thesis, but from a post-Kantian/phenomenological, perspective. Knowledge must conform to objects, says Todes.³⁹ This is a consequence of the fact that our perception is always practical first and conceptual or imaginative secondarily. “On our view,” writes Todes, “imagination presupposes practical perception because we must first become somebody by practical experience in the given world, before we can achieve self-expression and self-discovery by making a world of our own.”⁴⁰ (Levinas extensively argues a similar point in his discussions of separation, habitation/dwelling, and enjoyment in *Totality and Infinity*.)⁴¹ Kant believes that he can ascertain a priori knowledge of the world, for example, the pure forms of intuition (space and time). But this knowledge cannot guarantee that some content exists outside of us awaiting to be given form. It is the practical field of perception that indicates that objects await our interaction, but even this lends no certainty about the reality of objects for Todes.⁴² What does offer this certainty is the phenomenological evidence of the perceptual field, which determines the existence of objects “by way of some effective

³⁸ Samuel Todes, *Body and World* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001).

³⁹ Todes, *Body and World*, 159.

⁴⁰ Todes, *Body and World*, 174.

⁴¹ These are sections where we see most clearly what I am calling Levinas’s *material ontology*. The relevant subsections of *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), “Separation as Life,” “Enjoyment and Representation,” “I and Dependence,” and “The Dwelling” will be studied closely in chapter 3 of this dissertation.

⁴² Todes, *Body and World*, 161.

response to that object, and culminates by determining it as circumstantially outside us. This response, however, determines not merely the perceptual object upon which it is directed, but also the percipient from which it issues.”⁴³ Only the dialogical interaction that constantly occurs between subject and object, so central to Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception, can evince the materiality of these two terms. This dialogism lends subject and object their particular form and function. It is not the spontaneous synthesis of the ego which performs this feat, it is the responsiveness of the active body with all of its specific determinations: upright posture,⁴⁴ front-back asymmetry,⁴⁵ physical disability, gravitational attunement, etc.

Todes raises a now common criticism of the Kantian subject when he claims that Kant “has no sense of how practice makes the practitioner.”⁴⁶ For Kant, the world is but a reflection of our constitutive (imaginative, cognitive) capacities and we come to know ourselves only by first making this world. Against Kant, Todes and other contemporary proponents of embodiment insist that subjects are produced as they explore and interact bodily with their world.⁴⁷ Now, it is possible to argue that Kant does not in fact completely absent the body from his account of subjectivity. Angelica Nuzzo, for instance, offers Kant’s aesthetic theory as evidence for the possibility of a nondualist, embodied view of human sensibility.⁴⁸ She writes: “[Kant’s and Herder’s] general aim is to attribute to human sensibility a new central place in philosophy, thereby steering the philosophical focus from the metaphysics of a ‘disembodied soul’ to the inquiry into an

⁴³ Todes, *Body and World*, 170.

⁴⁴ See Erwin Straus, “The Upright Posture,” *Psychiatric Quarterly* 26 (1952): 529-561.

⁴⁵ Todes, *Body and World*, 106, 118.

⁴⁶ Todes, *Body and World*, 173.

⁴⁷ Todes, *Body and World*, 174.

⁴⁸ Angelica Nuzzo, “Kant and Herder on Baumgarten’s *Aesthetica*,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 44, no. 4 (October 2006): 577-597.

‘embodied mind’.” Kant’s modern view of sensibility is broad enough to encompass “the entire realm of the sensual: affections, intuition, sensation, feeling, and imagination.”⁴⁹

The innovative moment in Kant comes when he makes of the body a transcendental condition for aesthetics, a condition which is “formal” and “ideal,” but at the same time corporeal.⁵⁰ We will see that Levinas is after something similar but less formal. For Kant, sensibility is the active reception of objects given and is “responsible for the fact that we are able to confront the reality of given objects.” But sensibility’s activity extends further, since it also produces representations of objects and does so immediately, unlike thought, which is always mediated by sensibility.⁵¹ Sensibility guarantees that sensations received are never without form; and since Kant distinguishes between intuition and sensation he can designate intuitions as objective while assigning sensations a representational/subjective role as the formal *effect* of objects on our sensibility.

Nuzzo’s attempt to display the embodied element of Kantian cognition is emblematic of the broader concern with embodiment in contemporary philosophy. Like other recent attempts to retrieve the body, it testifies to the inadequacy of the now familiar narrative which tells of the Western philosophical tradition’s neglect of the body. This is why I hesitate to take sides against Nuzzo’s reading of Kant: it’s not a matter of either/or, where we are forced to acknowledge the body in Kant or lament its absence. It is a matter of degree and I believe that despite the embodied elements of Kantian cognition highlighted by Nuzzo, sensibility still remains subservient to the understanding in his philosophy. As a consequence, Kant provides an account which tames sensation by

⁴⁹ Nuzzo, “Kant and Herder,” 578.

⁵⁰ See Charles Taylor, “The Validity of Transcendental Arguments,” in *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), where Taylor argues for a continuity between the transcendental approaches of Kant and Merleau-Ponty.

⁵¹ Nuzzo, “Kant and Herder,” 582.

making of it an epistemological placeholder.⁵² The question remains: How does the transcendental ego link up with the transcendental body? Looking to the first *Critique*, it would have to be through sensibility, since all judgment must pass through the senses. But we have already seen the problem with considering objects and sensations as given corporeally on the Kantian model. Kant distinguishes between intuition and sensation, qualifying the latter as empirical and the former as either pure or empirical. Since we only ever intuit the appearances of objects, and thus apprehend objects only through an a priori formality which provides them with the space and time in which they reside, we are prevented from claiming that sensation actually comes from somewhere, let alone that it is given materially. The first *Critique* excludes sensation from the transcendental realm precisely because of its materiality.⁵³

It is the third *Critique* that ultimately makes room for the embodied dimension of sensibility through its analysis of the feeling of pleasure and displeasure. Nuzzo shows that this yields the condition under which it is possible for us to “*feel ourselves a part of living (i.e., sensible) nature,*” but I do not think it successfully “strengthens the connection between sensation and feeling,” even if Kant does allow for the possibility of a nonconceptual intuition.⁵⁴ Alongside the first *Critique*, the recasting of sensibility in the *Critique of Judgment* does not resolve the problem of how to reconcile the formal role of sensation with the feeling of pleasure or displeasure. Are we permitted to conclude that aesthetic pleasure, which is an embodied response to aesthetic phenomena, is brought about via sensibility? If it is illegitimate to claim that sensibility actually receives

⁵² As Nuzzo points out (“Kant and Herder,” 596), this is similar to Herder’s criticism of Kant. Herder preferred an historicism which sought “to grasp genetically and materially...the origins of historical human individuality” whereas “Kant’s transcendental inquiry into the human cognitive faculty is an investigation of the *a priori* sources and validity of our judgments,” 597.

⁵³ Nuzzo, “Kant and Herder,” 584.

⁵⁴ Nuzzo, “Kant and Herder,” 587.

material sensations, it is not clear how the corporeality of pleasure can link up with the corporeality of sensation in a nonformal way. Without this link the body cannot be brought to the center of experience. To allow such a connection, it seems necessary to forego the unity of the Kantian project and take sides with the third *Critique* against the first.

Remaining neutral on this score, I simply want to maintain that Kant has effectively and influentially tamed sensation by keeping the body separate from the material content of cognition, that is, by upholding a subject-object dualism that insulates the constitution of the subject from the material effects of the object. Accordingly, sensation cannot be regarded as constitutive of the Kantian subject.

The pacification of sensation is ramified in Hegel's phenomenology. In the section of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* entitled "Sense-Certainty," Hegel addresses the problem of the given by rejecting the existence of a noumenal realm that provides sensory input for cognition to process into workable knowledge. Hegel's refusal to infer the existence of pure sensory content would seem to eliminate the objectivity of sensation altogether and situate it exclusively on the side of the subject. In a sense, the symbiosis of subject and object is no longer present in Hegel because the object has become a concept: the world becomes the phenomenal appearance of human conceptuality, so the sensory material of intuition *qua material* becomes superfluous.

Hegel takes sensation to be a prejudicial concept, one which we use to explain the phenomena of experience without really comprehending the rationality of these phenomena. At the same time, he makes of experience only the appearance of

consciousness, given to itself phenomenally.⁵⁵ The sensible world is a fable for Hegel and it is quickly sublated by perception, which is of a “higher” rational order, in his dialectic. What we believe to be the direct *apprehension* of a singular sensory object reveals itself to actually be *comprehension* of an object endowed with universal qualities: “So it is in fact the universal that is the true [content] of sense-certainty,” Hegel says.⁵⁶ “I have this certainty *through* something else, viz. the thing; and it, similarly, is in sense-certainty *through* something else, viz. through the ‘I’.”⁵⁷ In Hegel the mediation of the world by the mind becomes a total mediation, thus ensuring that the alterity and foreignness of the world can be recuperated by the dialectic.⁵⁸

Hegel’s discontent with the formalism of Kant’s analysis of our cognitive faculty leads him to “put flesh on Kant’s architectonic.”⁵⁹ Hegel’s gripe with Kant is basically existentialist in character, in that he thinks Kant is trying to understand experience before actually experiencing something. This is why he begins the *Phenomenology* with sense experience; this move is equivalent to jumping right into the stream of consciousness and investigating its contours from the inside, rather than trying to deduce them beforehand. But it is also telling that he finds sense experience to be something that is already shot through with universals, and so neither formless nor immediate at all. Effectively, the stream of consciousness is shown to be given through perception and not sensation. Such

⁵⁵ This is the consequence of overcoming the subject-object duality retained by Kant. The implications for Merleau-Ponty, along with Husserl, Heidegger, and others who reject the essential distinction of subject and object are apparent. See Tom Rockmore, *Cognition: An Introduction to Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 23, *passim*.

⁵⁶ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 60. Regarding the possibility of immediate acquaintance, Hegel also writes: “In apprehending [an object], we must refrain from trying to *comprehend* it,” 58.

⁵⁷ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 59.

⁵⁸ Cf. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 56-57: “In pressing forward to its true existence, consciousness will arrive at a point at which it gets rid of its semblance of being burdened with something alien, with what is only for it, and some sort of ‘other’, at a point where appearance becomes identical with essence, so that its exposition will coincide at just this point with the authentic Science of Spirit.”

⁵⁹ Irmgard Scherer, “The Problem of the A Priori in Sensibility: Revisiting Kant’s and Hegel’s Theories of the Senses,” *The Review of Metaphysics*, 52, no. 2 (December 1998), 362.

a tactic is standard not only for Hegel's phenomenology, but also for Husserl and his followers. The difference is that Hegel does not allow for the transcendence of the object; the object is a concept, not a real thing in the world.⁶⁰ Like Merleau-Ponty, Husserl seems to allow for a "transcendence in immanence" of the object.⁶¹ Just as in Kant, the form of the Hegelian object is the product of the conscious subject. But unlike Kant, this object has no other life than the one bestowed upon it by the I of the observer.⁶²

Hegel's critique of Kant's dualism is aimed at sensation as a source of knowledge, specifically as the source of our representations. This is a reformulation of the Cartesian criticism of empiricism, as demonstrated by the wax example in the *Meditations*, where Descartes showed that what we actually perceive in an object as it undergoes myriad qualitative changes is nothing sensible—which can only lead to skepticism—but an idea or representation. Hegel's critique of sensation goes further than Descartes' skepticism, however. It leads to the abandonment of the concept of sensation as such. Although necessary to recount the odyssey of Spirit, sensation is just a rudimentary form of experience that bears no certain knowledge and can easily be seen as simply prejudicial. Hegel's perspective, which is recounted by Merleau-Ponty (PP Chapter 1), restricts the valence of sensation by considering it only for its capacity to yield certain

⁶⁰ Husserl remains close to Hegel when he writes: "*An object that has being in itself (an sich seiender) is never such as to be out of relation to consciousness and its Ego. The thing is thing of the world about me, even the thing that is not seen and the really possible thing, not experienced....*" ⁶⁰ Edmund Husserl, *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, trans. W.R. Boyce Gibson (New York: Collier, 1962), 134. Hereafter cited as *Ideas I*.

⁶¹ On the one hand, like Merleau-Ponty, Husserl maintains that the object of consciousness evidently transcends consciousness by being given always perspectively (§43 of *Ideas I* points out that even God could not perceive non-perspectively). On the other hand, although he admits that objects are given to us "in one blow" (cf. Sixth Logical Investigation), Husserl says that we must build up the unity of objects "with increasing completeness through perceptual continua harmoniously developed, and through certain methodic thought-forms grounded in experience" (*Ideas I*, 138). This last remark seems to align Husserl with Hegel and against Kant, and to replace the actuality of the thing in itself with the intuition of an essential appearance.

⁶² "Form is the Concept which, fully developed, is the I or pure self-consciousness." Scherer, "The Problem of the A Priori in Sensibility," 364.

representations. But sensation is much more than a means to certainty: it possesses a carnal quality that eludes the subject's power of representation and, in fact, threatens our representational capacity. This dimension of sensation eludes Hegel's phenomenology.

The non-Hegelian phenomenologists uncover a different ontology of the subject of sensation. Levinas, for instance, is interested in reviving the affective aspect of embodiment and considers sensation as a kind of element that nourishes the body and disrupts any attempt to freeze it in a system. Hegel completely neglects this. Merleau-Ponty is also not interested in operating within the old epistemological debates. He instead wants to construct a new framework for thinking the relation of body and world.

Merleau-Ponty's conception of sensation cannot be comprehended by the old model, even though I believe it is most powerful when articulated through this model. This is why I treat twentieth-century phenomenology—occasionally reinscribing it in older terms and divisions—as an extension of the history of philosophy and not as a movement that departs from ground hitherto uncharted by this history, which is a common way to regard the various “reductions” performed by the phenomenologist. Merleau-Ponty's nondualist and nonrepresentationalist perspective offers something like a monism of the sensible as opposed to a subject-object dualism that finds sensation on either side of this ontological divide. It is necessary to rethink sensation as taking place between subject and object; this is at least partly made possible by stepping outside the ontology of Descartes and Hume, Kant and Hegel. However, it is likewise necessary to note the influence of the moderns on Husserl's phenomenology and the phenomenological approaches that follow him.

What is at stake when breaking with the idealist model that culminates with Hegel is not only an embodied subject, but also a rehabilitation of the concept of sensation and an ethical theory that is predicated on the aesthetic life of the body. This ethical theory is situated not at the intellectual level, like the Kantian imperative, but at the intercorporeal level: at the site where bodies interact with other bodies, where bodily transactions, yields, absorptions, resistances, and collisions occur. Sensation is at the heart of all encounters, constituting and reconstituting the bodies involved.

HUSSERL: HYLETIC DATA (*IDEAS I*) AND THE BODY (*IDEAS II*)

Merleau-Ponty and Levinas challenge Husserl explicitly in their texts. A common target is his residual idealism, which harbors important remnants of both Kant and Hegel. Those who would defend Husserl against this charge always seem to be fighting an uphill battle. The call back to the things themselves has a Kantian ring to it, but it is actually for Husserl more of an Hegelian principle: return to the immediate objects of experience and proceed with reflection from there, without prejudging the matter at hand.⁶³ Despite his allegiance to the phenomena as such, however, Husserl retains a basic dualism which aligns him with Kant. The famous bracketing of the natural world which initiates the phenomenological method remains neutral about the things themselves and focuses the phenomenologist's attention solely on the given.⁶⁴ This means that Husserl does not discard the thing in itself, like Hegel, but refuses to speak about it *qua phenomenologist*.

⁶³ Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, trans. J.N. Findlay, Volume 2 (New York: Humanity Books, 1970), Introduction, §7; *Ideas I*, §24 ("The Principle of All Principles").

⁶⁴ As the "principle of all principles" says (*Ideas I*, 83): "every primordial dator Intuition is a source of authority (*Rechtquelle*) for knowledge... whatever presents itself in 'intuition' in primordial form (as it were in its bodily reality), is simply to be accepted as it gives itself out to be, though only within the limits in which it then presents itself."

Only natural scientists and ordinary folks believe themselves to be talking about things in themselves; such talk is suspended by the phenomenological reduction.

The given for Husserl is not what comes from “outside,” but what is present *to consciousness*; this includes the sensory material which Kant sees as provided by the objects of the external world. So, on the one hand, Husserl tacitly retains the noumenon/phenomenon duality, but in a neutralized form, while at the same time situating the origin of the given in consciousness and thereby forming another tacit alliance with a more extreme idealism. This is the case in *Ideas I*, although the story is complicated by Husserl’s turn to the body in *Ideas II*. As for objects and their sensible features, *Logical Investigations* complicates the matter further by offering a version of the sensible that is at odds with the idealism of *Ideas I*.

We saw how Kant’s relegation of the material of sensation to the noumenal realm, oddly enough, disqualified him from claiming its objectivity. Consequently, his dualism has the effect of immunizing the subject from the impact of sensations. Husserl’s idealism, at least in *Ideas I*, has a similar effect: he once again domesticates sensation and mitigates its material dimension by subjectivizing it.⁶⁵ Like Kant and Hegel before him, he sees the subject as animating sensory content,⁶⁶ whereas I would argue, with Merleau-Ponty and Levinas, that *it is sensory content that animates us*. We might pose this point of contrast in terms of what could be called the principle of animation: against the view which holds that the principle of animation is ideal or mental I offer the view that the

⁶⁵ In the analytic tradition, sensation is often seen as internal to the subject. Now, it is one thing to make sensation internal to the body and another thing to make it internal to consciousness. I take Husserl to be doing the latter, but not necessarily the former. In fact, he explicitly contests the view that sensations (*Empfindungen*) are internal to the body in Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, Second Book, trans. Richard Rojcewicz and Andre Schuwer (Dordrecht, Kluwer, 1989).

⁶⁶ Husserl, *Ideas I*, 227.

principle of animation is given materially and therefore constitutes the subject as a corporeal event. Phenomenological idealism keeps the materiality of sensation at a distance and thus keeps it at a safe remove from the body; sensibility is conceived intellectually and the carnal aspect of experience is drastically compromised.

It is not easy to figure the sensory/material or so-called “hyletic” layer in Husserl’s image of consciousness. As James Dodd has said, “it is perhaps the most volatile concept in [Husserl’s] corpus.”⁶⁷ *Ideas I* explains that the notion of a hyletic layer is meant to replace what he called “primary contents” in *Logical Investigations*. These primary contents Husserl describes as what “would be the contents of ‘external’ sensibility,” although he is quick to point out that this does not refer to “some metaphysical distinction of outward and inward.” At the level of phenomenological representation, then, these primary contents are the intuited ground upon which reflection is founded.⁶⁸ They include all the sensory content given in concrete experience, such as color and texture as well as the “sensile impressions of pleasure, pain, tickling, etc.”⁶⁹ Primary contents no longer works as a concept in *Ideas I* and Husserl decides there to speak of *hyle* instead. In each case, Husserl is reconstituting what would otherwise be referred to as sensation: “sensation is hyle, that is, matter waiting to be charged with animating sense, awaiting an apprehension that will give it meaning.”⁷⁰ The shift to the language of hyle helps him emphasize the fact that the “sensuous stuff” of consciousness is immanent to, not independent of, consciousness.

⁶⁷ Dodd, 46.

⁶⁸ Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, Volume 2, 814, 815.

⁶⁹ Husserl, *Ideas I*, 226.

⁷⁰ Cf. Alia Al-Saji, “Rhythms of the Body: A Study of Sensation, Time and Intercorporeity in the Phenomenology of Edmund Husserl” (PhD diss., Emory University, 2002), 1.

Ideas I upholds a hylomorphism⁷¹ that is Kantian in structure: what Husserl calls hyletic data is analogous to the first *Critique*'s sensory given; intentional acts give form to this data in the same way that the forms of intuition operate for Kant, even though Husserl refuses to proclaim that hyletic data are subject to an "animating synthesis" and even questions whether they play a constitutive role in intentionality.⁷² The pure objectivity of the hyletic layer must be, as in Kant, inferred from perception—it is never experienced in its pure form or given to consciousness, as it is always at least minimally filtered and formed by intentionality.⁷³ Just as in Hegel, perception is the most basic experience of what is given: "The *object-giving* (or *dator*) intuition of the first, 'natural' sphere of knowledge and of all its sciences is natural experience, and the *primordial dator* experience is *perception* in the ordinary sense of the term."⁷⁴ Nevertheless, the hyle is what grounds the constitutive acts (noeses) of consciousness in something *posited* as nonsubjective: this ground provides an ideal limit—the "noematic nucleus" which outlasts, as "objective," all of the adumbrations of any given object⁷⁵—for subjective constitution; its role is merely formal, necessary to explain the whence of sensory input. A tension immediately arises: if the hyletic layer is situated on the side of the subject, but is supposed to provide the nonsubjective, nonideal ground of noetic acts, what are we to

⁷¹ Cf. Husserl, *Ideas I*, §85.

⁷² Husserl, *Ideas I*, 227: "Whether...sensile experiences in the stream of experience are of necessity everywhere the subjects of some kind of 'animating synthesis' which informs them...or, as we also say, whether they ever take their part in *intentional functions*, does not here call for decision."

⁷³ Dodd suggests that Husserl's idealism is even stronger than Kant's: "Husserl's strategy is to claim that the sources of knowledge are not hidden, but 'are' only within an 'experience' that itself is a unity given in reflection—this is *against Kant*." *Idealism and Corporeity*, 46.

⁷⁴ Husserl, *Ideas I*, 45. He goes on to specify that "to have something real primordially given, and to 'become aware' of it and 'perceive' it in simple intuition, are one and the same thing." Yet, in *The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, trans. David Carr (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 164, Husserl will admit that each of our perceptions is simply an "appearance" of an object that transcends each of its perspectives. That is, he admits the "thing in itself" into his ontology—but on what grounds? Is he not in the same position as Kant, forced to speculate on the givenness of the thing in itself and thus break from the phenomenological attitude?

⁷⁵ Husserl, *Ideas I*, §§128-129.

make of the ontological status of the hyletic material? Husserl is forced to postulate the reality of a nonintentional source of sensory material in order to avoid idealism, but this can only occur through a betrayal of his allegiance to the evidence of phenomena *qua* phenomena.

Husserl distinguishes sensibility, or what remains phenomenally after the sensory content of perception has passed through the senses, from the hyletic layer which functions as the basis for meaningful acts of consciousness.⁷⁶ Distinguishing both sensibility and hyle from the animating acts of consciousness or noeses, Husserl regards the hyletic layer as (formally or functionally) objective while designating the phenomenal data of sensibility as the subjective manifestation of hyletic material. He writes: “Both [hyle and sensibility] together compelled the old transfer of the originally narrower meaning of sensibility to the spheres of sentiment and will, to the intentional experiences, namely, in which sensory data of the spheres here indicated play their part as functioning ‘materials’.” He continues by concluding that “we need a new term which shall express the whole group through its unity of function and its contrast with the formative characters....” This new term is hyle; it encompasses the affective and sensuous material that is formed by intentionality and given meaning by consciousness.⁷⁷ He distinguishes the formative acts as “psychical” to distinguish them from the bodily and sensory,⁷⁸ but emphasizes in response to Brentano’s psychologism that both the noetic (Brentano’s “psychical”) and the material (Brentano’s “physical”) fall within “the stream of

⁷⁶ Husserl, *Ideas* I, 228.

⁷⁷ Husserl, *Ideas* I, 228.

⁷⁸ Husserl, *Ideas* I, 229.

phenomenological being.”⁷⁹ Accordingly, both matter and form are circumscribed by consciousness; sensation loses its nonsubjective feature.⁸⁰

Because *Ideas I* is primarily concerned with the correlation between acts of consciousness and their intentional objects insofar as this correlation can be given a transcendental significance, the investigation of sensory material for its own sake remains subordinate to the project of transcendental phenomenology. In Husserl’s words, an engagement with sensory material as such, or a “pure hyletics,” “wins significance from the fact that it furnishes a woof that can enter into the intentional tissue, material that can enter into intentional formations.”⁸¹ *Ideas I* is then not the best place to find Husserl engaged with the corporeality of sensation, even if it is representative of his general philosophical perspective. It is best to look at *Ideas II*, where sensation (*Empfindung*) is dealt with explicitly with respect to the body and the hylomorphic structure of consciousness—which sees sensation as amorphous and innocuous—is contested.⁸²

Since an understanding of Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the lived body (*corps propre*) is informed by Husserl’s lived body (*Leib*) in *Ideas II*, it suffices to indicate here that Husserl’s account of sensation in this text is quite different than the theory of hyle in *Ideas I* and primary contents in *Logical Investigations*. As Alia Al-Saji reads it, the second book of *Ideas* shows Husserl focusing “on the way the lived Body is constituted through the localization of... sensings [*Empfindnisse*], i.e., the particular lived spatiality

⁷⁹ Husserl, *Ideas I*, 229, 230; Dodd, *Idealism and Corporeity*, 44-45.

⁸⁰ Dodd, *Idealism and Corporeity*, 45, writes: “Insofar as the thing is present in perceptual consciousness an apprehension that bears within itself a sense-content is involved; sensation itself, however, is not to be confused with anything thingly-real—which means, within the transcendental perspective, that sensation does not belong to the noematic [object side] correlate of the act of perception.”

⁸¹ Husserl, *Ideas I*, 233.

⁸² Al-Saji, “Rhythms of the Body,” 2.

of the Body.”⁸³ This is the prototypical version of sensation I will be eliciting from the work of Merleau-Ponty and Levinas as well as defending as the one most faithful to the aesthetic life of our bodies. It is one which attends to the affective and kinaesthetic life of the body⁸⁴ and, perhaps most importantly, attempts to reveal the materiality of sensation and the subject’s reliance on this materiality.

SENSE DATA AND THE AESTHETICS OF EMBODIMENT

We have sketched some of the problematic aspects of the idealist and/or constructivist treatment of sensation, focusing specifically on where sensation is localized vis-à-vis the subject. In the case of Kant, sensation is found on the far side of cognition among the things in themselves. For the Husserl of *Ideas I*, sensation as hyle appears within consciousness, and merely functions as the “external” layer of noetic acts. In both cases, sensation is cut off from the body and neither enables nor poses a threat to the constituting subject *as such*. By contrast, philosophers adherent to empirical realism, Bertrand Russell and G.E. Moore, for example, often speak of sensations as internal or subjective signs for something objectively given.⁸⁵ Because these realists defend an ontology that posits discrete, fully formed objects existing outside the mind, they believe that these objects are made known to us via the sensory data they transmit to our minds.

⁸³ Al-Saji, “Rhythms of the Body,” 4. For a thorough analysis of similar themes in Merleau-Ponty, see David Morris, *The Sense of Space* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2004).

⁸⁴ Cf. Alia Al-Saji, “The Site of Affect in Husserl’s Phenomenology: Sensations and the Constitution of the Lived Body,” *Philosophy Today* 44, SPEP Supplement (2000): 51-59, where she aims to show how Husserl allows us to “rethink sensation as a creative, differentiating, and dynamic multiplicity, as the way we feel our contact with the world, with others, and with our own life” (52).

⁸⁵ “Let us give the name ‘sense-data’ to the things that are immediately known in sensation,” like color, texture, etc. “We shall give the name ‘sensation’ to the experience of being immediately aware of these things.” Given this distinction, he draws that conclusion that we can *infer* the existence of objects which might cause our sensations, but do not appear directly to us. “Thus the various sensations due to various pressures or various parts of the body cannot be supposed to reveal *directly* any definite property of the table, but at most to be *signs* of some property which perhaps *causes* all the sensations, but is not actually apparent in any of them.” Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 11, 12.

Our minds subsequently reconstitute this data into the objects we perceive as outside of us. When our reconstitutions correspond to the object in itself, we can claim to know that object objectively. Merleau-Ponty thoroughly criticizes this model under the name of the “constancy hypothesis” (PP 7-12/13-19)⁸⁶ and in so doing steps through the door, opened by Husserl’s *Ideas II*, to an embodied view of sensation.

I am a bit more sympathetic to the realist view than Merleau-Ponty, but I am critical of it for two reasons. First, I think it is wrong to conceive sensation as internal, or as some kind of epiphenomenon of the mind. It is more than just a feeling or the subjective correlate of a physiological stimulus. Sensations provide a direct link to the world of objects, animals, people, and qualities. This link is a bi-directional communication. Given this, sensations must be seen as in some way external to the mind; however, this exteriority cannot be complete. Otherwise an unbridgeable ontological chasm opens between subject and world—this is precisely the view we are calling into question. The realist does not have a problem positing objects as external, but sensations are another story. In my view, sensations must be given some external status in order to preserve their objectivity and to explain their effectiveness. Such objectivity is required in order to explain how our bodies are responsive to sensations. So, my two points of praise for the realist are: 1) their objectivist view of objects and 2) the way this objectivism gives leverage to an externalist view of sensations.

The idealist critique of objectivism remains valid: if it is the case that we never experience an object in itself, let alone raw sensory material; and that we can only ever

⁸⁶ The constancy hypothesis is a staple of direct realism, but it problematically situates perception in the mind and therefore sets up a questionable kind of correspondence. Merleau-Ponty summarizes: “Hence we have in principle a point-by-point correspondence and constant connection between the stimulus and the elementary perception” (PP 8/14).

know the world through the secondary qualities we perceive (à la Berkeley), then talk about mind-independent reality must be speculative. Such speculation becomes necessary, however, in order to account for the dependency of our minds and our bodies on what is other. One could object that this begs the question by appealing to mind-independent bodies to argue for the reality of mind-independent bodies. But I think that such bodies are necessary to explain such phenomena as the constitution of the body, its responsive nature, as well as the disintegration of the body. The constitution of the world may be explicable by transcendental idealism, but it is difficult to see how such a view can explain the dissolution of the world it constitutes. In a word, if nothing other than the mind or consciousness or intentional objects exist, then what delivers violence and death to the subject? The materiality of the subject, that is, its engagement with an autonomous corporeal world and its means of communication with this world must be accounted for. I think a revitalized realism about sensation, which risks some speculative remarks, can do this. As speculative, this realism must go beyond both Kantian criticism and strict phenomenology.

We should avoid posing the question of sensation in terms of a false dichotomy: it is not the case that sensation is *either* a representational content, like Husserl's hyle, *or* an amorphous, discrete data about which nothing meaningful can be said. Instead, sensation can be seen as fundamentally multiple and composed of at least five main dimensions:

1. *Objectivity*: sensations belong to independent objects, animate as well inanimate,⁸⁷ and make up the singular qualitative constitution of these objects.

⁸⁷ Merleau-Ponty resists such a view when he writes in a working note of *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 250, that "the flesh of the world is not *self-sensing* (*se sentir*) as is my flesh—It is sensible and not sentient—I call it flesh nonetheless...in order to say that it is a *pregnancy* of possibles..." Even in this later text, which is often thought to overcome the latent dualism of the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty retains a dualism which separates the being into two spheres, the human and the nonhuman, but this division comes without

Sensations are *effective* in so far as they can bring about changes or engender responses in other objects. For example, sandpaper *can* smooth wood because it *has* an abrasive texture. Or rather: it's abrasiveness just is its capacity to affect wood in this way. Similarly, we can enter an illuminated room because a light bulb or the sun is able to produce brightness.⁸⁸ Sensations are *capacities* possessed by objects, not inert properties; or, if we insist on calling them properties, they must be conceived as detachable rather than dependent on the substance in which they inhere.⁸⁹

2. *Relationality*: relationality must be taken in tandem with, not as a refutation of, objectivity. Continuing with the sandpaper example, it can be said that sandpaper is abrasive only to surfaces that are receptive to abrasion. A piece of wood will receive sandpaper sensations differently than a piece of glass or marble. So, while sensations belong to objects as their affective qualities, they only make sense or manifest themselves when they enter relations, something which is constantly occurring. Humans are not a necessary condition for the manifestation of sensations; abrasion "makes sense" to any surface that is susceptible to scratching. Sensations are therefore *liminal* and *diacritical*: they always express themselves in relation to other objects and are effective in different ways, determined by the sensory capacity and susceptibility of the objects encountered. For humans, liminality is made possible by the fact that the body is both part of and, in a sense, outside of the world.⁹⁰ Diacriticality means that sensations are always caught up in a sensory system, each system comprising a distinct, complex environment.⁹¹
3. *Ambivalence*: sensations can be both enabling and disabling, tame or violent. Because sensations are ambivalent it is not possible to regard them as merely subjective. Some sensations result in the dissolution of the subject and these must be accounted for. Neither Merleau-Ponty nor Levinas adequately addresses this dimension of sensation. Sensory ambivalence provides the chance to build an

explanation. Precisely how this division comes to be, if it actually exists, is a metaphysical problem that Merleau-Ponty does not resolve.

⁸⁸ For objectivity, I follow for the most part the realist theory of objects developed by Graham Harman, principally in his *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (Chicago and La Salle: Open Court, 2002) and *Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things* (Chicago and La Salle: Open Court, 2005), as well as the ethics of things defended by Silvia Benso in her book, *The Face of Things: A Different Side of Ethics* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000).

⁸⁹ See Ernst Mach, *The Analysis of Sensations*, trans. C.M. Williams and Sydney Waterlow (New York: Dover, 1959), 5. Mach allies himself with the "philosophy of immanence" and cites Spinoza as his original predecessor (46), a point we will return to in our discussion of bodies, plasticity, and the meaning of their integrity. The idea that objects possess capacities or "powers," as well as the ontological status of these powers, is the subject of a debate in analytic philosophy, a short overview of which can be found in the introduction to George Molnar, *Powers: A Study in Metaphysics*, ed. Stephen Mumford (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

⁹⁰ This formulation is more appropriate for the account of embodiment given in *Phenomenology of Perception*, where the consciousness-object duality is still at play. Merleau-Ponty acknowledges the inadequacy of this model in *The Visible and the Invisible*, 200/253; a reformulation of this model is evident in his searching discussion of the "two leaves" of the body (135-138/178-183).

⁹¹ The diacritical nature of perception is affirmed by Merleau-Ponty in *The Visible and the Invisible*, 213/267, and likewise in the chapter on "The Thing and the Natural World" in *Phenomenology*.

ethics of embodiment in terms of our vulnerability to and nourishment by sensations.

4. *Alimentation*: it has already been said that sensations must be in some sense objective if we are to explain their effectiveness. This objectivity also accounts for their capacity to nourish our senses and feed our bodies in the way that a melody, painting, or landscape has the power to transform or invigorate us, or how a contour of the ground orients our posture and gait. Without alimentation, our bodies are left to languish in their habitual sensory circuits.⁹² Alimentation and nourishment are two of the most significant elements that I take from Levinas's carnal ontology.
5. *Anonymity*: the anonymity of sensation is what prevents it from becoming an anthropocentric conception, one which would drive a wedge between the human and nonhuman realms. Sensations do not need humans for them to be effective; humans may feel the abrasiveness of sandpaper in ways that a piece of wood cannot, but this is only because humans (and animals) possess the power to translate sensations into affections or to process sensations into perceptions or cognitions or linguistic expressions, thus personalizing them. This is why I would say that perception is personal while sensation is not. The human ability to translate sensations into something personal speaks to the relationality of sensations, not to their objective constitution. It will be said that sensations are always attached to a particular object (Merleau-Ponty speaks of the unique red of *this* carpet), but this by no means renders the quality *qua quality* proper to any particular object. I will argue that our identity is constituted by the sensations we receive as well as the sensations we give off, but I will insist that these sensations do not belong to us, but rather we belong to them.

These five dimensions arise out of a rereading of the carnal ontologies of Merleau-Ponty and Levinas. But neither Merleau-Ponty nor Levinas subscribes to all five of the dimensions. Such adherence requires that we formulate an independent position which is in some respects at odds with these two thinkers. This is what I try to accomplish in the chapter on plasticity (Chapter 4), wherein I attempt to develop an original view of the embodied subject and its reliance on sensation.

⁹² I began to explore the theme of sensory alimentation and its ethical potential in an article entitled "Enabling/Disabling Sensation: Toward an Alimentary Imperative in Carnal Phenomenology," *Philosophy Today* 52, no. 2 (Summer 2008): 99-115.

THREE BODY TYPES

I have tried to suggest that the modern view of sensation has not adequately addressed the reality of sensations. This omission orients my entire thesis. Correlatively, I have suggested that this inadequacy arises because sensation is always kept at a safe remove from the subject and that this gesture is supported by a dualist ontology that keeps the body separate from the perceptual and cognitive operations of the subject. Such a view, I argue, obscures the subject-object relation. My cursory history of the fate of sensation in the post-Kantian milieu serves not as an indictment of modern idealism *tout court*, but rather as an heuristic with which to understand the carnal phenomenologists' desire to rehabilitate sensation. The problem now is to give an account that adheres to the volatility of sensation and captures aspects of experience that the Kantian/Husserlian model does not. The resolution of this problem will reveal not only a more complex picture of sensation as such, but will also demonstrate the central function of sensation in the constitution of identity and the body-world relation. Such an understanding will enable a critique of the phenomenology of the body and the development of an ethics of embodiment.

My own view of the body as plastic will emerge via an exploration of the phenomenologies of Merleau-Ponty and Levinas. Chapters 1 and 2 will engage what will be called Merleau-Ponty's *reversible body*, which is developed in response to the modern theory of sensation and really begins to take form in the chapter on "Sense Experience" (*le sentir*) in *Phenomenology of Perception*. There are traces of the reversible body at play in *The Structure of Behavior* and this model is modified in texts like "Eye and Mind," "Cézanne's Doubt," "The Child's Relations with Others," and *The Visible and the Invisible*, but the most substantial articulations appear in the *Phenomenology*.

Partly in response to what is perceived as an ethical lacuna in Merleau-Ponty's own philosophy, Levinas deploys what I will call the *susceptible body*. If Merleau-Ponty's body downplays its passivity in favor of its competence or grasp (*prise*) of things, and therefore misrepresents the volatility of its sensitive life and poses a threat to the solicitations of other bodies, then Levinas has provided an account of the body which overstates the vulnerability of the body to the detriment of the enabling effects of sensation. He provides unique resources for thinking sensation in its transcendental and alimentary functions, as well as its affective and material dimensions. The Levinasian body will be dealt with in Chapter 3.

The *plastic body* which I will oppose to both Merleau-Ponty and Levinas is a reconstruction, built from components found in both thinkers' texts, most important for which is the *carnal sensibility* they offer as a replacement for the Kantian model. The plastic body tries to balance what I see as two extreme descriptions of the body-world relation. Once this balance is struck we will have an account of embodiment that provides an alternative to the Kantian view of sensation and subjectivity, closes the apparent gap between phenomenology and nonphenomenology (i.e., poststructuralists like Foucault and Deleuze as well as the embodied cognition movement) and provides the basis for an ethics of embodiment that is grounded in the aesthetic life of the body. This ethics will be sketched in my conclusion.

CHAPTER 1

PERCEPTUAL PRIMACY AND SYNCHRONY OF THE LIVED BODY

The body is a strange thing, and when it is caught up in an accident involving non-human forces, there is no predicting the result.
– Aira, *An Episode in the Life of a Landscape Painter*

The Introduction has provided a brief but adequate context in which to situate the reformulation of sensation in Merleau-Ponty and Levinas. The following two chapters will now focus on what Merleau-Ponty has to say about the body's constitution, the aesthetics of embodiment and the nature of sensation, and try to make clear the inherent divergence between sensation and perception as Merleau-Ponty understands it. The central text for this reading will be the Sense Experience (*Le Sentir*) chapter of *Phenomenology of Perception*. My purpose is to characterize Merleau-Ponty's ontology of the body, with specific attention given to the concrete aspect of its sensibility, and to challenge his thesis that the intercorporeal relation is fundamentally *reversible*. My critique will result in the claim that if we maintain Merleau-Ponty's thesis that the perceptual life of the reversible body is the bedrock of experience, then it becomes difficult to explain the asymmetry of violence and the reality of hostility, as well as the death of the body and therefore the disintegration of perception entailed in death.

It is undeniable that Merleau-Ponty makes the body central to his philosophy of the subject and that the ideality of the real is contested by his theory of embodiment and his primacy of perception thesis. By putting the body at the base of his analyses, indeed at the birth of the world, he puts the body immediately in touch with the objects of perception and argues for the codependent, dialogical constitution of subject and object. By making perception primary, he shows how things and persons, minds and ideas—in

short, determinacy itself—arises out of the indeterminacy of the perceived world. Sometimes he equates body and perception; other times he casts the body as an instrument of perception or consciousness. Most commentaries resolve this inconsistency by showing that Merleau-Ponty means to overcome mind-body dualism by relocating consciousness from the mind and into the body. There is no conscious mind “within” the body: it is just *the body itself* which is conscious.

It is not always noted, however, that the body is only important for Merleau-Ponty because it is essential to giving an account of the nature of perception. His introduction of the body into the discourse of perception is meant to challenge classical philosophers of mind (Descartes, Hume, and Kant, for instance) as well as the dominant psychological theories of his day. The body adumbrates the primacy of perception thesis with a constitutive, practical perspective that redefines the objective world by imbuing it with a meaning determined by the carnal constitution of the subject. It is this embodied dimension of perception that is missed by the philosophers. As for Merleau-Ponty’s opponents in psychology, they fail to acknowledge that a mechanistic view of behavior overlooks the vital role that meaning plays in human consciousness. Human consciousness “has the ability to orient itself by the *possible*, the *virtual*” and these possibilities are to be found in the structures of perception.⁹³

In a way, Merleau-Ponty is not really interested in the body as a material entity or its relations, but with how the body shapes perceptual experience and the meaning of the world. This means that he is not immediately interested in addressing the metaphysical questions which surround the body or incarnation, nor is he bothered too much about

⁹³ Gary Brent Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty: A Search for the Limits of Consciousness* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1981), 7.

reconciling the phenomenology of embodiment with the research of the physical sciences. Or, rather, he would prefer to explain the latter on the basis of the former. The body as perceived and lived—as given phenomenally to the consciousness inhabiting it—is his object of description. Most of what he says about the lived body is manifest to perception, neither speculative nor deductive. Thus, he adopts Husserl’s distinction between *Leib* and *Körper* in order to set the latter aside and focus exclusively on the former. *Körper* is the determinate, objective body of science. It is the physiological body that functions in many ways below the level of consciousness and that is constantly degenerating and regenerating with the passage of time. *Leib* is the conscious body, the body that experiences the world as a network of meaning instead of as a field of cause-effect encounters. When the lived body (*Leib*) is in pain it confronts that pain with horror or with patience. By contrast, pain for the objective body (*Körper*) is little more than a physiological change of state and is legible not by the body itself but only by an external observer trained to read its biochemistry.⁹⁴ Whenever Merleau-Ponty is explicating the life of the body, it is the lived body he intends. His object of study is circumscribed by a methodological decision: his adoption of phenomenology and its strict adherence to what appears (is *given*) to consciousness.

The problem of the body is not for Merleau-Ponty a matter of simple description or vindication of first-person experience. It is the problem of how “there is *for us* an *in-itself*” (PP 71/86), or how it is possible for perception to immanently order the perceptual

⁹⁴ For an extended critique of the physicalist/neurobiological (“objectivist”) account of pain from a Merleau-Pontyan perspective, see Abraham Olivier, *Being in Pain* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2007). Merleau-Ponty’s *The Structure of Behavior*, trans. Alden Fisher (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1963) is a book which demonstrates that positivistic approaches to psychology fail to adequately explain human behavior because they miss the phenomenon of structure identified and analyzed by Gestalt psychology. Following the Gestalt theorists as well as phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty redefines behavior as a meaning-laden phenomenon that cannot be explained solely by reflex theories, but needs rather a “principle” that accounts for the “relevance” of stimuli (SB 99/109).

field while at the same time revealing the world as a transcendent phenomenon. To reconcile this apparent paradox, Merleau-Ponty turns to perception and interrogates the ontological fact that perception is never divorced from a body's perspective on things. In order to disclose the meaning of the perceived, he is forced to come to terms with the meaning of the body. Therefore, instead of considering the body as an "obstacle" to be overcome, Merleau-Ponty conducts a critique of the body as the very condition of possibility for disclosing the world (PP 68/82). "The object-horizon structure, or the perspective, is no obstacle to me when I want to see the object; for just as it is the means whereby objects are distinguished from each other, it is also the means whereby they are disclosed" (PP 68/82). This means that our corporeity not only renders us finite creatures who are determined by our given spatial and temporal horizons, but that horizontality, or the figure-ground structure, is basic to perception, knowledge, and individuation.

It must be kept in mind that inserted in the middle of the figure-ground structure is a "third term." This is the body (PP 101/117).⁹⁵ Since the body plays such a pivotal role in the structuring of perception, it is necessary to determine the ontology of this body to reveal Merleau-Ponty's more general ontology. After all, he says that the perceiving subject is the perceived world (PP 72/86). To understand Merleau-Ponty's theory of the subject and how this subject interacts with the world, we must first know what makes up the body.

It would seem that by beginning with perception Merleau-Ponty is mainly concerned with epistemological questions, or at least with the question of how we access

⁹⁵ It is true that Merleau-Ponty calls the body the "third term" in the figure-ground structure specifically in the context of a discussion of spatiality. But if all perception is situated in a spatiotemporal horizon, and perception is the origin of both determinate objects and objective thought, then we must consider the body as conditioning every horizon of experience.

things. This is implied when he says in “The Primacy of Perception” that his project is “not a question of reducing human knowledge to sensation [*sentir*], but of assisting at the birth of this knowledge, to make it as sensible as the sensible, to recover the consciousness of rationality” (PrP 25/67). Similarly, M.C. Dillon’s *Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology* is oddly oriented by a classical epistemological problem: Meno’s paradox.⁹⁶ This suggests that Merleau-Ponty is occupied with unraveling our *knowledge* of the things themselves rather than the things *themselves*. Moreover, by closely following Husserl, it would seem that Merleau-Ponty is endorsing some form of idealism,⁹⁷ even if not the transcendental type. But Merleau-Ponty actively criticizes idealist presumptions by repeatedly pointing to the incongruity between perception and thing perceived. Thus, while his primacy of perception thesis works as a response to a host of epistemological viewpoints,⁹⁸ it also advances an ontological position which speaks to the constitution of both subjects and objects, and finds these entities to manifest an autonomous life of their own which actively resists a neat synthesis or total comprehension.⁹⁹

The dual epistemological/ontological concern marks a tension with Merleau-Ponty’s methodological starting point: the immanence of perceptual phenomena. How can specifically human perception reveal to us what ultimately exists in itself? The tension is ostensibly relieved when it is recognized by Merleau-Ponty that the duality of

⁹⁶ M.C. Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology*, 2nd edition (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), Introduction.

⁹⁷ On Merleau-Ponty’s idealism, see Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty*, 32; Barbaras, *The Being of the Phenomenon*, 14.

⁹⁸ Since the present essay is concerned specifically with the ontology of the body, I will forgo discussion of the way in which the primacy of perception thesis cuts across traditional intellectualist/rationalist and empiricist epistemologies and refer the reader to the secondary literature, especially the books by Dillon, Madison, Hass, and de Waelhens.

⁹⁹ Objects are not postulated as transcendent simply in order to account for the content of perception, their transcendence is evinced in the way they resist appropriation and only ever present themselves to us incompletely or perspectively. This is doubly true of other persons. See PrP 18/53; PP 322-323/372.

subject and object, in-itself and for-itself, is *founded* upon perception, rather than presupposed by it.

The first philosophical act would appear to be to return to the world of actual experience which is prior to the objective world, since it is in it that we shall be able to grasp the theoretical basis no less than the limits of that objective world, restore to things their concrete physiognomy, to organisms their individual ways of dealing with the world, and to subjectivity its inherence in history. Our task will be, moreover, to rediscover phenomena, the layer of living experience through which other people and things are first given to us, the system 'Self-others-things' as it comes into being; to reawaken perception and to foil its trick of allowing us to forget it as a fact and as perception in the interest of the object which it presents to us and of the rational tradition to which it gives rise. (PP 57/69)

The immediacy of perception, which "is no longer the impression, the object which is one with the subject, but the meaning, the structure, the spontaneous arrangement of parts" (PP 58/70), is now defined in nonobjective terms and cannot be dissociated from the network of concrete meanings that are exchanged at the intercorporeal level. Perception is not first a matter of intuitive apprehension or judgment, it is a dialogue of physiognomies—arrangements whose sense is made determinate and deciphered by the body's practical know-how.

John Sallis identifies three important characteristics of perception that summarize the consequences of Merleau-Ponty's primacy of perception thesis. By designating perceptual experience as primary, Merleau-Ponty shows that perception is original, autonomous, and foundational.¹⁰⁰ All of our reflections, and thus everything we know, have their origin in perception. The fund of perceptual experience is already there before our senses, full of animation, form, and meaning. Perception is not produced by the subject: the subject always finds itself inhabiting, from a singular perspective, a phenomenal field whose horizon is forever receding. For phenomenology, the resistance

¹⁰⁰ John Sallis, *Phenomenology and the Return to Beginnings* (New York: Humanities Press, 1973), 30.

this field offers to our gaze reveals it to be beyond our comprehension and in some sense prior to us. This open field that Husserl calls the *Lebenswelt* comprises phenomenology's transcendental (PP 61/74; VI 185-186/239).

Whereas for Kant the transcendental ego is what unifies the sensible order, for Merleau-Ponty only a subject situated within an environment is able to negotiate the coordinates that characterize our experience and furnish itself with the material that founds understanding, judgment, and reflection. "A subject so aloof from the world as to be able to constitute space as pure form would be no more capable of distinguishing 'up' from 'down' than would a subject so subordinated to the world as to be merely receptive of non-oriented sense-content," says Sallis.¹⁰¹ Perception takes place between subjects and objects; it therefore belongs neither to the subjective nor the objective, but rather *involves* (folds, envelopes) the subject and the object. The fundamental opacity or ambiguity of this involutory movement resists appropriation and prevents the evidence of perception from being "absorbed into the circuit of reflective thought."¹⁰² The object given in perception is never given completely, yet we observe it as a unified thing (PrP 15/47).

By designating perception as the birthplace of the world while at the same time imbuing this place with an irreducible ambiguity, Merleau-Ponty poses a considerable challenge for anyone asking, "What exists?" It seems necessary to always reformulate this question as "What can I make sense of, given my finite, corporeal constitution?" Of course, this echoes the Kantian critical question, "What can I know?" But Merleau-

¹⁰¹ Sallis, *Phenomenology and the Return to Beginnings*, 31. Merleau-Ponty will maintain that the object, rather than the subject, remains "aloof" from perception, that it "remains self-sufficient" (PP 322/372). See also Merleau-Ponty's discussion of Stratton's experiment in PP 248-251/287-291. For an alternative reading of the Kantian subject as transcendently embodied and therefore rooted in the world, see Nuzzo, *Ideal Embodiment*.

¹⁰² Sallis, *Phenomenology and the Return to Beginnings*, 30.

Ponty modifies the Kantian problem, which attempts to draw the limits of rational knowledge, by turning the synthetic act of the understanding into a problem whose key is the lived body. “The body, to which is linked the whole series of reductions that indicate the need for synthesis, is, in a sense, the agent of the synthesis that is needed.”¹⁰³ This does not mean that Merleau-Ponty simply replaces Kant’s transcendental ego with a lived body that would remain free of the effects of history. The body is always already “saturated with its object” (PP 215/249); the body which performs the synthesis of perceptual experience is never completely “aloof” from the world because there is always something impersonal and improper about the body (PP 215/249), unlike its self-identical doppelganger, the transcendental ego. Despite its capacity to “withdraw” from the world in reflection, the lived body always remains tied to its world by an intentional thread (PP 72/86).¹⁰⁴

The need for a transcendental faculty of synthesis becomes superfluous since the body accomplishes the coordination of experience. “In positive terms, Merleau-Ponty’s task is to retrace, beginning at the level of profiles, the constitution of the object, in such a way as to show how at each level there is already a synthesis initiated within the matter itself without there being any need for an extrinsic act of synthesis.”¹⁰⁵ The body is inserted directly into the perceptual horizon insofar as it is the anchor “in a total system of possible profiles in their correlation with certain motor possibilities”¹⁰⁶—the body is always practically converging upon an optimum perspective, or an increasingly coherent system of appearances, but never absolute knowledge (PP 301-303/347-350). The object

¹⁰³ Sallis, *Phenomenology and the Return to Beginnings*, 34.

¹⁰⁴ Merleau-Ponty also says, and this we will take up below to try and determine the priority of sensation, that sense experience “is the intentional tissue” that makes the world “present as a familiar setting of our life” (PP 52-53/64-65).

¹⁰⁵ Sallis, *Phenomenology and the Return to Beginnings*, 35, 36.

¹⁰⁶ Sallis, *Phenomenology and the Return to Beginnings*, 36.

is always evading the reach of perception despite our increasing ability to make sense of or manipulate it. Although foundational, perception discloses objects as independently constituted.

In a frequently cited working note to *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty acknowledges that by beginning with perception in *Phenomenology of Perception* he prevented himself from articulating the kind of nondualist ontology that was being worked out in his later texts. When he admits that “The problems posed in *Ph.P.* are insoluble because I start there from the ‘consciousness’-‘object’ distinction” (VI 200/253), he realizes that it is impossible to bridge the gap between subject and object, or lived body and objective body, if these binaries are cast as ontologically distinct. By beginning with perception, subject and object are supposed to achieve their (abstract) distinction from out of the unity of perception, considered as a dynamic intentional nexus. Ultimately, it is the body’s practical competence that traces the contours of reality: “My body is the fabric into which all objects are woven, and it is, at least in relation to the perceived world, the general instrument of my ‘comprehension’” (PP 235/272). It is clear that it is only through the body—here portrayed as a prosthetic of the understanding—that the world is organized for perception.

The lived body possesses a kind of double life. On the one hand, Merleau-Ponty wants the body and its practical aims to provide the background against which perception is generated (cf. the privileging of “spatiality of situation” over intelligible space in PP 100/116). On the other hand, Merleau-Ponty insists that the body always finds itself caught up in a world populated with objects, people, meanings, and ideas. He maintains the first position in order to escape a naturalistic or positivistic conception of subjectivity.

He maintains the second position in order to avoid charges of idealism. These evasions force him to maintain a view of the embodied subject as both generative of and generated by its perceptual world. The generated world would be identical to the perceived subject insofar as the subject is what gives form to the world, by orienting its spatiality, for example (cf. PP, Chapter 3). The objective world which generates the body would weave the perspectival and practical environment that we always find ourselves within. This latter would be the world in which things store their unseen profiles, the forgotten world of anonymous, nonintentional sensory existence which lines the visible world (PP 215-216/250-251).

By bracketing the objective world as well as the objective body, and beginning with the world *as perceived*, Merleau-Ponty gives himself over to phenomenological interrogation of the aporia of how my body can be both the origin of the world and its product. He details the ways in which the body interacts with its world at the phenomenal level, that is, at the level of perception. This interaction is several times characterized as a dialogue or reciprocal determination (PP 127, 129, 132/148, 150, 154). But this methodological maneuver raises questions about the pre-perceptual genesis of the body, particularly at the level of sensation. Some of these questions are addressed by Merleau-Ponty, but we must ask whether his account of the pre-perceptual genesis of the body falls within the scope of phenomenology or whether it must have recourse to a speculative metaphysics. I will argue that Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology does draw upon a certain metaphysics of the body, but that this metaphysics is spurred by his phenomenological investigations.

Merleau-Ponty acknowledges that the primacy of perception thesis remains bound to an idealist epistemology which assumes the constitutive power of consciousness in the form of the lived body. But if the body is what makes perception part of the objective world while at the same time serving as the condition of that world's appearance, then a kind of distance must be introduced between the material world in which the body is an object of science and the lived world in which the body engages a meaningful existence. As Merleau-Ponty remarks, "If my consciousness were at present constituting the world which it perceives, no distance would separate them and there would be no possible discrepancy between them" (PP 238/275).

What makes the body more than a physical object is the distance opened *within* consciousness by the binding polarization of subject and object that is intentionality. Intentionality is both what animates the body as a subject, but also what keeps it necessarily correlated with the world. Like the figure-ground structure, intentionality is an ontological fact of existence (PP xvii/xii): this principle says that our conscious life and knowledge are inextricably bound up with the historical horizon in which we exist. At the corporeal level, intentionality denotes a fundamental connection between my lived body, my objective body, the body of the other, and the objects of the world.

Merleau-Ponty's lived body must belong, in a realist sense, to the material world for his phenomenology to challenge the constitutive phenomenology of Husserl. To achieve this materialization, he must posit a pre-perceptual life of the body; that is, he must allow for a body whose capacity for perception is not the result of its own ideal activation and whose constitution is comprised of "existentials"¹⁰⁷ that "operate in

¹⁰⁷ Merleau-Ponty refers to the "silent knowing" and "pre-meaning" and "sedimented meaning" of these "existentials" [*existentiaux*] numerous times in the Working Notes of *The Visible and the Invisible*. They

perceptions” but remain unperceived themselves (VI 178, 180, 189/232, 233-234, 243; cf. PP 238/275). Upon reflection, the phenomenal field must show itself to have already been a field full of already extant bodies. Without this site of intercorporeity Merleau-Ponty would have to resort to a quasi-theological account of the incarnation of consciousness in the body, or leave the birth of consciousness shrouded in mystery.

Despite the constraints placed on his discourse by the phenomenological perspective, he does not pass over in silence the pre-phenomenal constitution of the body. However, he delimits its material constitution from an ontological, rather than physiological or biological, perspective. This requires some speculative deviation from a strictly phenomenological method.

When I say that Merleau-Ponty “speculates” about the constitution of the body, I mean that he admits elements into his account of subjectivity that are not disclosed phenomenologically. Methodologically, his phenomenology is synthetic rather than pure, a mixture of phenomenological description, empirical research, and metaphysical speculation. This is partly what enables him to escape the fate of subjective idealism; it is what Lakoff and Johnson admire when they call Merleau-Ponty an “empirically responsible” phenomenologist.¹⁰⁸ For instance, in order to explain the rigidity of psychological prejudices (like racism) and their influence on the structuring of perception, Merleau-Ponty appeals to the genetic, historical, and physiological dimensions. He does this not to show that perception is always forced to conform to a reified biological or social structure (Child 107/15), but to argue that heredity and social

are the “unconscious” “articulations of our field” (VI 180/233-234) and seem to be analogous to what Heidegger intends by *existentialia*, or the ontological structures of Dasein, in *Being and Time*. Cf. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1962), §9.

¹⁰⁸ Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, xi.

conditioning are co-constitutive of the individual and his or her attitude toward others. He writes that it is not the case that “the way in which the child structures his social environment is unrelated to the hereditary or constitutional dispositions of his nervous system” (Child 108/16). The individual is never simply determined by his or her environment. The individual operates between the biological and the social, “*takes a position* in the face of [these] external conditions” (Child 108/17, my emphasis). This is the phenomenological point. The child’s perceptual prejudices are the result of a “single global phenomenon” that emerges from certain natural determinations and social conditioning, but against which the child is able to make his or her own meaning (Child 108/17). To comprehend the genesis and alteration of this meaning it is necessary to see how perception is both something given (as social prejudice and physiology) and enacted (in the body’s meaningful responses to its perceived environment).

Unfolding the constitution of the body means giving an account of the genesis of its dimensions with a view to exposing how these dimensions make up the “new definition of the *a priori*” discussed at several points in the *Phenomenology of Perception* (e.g., PP 220-222/255-257). This corporeal *a priori* is addressed from at least three aspects which do not always display a coherent picture: the primacy of perception thesis, the body as the hinge¹⁰⁹ of perception, and sensation as the body’s original communion with the world. The primacy of perception thesis says that the things we encounter are conditioned by, which is to say oriented according to, our field of perception. This field is coordinated by the (partially anonymous) constitution of our bodies and their (often

¹⁰⁹ “Her corporeal schema is for itself—for the other—It is the *hinge* of the for itself and the for the other” (VI 189/243).

impersonal)¹¹⁰ capacity to practically synthesize the world (PrP 14/45-46). Of particular importance for this synthesis is the *schéma corporel*, or body schema,¹¹¹ and a number of other concepts which function transcendently to inform Merleau-Ponty's view of the body as reversible. These will be examined in the following section.

Although it operates as a transcendental, the lived body is never detached from external bodies, objects, other persons.¹¹² The material world and the body *as subject* are “co-transcendentals,” we might say. This is Merleau-Ponty's original philosophical innovation.¹¹³ The body for Merleau-Ponty is not “an agency underlying the organization of experience” or “the foundation of transcendental constitution.”¹¹⁴ Merleau-Ponty does show that the body organizes the space it inhabits into functional and practicable places, but he does not want to say that places are generated spontaneously. Instead, the body's organizational capacity “is a response to the questions the world raises,” which means that its transcendental function “is inconceivable apart from its receptive, responsive,

¹¹⁰ Consider Merleau-Ponty's remark that “we are given over to the object and we merge into this body which is better informed than we are about the world, and about the motives we have and the means at our disposal for synthesizing it” (PP 238/276).

¹¹¹ It is well known that the Colin Smith translation of *Phenomenology of Perception* translates *schéma corporel* sometimes as “body image” and other times as “body schema,” which is problematic because these two terms signify disparate phenomena. Shaun Gallagher, *How the Body Shapes the Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), has sifted through the plentiful literature on the body image and body schema in order to clarify their difference and standardize their reference. He proposes the following: “A *body image* consists of a system of perceptions, attitudes and beliefs pertaining to one's own body. In contrast, a *body schema* is a system of sensory-motor capacities that function without awareness or the necessity of perceptual monitoring” (24). Gallagher further notes that when Merleau-Ponty writes of the *schéma corporel* he intends “a system of dynamic motor equivalents that belong to the realm of habit rather than conscious choice” (20). Part 1 of Morris's *The Sense of Space* unpacks Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the body schema as an “ensemble” of habituated styles (39) and further insists that *schéma corporel* always be rendered as body schema when translating Merleau-Ponty. This is the best way to avoid mistaking the *schéma corporel* for something representational, personal, or immediately intentional.

¹¹² “Body-subject and world are ultimately mutually constituting despite all the emphasis placed just on the subjective constitution of the world in *Phénoménologie de la Perception*. Neither would be what it is without the other.” Stephen Priest, *Merleau-Ponty* (London: Routledge, 1998), 74.

¹¹³ Priest (*Merleau-Ponty*, 57) notes that “Merleau-Ponty's originality lies in the idea that subjectivity is physical.” Neither materialism, idealism, nor dualism “includes the thesis that I am my body; that I am a subjective object or a physical subject.”

¹¹⁴ Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, 146.

centripetal role before the givenness of the world, its existence as flesh amidst the flesh of the world.”¹¹⁵ When we speak of Merleau-Ponty’s transcendental perspective, we must always keep in mind that his is an impure transcendental, a set of conditions that are themselves conditioned by the body’s mutable history. This “historical *a priori* is constant only for a given phase and provided that the balance of *forces* allows the same *forms* to remain” (PP 88/104). Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of habit, which we will examine below, fills out the meaning of the historical *a priori*.¹¹⁶

Sometimes he speaks to the contrary, but there is neither a pure *a priori* nor a pure *a posteriori* in Merleau-Ponty.¹¹⁷ For instance, he says that the habituated body schema “remains forever anterior to perception” (PP 238/275), which would seem to indicate that

¹¹⁵ Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology*, 146.

¹¹⁶ Dillon’s defense of Merleau-Ponty’s non-Kantian transcendental philosophy does not fully appreciate the difficulty of escaping Kantianism, especially for the phenomenologist. On the one hand, the primacy of perception thesis opposes the Kantian model by claiming that the phenomena of perception are *prior to* the divorce of subject and object, subject and object being abstractions conditioned by the primordial layer of perceptual experience. The transcendental is generated not by a pure lived body, but by the lived body’s phenomenal, intercorporeal encounters in the “system ‘self-others-world’” (PP 60/73). In Dillon’s words, “The lived body is not a transcendental subject; it is a phenomenon situated among other phenomena within the world horizon” (*Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology*, 147). Merleau-Ponty further displaces the constitutive role of the subject by speaking sometimes of the thing as the source of the subject-body’s unity (PP 322/372). But how can the thing provide the lived body’s unity if the thing’s unity is merely an abstraction from perception, which is itself conditioned by the lived body? Merleau-Ponty will maintain that neither body nor object possesses priority; it is their dialogue, communion, or intertwining which is primary. But if he wants to displace the constitutive role of the subject, then he must posit the externality of other bodies *a priori*. This, however, is disallowed by the primacy of perception thesis as well as the general phenomenological perspective Merleau-Ponty adopts from Husserl. To sidestep idealism and ground embodied perception in intercorporeity, Merleau-Ponty needs the lived body to be the product of intercorporeal encounters rather than their condition of possibility. This requires him to commit to both an ontological realism about other bodies and a correlative dualism that enables his subject-object dialogue to be truly dialogical. His realism is most evident in his treatment of sense experience, where he deviates from what is given phenomenally to perception in order to speak about what lies below the level of intentionality; his tacit commitment to dualism in the *Phenomenology* gets recast in terms of reversibility in *The Visible and the Invisible*, arguably to the detriment of alterity.

¹¹⁷ When I speak of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception as a “transcendental philosophy,” it must be kept in mind that the transcendental in Merleau-Ponty is never a pure *a priori*, but as M.C. Dillon has shown (“Apriority in Kant and Merleau-Ponty,” *Kant-Studien* 78: 403-423), neither *a priori* nor *a posteriori*. This neither/nor once again supports Barbaras’s claim that Merleau-Ponty remains caught up in old dualisms and can only situate himself negatively in the tradition he seeks to overcome. In any case, Merleau-Ponty’s transcendental is an *historical transcendental*, a concept we will come to grips with later. The historical transcendental will be reconstituted in terms of plasticity, with specific reference to Deleuze, DeLanda, and Spinoza, in chapter 4.

the body schema is always prior to existence, and thus belongs to an a priori plane. The body and perception would be disidentified in this case, the former being always already constituted prior to the appearance of temporal events. But temporality is always central to embodiment for Merleau-Ponty. “We must understand time as the subject and the subject as time,” he says (PP 422/483).¹¹⁸ If the body and perception are identical—that is, if there is no body before perception and no perception before body—it is necessary to make sense of the latent body, the body lived unconsciously,¹¹⁹ prior to reflection and in the background of explicit perception. As Merleau-Ponty writes in “Eye and Mind:” “There is that which reaches the eye directly, the frontal properties of the visible; but there is also that which reaches from below—the profound postural latency [*latence posturale*] where the body raises itself to see...” (EM 187/85-86). This is the body in the grip of the corporeal world, constrained by the exigencies of its embodied experience.

When posited from the phenomenological point of view, the primacy of perception thesis has the disadvantage of not really explaining how it is possible for the body—its habits, body and postural schemata, behavioral circuits, style, or physiognomy—to be constituted prior to perception. Indeed, it does not allow us to speak of an “anonymous” or “impersonal” body that underlies conscious perception and precedes the differentiation of my body from the body of the other (PP 240/277; Child 119/33). Like Merleau-Ponty (VI 200/253), I see this as a methodological problem that limits his early work but which can be overcome by adopting an ontological perspective,

¹¹⁸ Merleau-Ponty’s view of time is undoubtedly intersubjective, as when he says that “‘events’ are shapes cut out by a finite observer from the spatio-temporal totality of the objective world” (PP 411/470). By “objective” here, he means intersubjective: time is the totality of events carved out of being by the totality of observers. Nearly the entire temporality chapter supports this subjectivist view of time, which is problematic from the realist perspective I am advocating here.

¹¹⁹ “This unconscious is to be sought not at the bottom of ourselves, behind the back of our ‘consciousness’, but in front of us, as articulations of our field” (VI 180/234).

as he does most explicitly in *The Visible and the Invisible* when he shifts from the language of consciousness and object (dualism), to the language of the flesh of the sensible (monism).¹²⁰ Despite his focus on first-person perception, however, Merleau-Ponty's earlier texts have plenty to say about pre-perceptual and anonymous elements of the body and, while an adequate metaphysics of corporeal individuation may be lacking in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, there is a healthy ambiguity that attends the transcendental status he assigns to the body. For instance, the body schema might be designated a pure a priori if it can be shown to possess an immutable element (PP 142/166; SB 189/204).

What I am suggesting in this discussion of the primacy of perception thesis is that, if perception is in a strong sense essential to all constitution, it is not clear how we are to conceive the materiality of the body *prior to* perception. And yet, if it is the body that perceives (PP 238/275), and this body is the product of "a past which has never been present" (PP 242/280), then we are obliged to elucidate the metaphysics of this originary constitution. On Merleau-Ponty's view we are forced into the position of thinking the body as a condition of possibility of experience while simultaneously upholding the view that both body and world are the products of perception. To resolve this issue it seems necessary to distinguish the body from perception and lend a certain primacy to the body as a thing that perceives only secondarily. Such a view challenges the primacy of perception thesis by undermining the transcendental character of perception and shifting the transcendental to the level of corporeal sensibility. This can be accomplished by a

¹²⁰ This is not to suggest that the *Phenomenology* does not contain an ontology. Indeed, after Dillon and others I am trying to bring out some of the ontological dimensions of the theory of embodiment put forth in the *Phenomenology*. I do feel, however, that this ontology is hindered (if not contradicted) by the privilege afforded to the first-person perspective deployed in this early text. I reserve for a subsequent project my critique of phenomenology as a philosophical method for doing ontology.

examining the Sense Experience chapter of the *Phenomenology*, where the privilege of perception is called into question as Merleau-Ponty attempts to delimit the difference between sensation and perception. It is here that we see the most radical elements of Merleau-Ponty's transcendental philosophy, as well as his most fertile attempts to rehabilitate the concept of sensation in the name of a carnal ontology.

To illustrate these points I will defend the deliberately provocative thesis that Merleau-Ponty gives priority to sensing, not perceiving, as he attempts to account for the body's relation to its world. This priority is granted from an ontological/metaphysical perspective, but not from a phenomenological one. Along the way, the basic question I attempt to answer is: *What constitutes this body that orients our perceptual field?* Merleau-Ponty has plenty to say about this. I will also pursue a second question: *Where does this body come from; how is it individuated from the ambiguous field of the sensible?* I will first unpack some of the primary elements of the body and show that Merleau-Ponty mainly conceives the body as reversible, that is, synchronized with its environment.

Now that we have seen how the problem of the body is a problem of perception, we must ask: What is this body that coordinates and conditions the subject's capacity for perception, indeed *is* this capacity, and gives meaning to the world as perceived? Where does it come from and what is it made of? Here we will review some of the components of the lived body and determine in what sense these components enable perception.

The lived body is not explicitly thematized in our daily operations, although we are always in some sense aware of it; some of its components exist in the background as we carry out our mundane activities, and we rely on its stability as we go about our

business. When the body becomes ill or is disturbed in some other way, it announces itself like Heidegger's broken hammer¹²¹ and becomes an object to be examined.¹²² In these cases, it presents itself as an obstacle to be overcome rather than a tool that allows us to move with facility about our environment. Under normal circumstances our body's are attuned to their environment and function together as an uninterrupted unity. As Shaun Gallagher puts it,

When the lived body is "in tune" with the environment, when events are ordered smoothly, when the body is engaged in a task that holds the attention of consciousness, then the body remains in a mute and shadowy existence and is lived through in a non-conscious experience. But when the lived body loses its equilibrium with the environment, it suddenly appears at center stage, announcing itself as painful, fatigued, distorted, clumsy, embarrassed, etc.¹²³

This does not mean that we inhabit two ontologically distinct bodies or that the body can be divided up into multiple ontological levels.¹²⁴ It means that the lived body is most of the time absent from perceptual experience while at the same time conditioning that experience.¹²⁵ It assumes various levels of disclosure, but for the most part remains inconspicuous.

Given this image of the normal mode of embodiment, I want to argue here that the texts prior to *The Visible and the Invisible* catalogue a series of correlations between body and world that prefigure the concept of flesh, a concept which provides a problematic image of the body-world relation. These correlations can be found in Merleau-Ponty's discussions of, for example, habit, style, physiognomy, and body schema. Admittedly, the

¹²¹ See Heidegger, *Being and Time*, §16. For the ontological implications of this breakdown, see Harman, *Tool-Being*.

¹²² Cf. Karl Jaspers, *General Psychopathology*, trans. J. Hoenig and Marian W. Hamilton (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 88.

¹²³ Shaun Gallagher, "Lived Body and Environment," *Research in Phenomenology* 16 (1986): 152.

¹²⁴ Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, 139-150, dispels this notion by contrasting Merleau-Ponty's account of the lived body with Sartre's ontological analysis of the body.

¹²⁵ For the thesis that the "experiential absence" of the body is more fundamental than the "ambiguous presence" of the body, see Gallagher, "Lived Body and Environment."

language of “correlation” prejudices the matter at hand by smuggling in objectivist terms when these terms are precisely what Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology aims to dispel. However, given that perception always “takes advantage of work already done” (PP 238/275) it is clear that there is a (qualified) ontological realism at play in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology that authorizes the term. Moreover, Merleau-Ponty’s use of terms like “communion,” “dialogue,” and “synchronization” suggests that perception in the *Phenomenology* can be thought within a dualist framework, even if this framework is only to be understood as the result of a more originary unity of subject and object.

The emphasis on synchronization expresses Merleau-Ponty’s desire to take the middle road between rationalism and empiricism, and to strike a balance between active and passive conceptions of the embodiment. The body is not fully responsible for creating the world in which it exists, but neither is it completely vulnerable to all of the impressions inflicted upon it by material events. It is an entity whose actions are partly enacted according to its desires and partly dictated by the impersonal contours of its physical locale. As Madison puts it, “The subject of perception is not the free subject, the master of itself which realizes itself to be a unique individual.”¹²⁶ Because the body is bound up with the world and given a form or “logic”¹²⁷ that it does not give itself, its capacity for action, its constitution as an “I can” rather than an “I think,” is determined within the “unreasonable promiscuity”¹²⁸ it carries on with its environment when it is not

¹²⁶ Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty*, 26.

¹²⁷ David Morris, “The Logic of the Body in Bergson’s Motor Schemes and Merleau-Ponty’s Body Schema,” *Philosophy Today* 44, SPEP Supplement (2000): 65, shows that “The logic of the body in Merleau-Ponty would have to be a cultural-historical logic, a logic of a body already infected with ‘exterior’ meaning, not just a logic of internal translations, repetitions, parts and wholes.”

¹²⁸ Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty*, 26.

reflecting on itself. The prepersonal unity of the body first informs perception and all that perceptual experience entails.¹²⁹

Perhaps the central correlation of body and world involves *habit*. Merleau-Ponty's account of the habituated body is closely linked to his discussions of the body/postural schema, physiognomic perception, and behavioral circuits, each of which is supported by what he calls an "intentional arc." The intentional arc subtends consciousness and draws the various threads of the practicable environment together into a meaningful horizon of possibilities. It does this by first unifying the senses into a synchronized system. This is what Merleau-Ponty means by "synaesthetic perception" (PP 229/265). The body is not just a reflex mechanism; it is a physical entity that interprets and makes sense out of the disparate stimulation it receives. The "personal core" (PP 134/156) of the body "brings about the unity of the senses, of intelligence, of sensibility and motility" and "goes limp" in illness, as the Schneider case reveals (PP 136/158-159). Habits are crucial because they provide the body with its corporeal identity, in the form of latent or sedimentary sets of actions that makes our surroundings familiar and workable, that enables our body to sense and perceive without always having to explicitly appeal to the personal core of consciousness.

Habits give our bodies their stable form. They are not merely supplemental or ancillary modifications of a bare corporeity. Or rather, insofar as we acquire them from our cultural and social environments they are a kind of original prosthetic, like language (Child 99/4-5). Habits allow us to sink our attention in the present without having to attend at each moment to the body. The body as a unified system is, Merleau-Ponty says,

¹²⁹ As Morris, "The Logic of the Body," 64, shows, "the body only perceives through its anticipatory motor explorations" which are informed by motor and body schemes that "allow the body to bring the past into the present, and thus articulate the present in a way that would otherwise be impossible."

“my basic habit” [*l’habitude primordiale*] (PP 91/107). In order to free itself from the environment, the body adopts “pre-established circuits” that give it the space to pursue its intellectual projects. As he says, “it is an inner necessity for the most integrated existence to provide itself with an habitual body” (PP 87/103).¹³⁰ This is a view shared with William James, who maintains that habit condenses and simplifies the movements required to complete a particular task, thus habit “diminishes fatigue” by freeing up attention.¹³¹

Habit, for James, is a material phenomenon that is registered both on and in our bodies. He holds that our habit sets “depend on sensations not attended to,” which means that our “body’s attitude” or proprioception¹³² subtends the series of movements which make up a given habitual action, like buttoning one’s shirt.¹³³ The body’s attitude is written in the body and, like Merleau-Ponty’s intentional arc, what enables the body to make sense of a particular series of sensations and unify them into a coherent habitual action. As he writes in *The Principles of Psychology*, “*the phenomena of habit in living*

¹³⁰ Once again we see Merleau-Ponty inserting a certain *distance* between the physical body and the lived body, and thus imposing a duality of the body. This duality allows Merleau-Ponty to denote the habit body as the “mediator of a world” (PP 145/169). The metaphysical problem that lingers here is that of how the lived body originally separates itself from its envelopment with the physical environment, or how impersonal biological bodies becomes the personal subject of perception. This problem is dodged by Merleau-Ponty when he explains that “by an imperceptible twist an organic process issues into human behavior” (PP 88/104). The problem is ramified, it seems to me, in *The Visible and the Invisible* because Merleau-Ponty’s switch to a monist ontology puts him in the position of explaining the emergence and particularization of perceptual agents. Such a problem is sidestepped from a phenomenological viewpoint because the phenomenologist takes his or her point of departure from the facticity of existence and therefore begins his or her analyses from the perspective of an always already individuated subject. It is, however, in the course published as *Nature*, trans. Robert Vallier (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2003) where Merleau-Ponty takes on the question of the emergence of “spirit,” which he tells us “is not what descends into the body in order to organize it, but is what emerges from it” (140).

¹³¹ William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, volume 1 (New York: Dover, 1918), 114.

¹³² Proprioception denotes the ecological awareness that enables the body to maintain its postural equilibrium.

¹³³ James, *Principles*, volume 1, 116-119.

beings are due to the plasticity of the organic materials of which their bodies are composed.”¹³⁴

Merleau-Ponty does not share James’s naturalistic/neuroscientific interpretation of habit. For Merleau-Ponty, habits are not stored in the physiology of the body as muscle memories or neurological patterns. Habits are an acquired “power”¹³⁵ that is built upon the body’s unified capacity to grasp an environmental directive and imbue that directive with a meaningful “motor significance” of its own (PP 143/167). The sedimentation of a habit in the body is always permeated, as Edward Casey notes, by the “intentional threads that go back and forth between the body and its ever-changing phases, which are continually reanimated by current experience.”¹³⁶

The acquisition of a habit involves the “rearrangement and renewal of the body schema,” which underlies the habitual process as an “immediately given invariant” (PP 141, 142/165, 166; translation modified). The body schema is an open system of motor potentiality that is receptive to the cultivation of habit. It remains open because it is arranged according to the practical objectives of the subject. Practical objectives are not determined in a vacuum, however; they are horizontal, and thus always motivating new projects. The subject sets his or her tasks according to the layout of his or her situation and the practical possibilities it presents, while habits rearrange the body schema according to the singular way these possibilities are inhabited. Correlatively, the body

¹³⁴ James, *Principles*, volume 1, 105 (James’s emphasis).

¹³⁵ The notion of power I have in mind here bears an affinity with what analytic philosophers call “dispositional properties” or “powers.” See, for instance, David Weissman, *Dispositional Properties* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1965) and Molnar, *Powers*. Stephen Mumford’s introduction to Molnar’s book provides a good introduction to the debate surrounding powers/dispositional properties, which are, in a word, *capacities* possessed by objects that are irreducible to physical makeup.

¹³⁶ Edward S. Casey, “Habitual Body and Memory in Merleau-Ponty,” *Man and World* 17, no. 3/4 (1984): 285.

schema is structured as a response to concrete conditions; it is a dynamic form that is at once shaped by material forces and ordered by the intentional arc of the embodied agent. Casey writes, “the habituation which such inhabitation accomplishes involves a delicate dialectic between the implied passivity of enclosure...and the activity of getting to know our way around in a given circumstance.”¹³⁷ There is never a point at which this dialectic is not underway, which is why Merleau-Ponty can say that space “is already built into my bodily structure, and is its inseparable correlate” (PP 142/166).

The sedimentation of habits in the lived body release the subject from the immediacy of the present and enables the “movement of transcendence” that characterizes Merleau-Ponty’s conception of being in the world. In his discussion of being in the world we find one of the strongest statements of Merleau-Ponty’s correlationist view of embodiment:

The world is inseparable from the subject, but from a subject which is nothing but a project of the world, and the subject is inseparable from the world, but from a world which the subject itself projects. The subject is a being-in-the-world and the world remains ‘subjective’ since its *texture and articulations* are traced out by the subject’s movement of transcendence. (PP 430/491-492, my italics).¹³⁸

As we know, this is not an endorsement of idealism. It does, however, indicate that Merleau-Ponty sees our capacity to transcend any present situation as predicated upon the immanent organization of that situation by the body’s perceptual activity. Conversely, this activity must also be seen as a fundamental passivity of the body. The world, too, turns the subject into a project. Despite the apparent symmetry, there is a sense in which the strict correlation of body and world—i.e., the immanence of embodiment—described by Merleau-Ponty is dominated by the projects/projections of the subject. This is because

¹³⁷ Casey, “Habitual Body and Memory in Merleau-Ponty,” 285.

¹³⁸ On the freeing of perception and movement by the sedimentation of habit, see Félix Ravaisson, *Of Habit*, trans. Clare Carlisle and Mark Sinclair (London: Continuum, 2008), 49.

world is an articulation of the subject's practical freedom, which means that the constraints imposed on the subject are, in a sense, self-imposed. Moreover, it is as though the world would be a deprived wasteland without the "texture" provided to it by subjectivity. It is not so much that the subject possesses a mysterious power to escape immanence, but that Merleau-Ponty's immanence is never pure. It is always already permeated by avenues of transcendence traced out by the subject. Perception guarantees the complicity (rather than identity) of subject and world by permeating their immanence with an intentionality that binds while it liberates. This complicity remains dissymmetrical, however, for it is the subject that introduces intentionality and initiates the movement of transcendence. The dissymmetrical relation accounts for the ability of the subject to cultivate *its own* habits.¹³⁹ Without the movement of transcendence the habits of the body would only be imposed on the body from outside influences.

Just as tissue, neurons, blood, etc. work together to form our physiological system, the habits we adopt, cultivate, and inherit make up the lived body's non-biological armature. Without the economizing effect of habits our bodies are destined to expend their energy on simple reflexive behavior or waste it relearning how to perform operations they have performed many times before. Our bodies are normally not restricted to these modes of existence. Much of our lives are routinized and we carry out many daily tasks as if we were automata. But automation is only apparent. Our habitual activities actually enable us to expand our range of spontaneous actions, which is what

¹³⁹ Casey distinguishes between the kinds of habits that can be cultivated "spontaneously" and the habits which are sedimented in the form of customs ("Habitual Body and Memory in Merleau-Ponty," 286-287). His notion of customary habits can be compared with the habits of class that tie us to a class, as James identifies (*Principles*, volume 1, 121). Customary and class habits have an effect of contraction and should be contrasted with the "dilating" habits that Merleau-Ponty elaborates.

Merleau-Ponty means when he says that “habit expresses our power of dilating our being in the world, or changing our existence by appropriating fresh instruments” (PP 143/168).

The armature of habit is no less fundamental than the biological constitution of the body. It is true that Merleau-Ponty says that habit is “merely a mode” of the body’s fundamental capacity to transform a spontaneous action into a personal gesture (PP 146/171, translation modified), that habit particularizes the body through repetitious and regular acts. But he also points to habit as ontologically basic to the body. As Casey shows, this primacy is two-fold. First, habit is the corporeal manifestation of a past that lives on in my body as its unreflective history. “In this way habit takes the lead over the very body it requires for its own realization.” Second, habit forms the basis upon which corporeal style and personal expressivity rest. It mediates between the general, anonymous body and the sculpted body built up by our culture and conduct.¹⁴⁰ Habits are what enable our bodies to understand their environment, to achieve a “harmony between what we aim at and what is given, between the intention and the performance” (PP 144/169). This understanding is of course not mental, but inscribed in the body as the physiognomy and corporeal *sens* that at once opens and limits our field of perception (PP 152/178).

Before we achieve the freedom to cultivate our own habits we must have reached a workable state of equilibrium. The forces and impulses we are born with must be tamed in order to become manageable. Only at this point are we free to take up the world as a field of equipment. In a sense, this is done for us as we enter into the circuits of behavior

¹⁴⁰ Casey, “Habitual Body and Memory in Merleau-Ponty,” 290. Merleau-Ponty writes in the *Phenomenology*: “Although our body does not impose definite instincts upon us from birth, as it does upon animals, it does at least give to our life the form of generality, and develops our personal acts into stable dispositional tendencies. In this sense our nature is not long-established custom, since custom presupposes the form of passivity derived from nature. The body is our general medium for having a world” (PP 146/171).

maintained by our culture. As Alphonso Lingis puts it, “One is born with forces that one did not contrive. One lives by giving form to these forces. The forms one gets from the others.”¹⁴¹ As human beings, we are delivered directly into a world whose form has been shaped by human artifice. These forms are technologically produced and conducive to the kinds of beings that we are. Cultural artifacts are ideally made to enable the postures that we normally adopt as we take our position in the environment. The built places that receive us as newborn infants already have us in mind, or they at least anticipate that our bodies will resemble those which came before. When they do not, we rebuild them or adapt our postures accordingly; or, the body endures the labor of forced adaptation and potential debilitation. The network or circuit of places made to accommodate our corporeal physiognomies constitutes the meaning of our built environment.

The development of the lived body that Merleau-Ponty describes is supported not just by the foresight of architects, but also by atavisms of culture that live on in our human bodies. Following André Leroi-Gourhan, Lingis explains,

Unlike other mammals, which make their way head first, the nose is no longer in contact with the environment; the eyes have become the directing organ. The upright posture disengaged the hands from the terrain; they now become coordinated with the eyes. As humans begin to alter and reconstruct the environment about them, new functions are taken on by different body parts and organs.¹⁴²

So it is not just that our bodies are born into inhabitable spaces that will enable the acquisition of habits. The ways in which we as humans have come to inhabit our environment are ingrained in the physiology of our species, and therefore operate to

¹⁴¹ Alphonso Lingis, *Sensation: Intelligibility in Sensibility* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1996), 1. For Dewey’s account of how our originally “plastic” impulses get channeled into social forms of conduct, see John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), 69-75.

¹⁴² Alphonso Lingis, *Body Transformations: Evolutions and Atavisms in Culture* (London: Routledge, 2005), 57.

construct the postures we assume. This point echoes, from an evolutionary perspective, Merleau-Ponty's remarks about the symbiotic relation between the child and his/her world:

In fact, from the time of his birth the child who will have prejudices has been molded by his environment, and in that respect has undergone a certain exercise of parental authority. Consequently, there is no moment at which you could grasp, in a pure state, his way of perceiving, completely apart from the social conditioning that influences him. Inversely, you can never say that the way in which the child structures his social environment is unrelated to the hereditary or constitutional dispositions of his nervous system. [...] And so the internal characteristics of the subject always intervene in his way of establishing his relations with what is outside him. It is never simply the outside which molds him; it is he himself who takes a position in the face of the external conditions. (Child 108/16)

Ultimately, the individual is neither social nor natural to begin with. He or she is both at once. The space between these two organizational forces—nature and culture—possesses an “elasticity” [*élasticité*], says Merleau-Ponty, because it can manifest both reactive and active responses within the child (Child 108/16).

Similarly, the body is always caught up in circuits that are basically affective. Affective circuits lend our bodies an emotional identity by economizing the things we feel.¹⁴³ Since the body is never without its passions, never without a certain emotional disposition or mood, its affectivity must be regarded as constitutive of embodiment.¹⁴⁴ It can be argued, as Lawrence Hass does, that it is affectivity that separates us from the world of inanimate things.¹⁴⁵ Our affects imbue our intercorporeal encounters with a resonance that can energize us (joy) or enervate us (sadness). But it is not just personal encounters that are laced with affectivity—it is the entirety of aesthetic experience. This

¹⁴³ For the way affective circuits economize our actions and thereby give rise to the identities of our bodies, see Tom Sparrow, “Bodies in Transit: The Plastic Subject of Alphonso Lingis,” *Janus Head* 10, no. 1 (Summer/Fall 2007): 114-116.

¹⁴⁴ For an ontology of mood, see Heidegger, *Being and Time*, §29.

¹⁴⁵ Hass, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy*, 78.

insight is behind the discussion of color in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, where colors are said to have a “felt effect” and a “motor significance” that explains why, for instance, “red signifies effort or violence, green restfulness and peace” (PP 209-211/242-244).¹⁴⁶ This is not to say that our bodies are hopelessly at the mercy of their sensory environment. As Merleau-Ponty argues, “The subject of sensation is neither a thinker who takes note of a quality, nor an inert setting which is affected or changed by it, it is a power which is born into, and simultaneously with, a certain existential environment, or is synchronized with it” (PP 211/245). Sensory and affective circuits carry our bodies along, pushing and pulling them, because our bodies are *of* the sensible realm and informed by its sensory contours. Yet we retain the ability to seize upon and transform their meaning, and thus transcend ourselves through aesthetic/affective creation. “I cannot be caught in immanence,” says Paul Klee.¹⁴⁷

Gail Weiss notes that it is the intentional arc that enables a series of disparate affects to be drawn together into a personal circuit. The intentional arc acts as a kind of internal circuit of the lived body insofar as it is what is always running in the background as the (normal) subject sets out to enter into new and habitual series of tasks. Unlike the habitual circuits that we find in James, where the body runs according to an established set of neural pathways that correspond to its observable behavior, for Merleau-Ponty it is the body’s intentional arc that allows it to engage in habituated activities unthinkingly. “This intentional arc,” writes Weiss, “provides human beings with an affective sensibility

¹⁴⁶ I detect here in Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of the physiognomy of color the seeds of an analysis of race relations, some points of which I will raise throughout this essay. However, a theory and critique of the “physiognomy of race” will have to be deferred for a subsequent text.

¹⁴⁷ Cited by Merleau-Ponty in EM 188/87.

that enables the integration of quite dissimilar experiences into a synthetic whole.”¹⁴⁸ For Merleau-Ponty, it is the intentional arc (which is not reducible to a physical event) that underpins the body’s competence, its coherent and almost effortless way of moving, acting, gesturing, and expressing itself corporeally. Or more specifically, it is the habituation of the body’s intentionality through practical interaction with the environment that establishes the intentional arc as the grid upon which the world is always projected.¹⁴⁹

There is evidence to suggest that the emotional life of the brain is at least as fundamental to the lived body’s normal functioning as the meaningful dialogue it carries out at the perceptual level. The point here is not merely that the lived body cannot perform without having an emotion, and that this emotion emerges in the brain, it is the more salient point that the meaning culled from the world by the lived body is always in part produced by the affective valence of our situations. A “situation,” as Mark Johnson understands it, is a complex event which occurs *between* an organism and its environment. It is very close to what Merleau-Ponty means by our existential situation, or being in the world. Drawing from the philosophy of Dewey as well as the neuroscience of Antonio Damasio, Johnson argues that

¹⁴⁸ Gail Weiss, *Refiguring the Ordinary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 79. Weiss points out that it is his loss of an intentional arc that disables the patient Schneider’s capacity to order his world into a coherent, meaningful whole. The more general point that Merleau-Ponty wants to stress with Schneider’s case is that his pathology cannot be fully explained by appealing to the physical disablement of a particular brain function.

¹⁴⁹ In “Merleau-Ponty’s Critique of Mental Representation,” Hubert Dreyfus makes it clear that the intentional arc is *not* a representation of the world, but must be understood as the “feedback loop” of learning that is established as bodies interact with other bodies, things, etc. “The idea of an intentional arc is meant to capture the idea that all past experience is projected back into the world. The best representation of the world is thus the world itself.” Dreyfus’s paper is available at: <http://www.class.uh.edu/cogsci/dreyfus.html>

Emotions are key components of complex processes of assessment, evaluation, and transformation. As such, they are integral to our ability to grasp the meaning of a situation and to act appropriately in response to it. Most of this ongoing processing and action is never consciously entertained, but it is nonetheless *meaningful* to us, insofar as it constitutes an important part of our maintaining a workable relation to our surroundings.¹⁵⁰

Without emotions, it is difficult (or impossible) for our bodies to determine whether or not their present environment is safe to inhabit. Without such assessment, the body cannot act rationally or free itself from the defensive posture in which it remains vigilant against imminent threats. By the same token, the body cannot read hostility or security into the land without having fashioned an intentional arc that will allow it to judge another body as congruent or incongruent with itself. Affectivity and intentionality are woven together to infuse the body's sensibility.

Anticipating a bit, I would say that Merleau-Ponty too often focuses on the intentional life of the body while neglecting its affective and material life. In this he remains very much a proponent of the subject as primarily an active agent. It is not that he fails to see that these two dimensions of embodiment are intertwined and equiprimordial,¹⁵¹ but that he tends to pathologize those moments when the body loses its competent hold on the world or when its intentional arc loses its coherence. This results in an inadequate view of how the body acquires its identity and maintains its integrity vis-à-vis the environment. Similarly, he tends to overlook the physical or material aspects

¹⁵⁰ Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body*, 68.

¹⁵¹ This is perhaps most apparent in "The Child's Relations with Others" (cf. 108-113/17-23).

of how objects and emotions orient the body's activity.¹⁵² The dialogue of subject and object—which forms the kernel of Merleau-Ponty's narrative regarding the primacy of perception—is driven by the exchange of meanings *intended* by bodily consciousness, not by unregistered signals (autonomic) received from the environment or mundane sensations that fail to solicit attention. It is, for the most part, only figures which *stand out* against a horizon that interest Merleau-Ponty. He has considerably less to say about insignificant and “neutral”¹⁵³ situations, as well as situations where the body is so overwhelmed that its intentional threads are severed and the figure-ground structure is torn asunder.¹⁵⁴

Shannon Sullivan explains that for Merleau-Ponty objects regulate the body intentionally as well as materially. “The keyboard,” for example, “has a particular shape and manner of operating that call for a specific bodily comportment in order to use it.”¹⁵⁵ There is a plurality of significance transmitted to the body by the keyboard that can be accommodated in a variety of ways; but the body must adapt itself if it wants to dialogue with, rather than dominate, the object. My body does not perceive the material world without that world confronting me with a meaning that I or someone else has projected onto it. Sullivan writes: “The keyboard has a meaningful place within my world because, through my body's familiarity with the keyboard gained through the repeated use of it, a

¹⁵² Shannon Sullivan, *Living Across and Through Skins: Transactional Bodies, Pragmatism, and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 68.

¹⁵³ “A situation becomes neutral when the immediate environment arouses no concern. An environment void of importance is something that also exists, and in such an environment, too, ‘stimuli’ are active,” writes Straus in *The Primary World of Senses*, 81.

¹⁵⁴ I am thinking here of what Foucault refers to as “limit-experiences.” See Michel Foucault, *Remarks on Marx*, trans. R. James Goldstein and James Cascaito (New York: Semiotext(e), 1991), 31-32. It is the *immediacy*, it seems to me, that is significant about the situations Foucault describes. It is true that our bodies recover from extreme situations that test their limits—that these situations simply solicit our bodies in a particular way—but the situation itself must also be considered integral to the body's historical identity.

¹⁵⁵ Sullivan, *Living Across and Through Skins*, 68.

piece of plastic and metal has become an extension of my intentionality.” And: “My intentionality turns a heavy object into a paperweight; it is because of my need to hold papers down that a random stone nearby becomes a cultural object.”¹⁵⁶ These descriptions imply that the lived body controls the order of perceptual significance and the circuits of meaningful behavior.

There are instances, however, when the materiality of the world seizes upon our bodies and perception becomes unhinged. Lingis describes the orgasmic body as one whose seizure is not merely a failure of the intentional arc, but the result of a decomposition of the body’s postural schema itself.¹⁵⁷ In a different context, George Yancy describes a scene wherein the body of a white woman is given over to involuntary gestures that cannot be explained with a Pavlovian reflex theory or a theory of dialogical perception. Something else is required to account for the “ambush”—the visceral response solicited in the white woman when the body of a black man enters her elevator. She may tell herself that she knows this body; that she has a handle on what a black body is; that she has no reason to clutch her purse closely. Yancy writes how “she may come to judge her perception of the Black body as epistemologically false, but her racism may still have a hold on her lived body.”¹⁵⁸ Despite herself, she tenses up, her body recoils. She does not search the man’s body to bring its sense into relief; nor does she objectify

¹⁵⁶ Sullivan, *Living Across and Through Skins*, 67, 68-69.

¹⁵⁷ Lingis challenges Merleau-Ponty’s interpretation of Schneider’s sexual incompetence as a loss of the capacity to order his erotic world, via the intentional arc, into a meaningful whole. The libido, argues Lingis, is not a force that is ordered by perceptual structures; nor is it organized teleologically like body’s motility. “Does not the orgasmic body figure as a body decomposed, dismembered, dissolute, where postures and dynamic axes from and deform in the limp indecisiveness of the erotic trouble? Is it not a breaking down into a mass of exposed organs, secretions, striated muscles, systems turning into pulp and susceptibility?” Alphonso Lingis, *Libido: The French Existential Theories* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 55-56.

¹⁵⁸ George Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008), 5. For the full account of whiteness as ambush, see chapter 7.

him. She has no need to: his darkness symbolizes a threat. Conversely, *she* becomes self-aware, nearly to the point of paralysis; she averts her eyes and fixes them straight ahead.¹⁵⁹ But it is not that the black man's gaze has turned her into an object, as Sartre would say. It is the very darkness of the man's body, his sensory and symbolic constitution, that arrests the white woman's movement. He remains an ambiguous presence, his darkness gripping her.

Yancy's work draws insight from Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, a book wherein Fanon explicitly takes up the concept of the body schema to interrogate its function in intercorporeal relations. Ordinarily, the body schema is described as the "implicit knowledge" possessed by the body that enables it to reach for the cigarettes at the corner of the desk, or lean backward to retrieve the matches buried in the desk's drawer.¹⁶⁰ Such postural facility is experienced by the white body whether it is in its office or out in public. The black body, by contrast, is not afforded this facility when the gaze of a white person descends upon it. Recalling such an encounter, Fanon describes himself as "completely dislocated" by the white gaze, which apprehended and returned his body to him "sprawled out, distorted, recolored, clad in mourning...."¹⁶¹ "What else could it be for me but an amputation, an excision, a hemorrhage that spattered my whole body with black blood?"¹⁶² What gets excised from Fanon's subjectivity is precisely his body schema, or at least its enabling function. It is replaced by a "racial epidermal

¹⁵⁹ Yancy writes: "Her body language signifies, 'Look, *the Black!*' On this score, though short of a performative locution, her body language functions as an insult." He goes on to say that, "The point here is that deep-seated racist emotive responses may form part of the white *bodily* repertoire, which has become calcified through quotidian modes of bodily transaction in a racial and racist world." *Black Bodies, White Gazes*, 4, 5.

¹⁶⁰ Frantz Fanon, *Black Bodies, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 111.

¹⁶¹ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 113.

¹⁶² Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 112.

schema”¹⁶³ that, if anything, disables his body by entering it into an economy which operates according to hues and tints, shades of light and dark.

As objectified, the black body becomes laced with legends, symbols, myths, and fantasies—all of which are woven into it by the look of the white person and supported by what Fanon calls a “historico-racial schema.”¹⁶⁴ This schema, which is situated anonymously *below* the body schema, calls upon or “hails” the black body to be more than a practical, competent corporeality, or what Merleau-Ponty calls an “I can.” Merleau-Ponty says that it is our competent embodied perception that weaves the fabric of the real (PP x/iv-v). Fanon reminds us that it is the perception of the white body that traces the contours of the world and forces the nonwhite body to respond accordingly. “I wanted to come lithe and young into a world that was ours,” laments Fanon, “and to help build it together.”¹⁶⁵ To summarize this contrast, we might say that whereas the white body is *solicited* by the world to actively complete it, the black body is made to *perform* in a world that has always already been completed for it. It is in this economy of colored skin that the dialogical theory of perception exposes its limitations.

Reading Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology*, it is easy to feel that the world he has in mind is for the most part a world filled with things to be handled or manipulated, or what Heidegger called the ready to hand. The manipulation of things often leads to a better understanding of them; this is where knowledge comes from. We can manipulate

¹⁶³ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 112.

¹⁶⁴ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 111. Fanon is drawing off of Jean-Paul Sartre’s analysis of “the look” in *Being and Nothingness*. Yancy shows how the historico-racial schema operates as part of what Foucault calls the “positive unconscious,” explaining that “My darkness is a signifier of negative values grounded within a racist social and historical matrix that *predates* my existential emergence” (*Black Bodies, White Gazes*, 3). Cf. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Vintage, 1970), xi.

¹⁶⁵ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 112-113. For a fuller account of how the black body returned to or hailed by the white gaze, see Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes*, 71-75. For an account of interpellation as a material practice, see Louis Althusser, “Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatus,” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001).

things because we are things ourselves, albeit a special kind of thing—the kind of thing that directs itself toward goals and orders its surroundings into a meaningful habitat. The problem of other persons and how we recognize them as such is certainly considered, but the exemplary scenes in the *Phenomenology* involve a human being confronting an inanimate object. When the human is incapable of maximizing its grip on the object, that is, when the human is unable to adjust its body to the physiognomy of another body, Merleau-Ponty signals a pathology (PP 136/158). Yancy’s description of the “elevator effect” and Fanon’s theory of the racial epidermal schema, however, reveal corporeal incompetence and dissymmetry as norms of embodiment. We too are manipulated by objects, symbols, and stimuli, and not just in ways that enable our bodies or aid our perceptual grasp.

Merleau-Ponty’s account of color-perception in the *Phenomenology* underscores his more general point that our body’s communication with its environment happens primarily at the level of perceptual meaning, or what he often calls “physiognomy” or “motor physiognomy” (PP 209/243). The subject is not a pilot navigating the body from within or a merely organic mechanism. The subject can negotiate its surroundings because its corporeal composition is legible by other bodies, and other bodies are legible for it. Bodies possess the power to read and respond directly to both formal and qualitative features. Merleau-Ponty insists that perception is always laced with sense, and it is this sense that enables the body to respond to “sensations.”¹⁶⁶ To say that colors induce the body to move in specific ways because they display a certain physiognomy is to say that sensory experience is always figured, that even colors are never experienced

¹⁶⁶ We will examine the motor physiognomy of sensations in the following section.

as detached from a significant horizon.¹⁶⁷ The body can negotiate this horizon because it possesses its own physiognomy, one which is arranged by the physiognomy of the world and displayed in the arsenal of gestures it typically deploys (PP 143/168).

Merleau-Ponty deploys many concepts to characterize the original unity of body and world. In the *Phenomenology*, it is perception, physiognomy, and style; in the course on nature, it is natural environment and the Earth;¹⁶⁸ in *The Visible and the Invisible*, it is the flesh of the sensible, “this generality of the Sensible in itself, this anonymity innate to Myself” as Merleau-Ponty puts it (VI 139/183). Individual bodies for Merleau-Ponty are always cut from the same impersonal cloth—personal individuation is something achieved, not given. The meaning of the personal, however, can only be understood against the backdrop of a prepersonal milieu, whether this is nature, the sensible realm as such, or the world as an eminently expressive style:

The natural world is the horizon of all horizons, the style of all possible styles, which guarantees for my experiences a given, not a willed, unity underlying all the disruptions of my personal and historical life. Its counterpart within me is the given, general and pre-personal existence of my sensory functions in which we have discovered the definition of the body. (PP 330/381)

The notion of style gives us a clue to Merleau-Ponty’s view of corporeal identity as something dynamically constituted by environmental conditions. In a strong sense, our bodies are products of the sedimented meaning that makes up our cultural milieu.¹⁶⁹ Born into a stylized environment which calls upon it to adopt a compatible bodily

¹⁶⁷ This why Merleau-Ponty insists that “it is impossible completely to describe the colour of the carpet without saying that it *is* a carpet, made of wool, and without implying in this colour a certain tactile value, a certain weight and a certain resistance to sound” (PP 323/373).

¹⁶⁸ “The Earth is the matrix of our time as it is of our space. Every constructed notion of time presupposes our proto-history as carnal beings compresent to a single world,” Merleau-Ponty writes in “The Philosopher and His Shadow,” in *Signs*, trans. Richard C. McCleary (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 180/FR.

¹⁶⁹ This sedimentation constitutes the historical a priori for Merleau-Ponty. It provides the mutable, phenomenal ground upon which the world is synthesized, understood, and modified by the body-subject (Dillon, “Apriority in Kant and Merleau-Ponty,” 420).

comportment, the body is not *inscribed* with a style as much as it coherently expresses an historical embeddedness, a set of social and physical limitations or constraints. The body is “a certain style informing my manual gestures and implying in turn a certain style of finger movements, and contributing, in the last resort, to a certain bodily bearing.” Its identity is, in a word, “a work of art” (PP 150/176).

Style is not fixed in the visible form of the body; nor is it an abstraction from the many postures a given body assumes. A style is nothing other than the specific animation of a body, the invisible force that renders it recognizable in its singularity (PP 327/378).¹⁷⁰ As Graham Harman writes, “style is a real force that animates the qualities [of a body].”¹⁷¹ Style is not spontaneous expression, however, and in the last analysis the general style of the natural and social worlds serves as the condition of possibility for the emergence of individual style.¹⁷² “Expression,” therefore, “has the form not only of a creative, but also of a *responsive expression*.”¹⁷³

By defining it in terms of style, Merleau-Ponty lends a determinate fluidity to corporeal identity. “A style,” he writes, “is a certain manner of dealing with situations, which I identify or understand in an individual or in a writer, by taking over that manner myself in a sort of imitative way, even though I may be quite unable to define it” (PP 327/378). As we know, style is recognizable across an array of individual examples.

¹⁷⁰ Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 56.

¹⁷¹ Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 58.

¹⁷² Merleau-Ponty insists that expression and existence are “reciprocal,” that “the body expresses total existence, not because existence it is an external accompaniment to that existence, but because existence comes into its own in the body” (PP 166/193). This statement must always be tempered by Merleau-Ponty’s quasi-transcendentalism, which holds that we always already find ourselves within a sedimented, linguistic *Lebenswelt* that limits the range of available styles, and his that our behavior emerges from an animal *Umwelt* (Nature 208). The ontology of the body must be situated between “wild” and “sedimented” being (Nature 220).

¹⁷³ Bernhard Waldenfels, “The Paradox of Expression,” trans. Chris Nagel, in *Chiasms: Merleau-Ponty’s Notion of Flesh*, eds. Fred Evans and Leonard Lawlor (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 98.

“One can hear a newly discovered Charlie Parker recording and immediately recognize the style; one can and will say that ‘that solo is really classic Bird’, even though up till now it was not part of the known Parker oeuvre.”¹⁷⁴ Beyond a certain threshold of differentiation a specific style begins to break up and morph into another style. We can imagine a masterful jazz musician like Parker deviating so far from his usual delivery so as to approximate John Coltrane. In such an instance, what is left of Parker? Has he not in a sense become Coltrane, insofar as Coltrane’s identity just is his musical style? In a strong sense, Parker and Coltrane *are* the sounds they produce. A visual example is given in *The Visible and the Invisible*, where Merleau-Ponty explains how a pebble or a shell exhibits an identity that persists throughout “their variations within certain limits.” On his principle of identity, bodies maintain their identity so long as their sensible modifications do not disintegrate the style that animates them. Identity is lost when a body moves “beyond a certain range of their changes” (VI 161/213), or crosses a stylistic threshold.¹⁷⁵ Merleau-Ponty does not fully explore the causes of these deviations of identity.

For Descartes, it is the mind that judges an object’s identity as continuous throughout its modifications, or that determines a cloaked figure perceived from some distance to be a person rather than an automaton.¹⁷⁶ It is this same mind which, removed from the mutable world of extended substance, retains its identity and subsists through every modification of the body. For Merleau-Ponty, by contrast, it is the body that

¹⁷⁴ Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 55.

¹⁷⁵ Such a conception of identity would become visible in the paintings of Cézanne as well as those of the Impressionists, insofar as these artists exploit the thresholds of form. We have the feeling, for instance, when viewing a Cézanne landscape that its contours are on the cusp of dissolution and chaos, but that a reconfiguration of those contours could express the “same” landscape on the verge of a completely different dissolution. Such is the fluidity of the sensory content which makes up the form of Cézanne’s subjects.

¹⁷⁶ René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, in *Philosophical Essays and Correspondence*, ed. Roger Ariew (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000), 110-112.

recognizes another human body beneath the cloak. “It is through my body that I understand other people, just as it is through my body that I perceive ‘things’” (PP 186/216). The dialectic of recognition becomes a dialogue of styles that unfolds without mediation. “The concept of style,” writes Linda Singer, “secures the Other’s direct accessibility as a distinctive way of inhabiting the world. [...] His integrity is not that of a conceptual consistency, but of an existential project which is directly present, even if I cannot reconstruct its inner workings.”¹⁷⁷ In Merleau-Ponty’s words, the other is, for me, “an unchallengeable style” that relays an identity to my own body’s identity and makes the other “in principle accessible to me as I am to myself” (PP 364/418; SB 222/238).

Style is one of the most plastic phenomena adduced by Merleau-Ponty. It “ensures my existence of a stability, while allowing for the possibility of growth and change.”¹⁷⁸ It points to the fluid constitution of bodily integrity and defines the intercorporeal realm as a sphere of immanence, where bodies communicate and influence each other. This communication is at once personal and anonymous, inherited and created.¹⁷⁹ But corporeal style remains dependent on the body schema, which offers a form of stability amid the fluid immanence of the intercorporeal dialogue. Gallagher holds that the body schema should not be regarded as something that stands between subject and object as mediator or “screen” (SB 219/236), but rather that “insofar as it is dynamic in taking up certain postures and thus situating the body in respect to the environment, it remains experientially invisible—absently available.”¹⁸⁰ The body schema does, however, play the “active role of organizer” of sensations and “reflects and

¹⁷⁷ Linda Singer, “Merleau-Ponty on the Concept of Style,” in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, ed. Galen A. Johnson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 242.

¹⁷⁸ Singer, “Merleau-Ponty on the Concept of Style,” 242.

¹⁷⁹ Singer, “Merleau-Ponty on the Concept of Style,” 242.

¹⁸⁰ Gallagher, “Lived Body and Environment,” 157.

determines the posture that is taken up by the lived body in its everyday situations.”¹⁸¹

This seems to suggest that the activity of the body schema plays a more fundamental role in the organization of perception than any passivity.

Merleau-Ponty holds that a figure against a background is the simplest of sensible experience. Lest we interpret this to be a merely empirical truth, he notes that “this is not a contingent characteristic of factual perception” (PP 4/10). It is an ontological fact. But like all transcendentals in Merleau-Ponty, one that is historically conditioned. Elizabeth Grosz points out that the body schema (she says “body image”) is at work in the structuring of this a priori. She says that,

The body image is necessary for the distinction between figure and ground, or between central and peripheral actions. Relative to its environment, the body image separates the subject’s body from a background of forces; but also within the body, the body image establishes the distinctions—between movements of limbs, say, and the rest of the body—which provide it with its corporeal context. A single movement reorients the whole of the body, creating what might be called a gait or posture, an individual and cultural bodily style.¹⁸²

Sullivan calls such an ordering of the environment “projective intentionality” and, like Grosz, sees such a view as problematic from a feminist ethical perspective:

Instead of being an account of the dynamic, co-constitutive relationship between self and other, the model of intersubjectivity offered by Merleau-Ponty tends toward that of a subject’s monologue with itself that includes a domineering erasure of others in its projective ‘communication’ with them.¹⁸³

Although invaluable for understanding the corporeal structures of lived experience, Merleau-Ponty’s account of the body schema is often blind to raced, gendered, and other forms of embodiment.¹⁸⁴ I would add that he equally neglects non-figured experience, or

¹⁸¹ Gallagher, “Lived Body and Environment,” 157.

¹⁸² Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 83-84.

¹⁸³ Sullivan, *Living Across and Through Skins*, 65, 66.

¹⁸⁴ Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 108. See also Iris Marion Young, *Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

the experience of sensing an ungraspable—like wind or cold—that does not stand out against a backdrop. This blind spot in Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of embodiment informs his mistaken view that body and environment are synchronized or reversible, and that our primary mode of engagement with the world involves manipulation of things.

We have already noted that habits are rearrangements of the general body schema underlying the habituated, stylized body which serves as the invariant against which the modifications of the body are registered. We have seen, moreover, how Fanon calls into question the historicity of the body schema and how Grosz and Sullivan raise problems about its constitutive activity. For these reasons, we can say that the body schema’s dynamic relation with its surroundings is fundamental to its individuation and its so-called invariance (PP 141/165) pertains only to its role as active regulator of movement, not to the determinate regulations themselves. These regulations are determined culturally, historically, intercorporeally; they configure the world we perceive. Despite its variability, the body schema nevertheless operates as the dominant organizing principle of perception. From the perspective of lived experience, the world cannot but appear as complicit or synchronized with the body-subject’s practical agenda, even if this agenda is laced with anonymous, impersonal, and unconscious prejudices.

On the one hand, it is possible to characterize Merleau-Ponty’s conception of the body schema and habit as plastic, as Weiss does.¹⁸⁵ This should not be taken to mean that the lived body’s structure begins as a blank slate and only subsequently becomes schematized and habituated. The lived body requires habits and body schemata in order to perceive, and without them “perception is impossible” (Child 122/37). These basic structures maintain their stability while also remaining open to modifications that would

¹⁸⁵ Weiss, *Refiguring the Ordinary*, 4.

restructure them. Since perception is internally linked to the body's constitution, any restructuring entails a new style of movement, and thus a new perceptual experience.¹⁸⁶

On the other hand, it seems to me that Merleau-Ponty does not want to grant that the lived body is fully plastic. So long as it is a living (human) body, and not a body reduced to its objective relations in the world, it maintains a set of invariants that do not succumb to any transformation. These invariants include the figure-ground structure of perception. The figure-ground structure rests on the body schema, which suggests that the body schema must be always present in some form for the body to perceive. On this reading, perception is no longer primary. An unschematized body will not be capable of distinguishing figures and will not, therefore, be able to enter into dialogue with the environment. Such a body would not be living in Merleau-Ponty's terms.

Since perception presupposes a functioning body schema, and the body schema is acquired dialogically, body and world must be synchronized for perception to occur. Otherwise, the body schema could not develop. I think this synchronization is behind Merleau-Ponty's conception of reversibility. It is responsible for his later view that subjects and objects are basically articulations of a single sensible element called the flesh, where "seer and visible reciprocate one another and we no longer know which sees and which is seen" (VI 139/183).

Merleau-Ponty employs the language of synchrony on more than one occasion. For instance, he speaks of impersonal biological life and personal life as for the most part operating in concert, the former being "practically taken for granted" as something "I rely on to keep me alive." As Merleau-Ponty puts it, we exist "without...being able either to

¹⁸⁶ "This link between motility and perception shows at what point it is true to say that the two functions are only two aspects of a single totality and that the perception of one's entry into the world and of one's own body form a system" (Child 122/38).

reduce the organism to its existential self, or itself to the organism” (PP 84/99). Citing the biography of Saint-Exupéry, Merleau-Ponty notes that on rare occasions our organic life can be almost completely suppressed by our personal life: “It may even happen when I am in danger that my human situation abolishes my biological one, that my body lends itself without reserve to action” (PP 84/99). Later on in the *Phenomenology* he explicitly speaks of the synchronization of the biological and human, yet lends a certain primacy to the biological:

...as we have indicated above, biological existence is synchronized [*embrayée*] with human existence and is never indifferent to its distinctive rhythm. Nevertheless, we shall now add, ‘living’ (*leben*) is a primary process from which, as a starting point, it becomes possible to ‘live’ (*erleben*) this or that world, and we must eat and breathe before perceiving and awakening to relational living, belonging to colours and lights through sight, to sound through hearing, to the body of another through sexuality, before arriving at the life of human relations. (PP 159-160/186)

Instead of taking this to be a glimpse into Merleau-Ponty’s latent naturalism, we should see it as an example of his “empirically responsible” phenomenology. For, from an existential point of view, the biological does not come first and the human is not built upon the organic unity of the body. The lived body reciprocally expresses the physiological and psychic because it always finds itself already absorbed in a meaningful circuit of behavior.

This is one of the reasons that Merleau-Ponty will speak on the one hand of an original syncretism of body and world, but then quickly dispel the notion that sensing (*sentir*) is ever without a human sense. “The subject of sensation is neither a thinker who takes note of a quality, nor an inert setting which is affected or changed by it, it is a power which is born into, and simultaneously with, a certain existential environment, or is synchronized with it” (PP 211/245). And yet, Merleau-Ponty will speak of our

sensibility as belonging to an anonymous life of the senses that thrives “on the fringe of my own personal life and acts.” He writes, “Each time I experience a sensation, I feel that it concerns not my own being...but another self which has already sided with the world, which is already open to certain of its aspects and synchronized [*synchronisé*] with them” (PP 216/250). Now, this is a form of synchrony that the lived body is not in control of, for it is established nonintentionally and concerns the body as something that senses before it perceives, that lives materially before it grasps meaningfully.

It is here that we see Merleau-Ponty catching sight of the relation between sensing and sensed that defines his notion of flesh. More importantly for us, however, we also see the point at which the body-world relation becomes a volatile one. It is at the level of sensing that the body is at its most vulnerable, where its hold on the world and its capacity to dialogue with other bodies is not yet accomplished, and is even susceptible to experiences that could disable its integrity.

Sensing relies on a synchronization or synthesis of the senses (with each other and with their object) whereby each organ’s unique means of exploring is brought together in the intersensory realm of perception. This realm is made possible by the “domain of sense itself, the community of significance between [the visual and tactile] being inadequate to ensure their union in one single experience” (PP 225/260). This union, as we have seen, is effected by the body and the intentional arc that allows it to actualize the “motor potentiality” of an object and thereby grasp its meaning effectively.

I am able to touch effectively only if the phenomenon finds an echo within me, if it accords with a certain nature of my consciousness, and if the organ which goes out to meet it is synchronized with it. The unity and identity of the tactile phenomenon do not come about through any synthesis of recognition in the concept, they are founded upon the unity and identity of the body as a synergic totality. (PP 316-317/366)

Thus, the dialogue of subject and object, of styles and physiognomies, only occurs when the lived body is capable of conforming itself to the “logic of the world,” that is, when it is capable of synchronizing with it (PP 326/377).

In his treatment of sensibility/sense experience, Merleau-Ponty seems to acknowledge the diachrony of sensations and their capacity to disrupts body-world synchrony. But, as we will see, he is reluctant to lend primacy to sensing over perceiving. Indeed, these potentially distinct modes of experience are collapsed in most of Merleau-Ponty’s descriptions. Understood as a pre-perceptual and anonymous mode of embodiment, the volatility of sensing poses a threat to synchronization of body and world. It opens the body to forces foreign to perception.

The concept of flesh developed in *The Visible and the Invisible* follows up the idea of synchronization with the insight that seer and seen, touching and touched, are reversible or chiasmic phenomena. The subject-object dialogue, which retains the dualist form, is transformed into an immanent ontology that regards subjects and objects as individual expressions of the sensible in general. Now, I would not want to go so far as to say that such a move “reduces the other to the same” or eliminates alterity from intercorporeal relations. However, I agree with Levinas when he says that “[there is a] priority of the flesh...to the detriment of another ambiguity or ambivalence, that of the enigma of sensation-sentiment, which is played out in the passivity of the *senses affected* [*sens affectés*] by the sensorial, between the pure undergoing or suffering and eventual

pain, and the *known* [su] of knowledge that remains behind as its residue or trace.”¹⁸⁷

This insight is what will orient Chapter 3 below.

Merleau-Ponty tames the volatility of sensation in two ways: first, by defining it in terms of synchrony and treating it as something that for the most part enables our perceptual competence; and, more radically, by arguing for a “fundamental narcissism of all vision” which is supposed to describe the mode of being of the flesh. The general *reversibility* signaled by this portrayal of the sensible may pertain to peaceful and mundane experiences of others, but it neglects all the ways sensations can disable us, as well as the uncertainty involved as our bodies move from one sensory environment to another. It does not do justice to novel or extreme sensations, and it downplays the reality of hostile or deadly environments. In a word, it trivializes the vulnerability of our sensibility.

As we have noted, Merleau-Ponty does recognize a layer of sensation that operates “below” perception. As pre-perceptual it does not solicit a dialogue from the lived body. Instead, it remains out of sync with lived experience and presents the body with a volatile situation.¹⁸⁸ Merleau-Ponty’s emphasis on body-world synchronization obscures the asymmetry of intercorporeity at the level of sensation; this comes as a result of his desire to assimilate sensation (as *le sentir*, sense experience or sensing) to the model of perception as “communion.” The thesis of reversibility can only be advanced by ignoring the alterity of the material world, that is, at the peril of sensation’s autonomy.

This is why neither the phenomenology of perception nor the ontology of the flesh can

¹⁸⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, “Sensibility,” in *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty*, eds. Galen A. Johnson and Michael B. Smith (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1990), 65.

¹⁸⁸ In this discussion of “levels” (PP 253-254/293-294), Merleau-Ponty acknowledges a certain contingency and instability at the heart of experience, but does not explain where this instability comes from. By positing sensation as nonsubjective and below perception, we can account for this instability. For more on levels, see Alphonso Lingis, *The Imperative*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 25-38.

adequately address the problems of embodiment and why the metaphysics of bodies we find in Spinoza or Nietzsche,¹⁸⁹ for instance, is also needed.

In giving an account of subjectivity and the immanence of the body-world relation, I think Merleau-Ponty does make significant advances past Kant and Husserl by developing concepts like style and physiognomy. These concepts allow him to speak coherently about perception and intersubjectivity as corporeal interactions that do not require the mediation of a transcendental subject. For this reason, Merleau-Ponty should be regarded as a kind of materialist.¹⁹⁰ This ambition becomes even more apparent when he is writing about sensing, or when he speaks of the “carnality” of the flesh in *The Visible and the Invisible*. Here his theory of embodied perception shifts its focus from the form of perception to the material of perception—i.e., sensations, the sensible as such—even though he does not endorse the form-matter distinction. It is in his analysis of sensation that we can best see Merleau-Ponty trying to negotiate the immanence of body and environment. But his account of immanence is compromised by his endorsement of the primacy of perception thesis and his methodological commitment to the principle of intentionality. The limit of his materialism, moreover, appears when his theory of habit is contrasted with a neurophysiological account like that given by James.

¹⁸⁹ Nietzsche writes in *The Will to Power* (quoted in Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 204, note 5), “In the chemical world the sharpest perception of the difference between forces reigns. But a protoplasm, which is a multiplicity of chemical forces, has only a vague and uncertain perception of a strange reality.” This sentiment summarizes the general perspective taken up in Nietzsche’s philosophy of the body: when he thinks the body he attempts to think it not at the level of consciousness or perception, but at the level of the material and physiological. I do not feel that we should privilege this level, but we cannot neglect it or give it a derivative status. Indeed, the challenge is to reconcile the identity of the transcendental and material. For Merleau-Ponty’s relation to Spinoza and a defense of his “fundamental kinship with Spinoza’s monistic metaphysics,” see Henry Pietersma, “La place de Spinoza dans le pensée de Merleau-Ponty: convergence, entre les deux penseurs,” *International Studies in Philosophy* 20, no. 3 (1988): 89-93.

¹⁹⁰ I prefer the term “materialist” instead of “naturalist” because of the latter’s biological, anatomical, and physiological connotations. I do not see Merleau-Ponty as ultimately a philosopher concerned with the workings of the natural world of science (in part because he is not concerned with body as object), but with giving a nonreductive account of situations whose “subjective” and “objective” features are explicable in corporeal terms.

CHAPTER 2

SENSING, REVERSIBILITY, AND THE PROBLEM OF VIOLENCE

Let us return to sensation and scrutinize it closely enough to learn from it the living relation of the perceiver to his body and to his world.
– Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*

Merleau-Ponty begins his rehabilitation of sensation as early as *Phenomenology of Perception*. After rejecting the modern view of sensation as a unit of content that must be assembled with other units in order to build the objects of perception, he endorses a view of sensation as *sensing* (which is a more appropriate translation of *le sentir*, sense experience)¹⁹¹ which is adopted from Erwin Straus's *The Primary World of Senses*, on the one hand, and Husserl's *Ideas II*, on the other. This notion of sensing, which regards sensation as "that vital communication with the world which makes it present as a familiar setting of our life" (PP 52-53/64-65) is central to Merleau-Ponty's postdualist perspective and the primacy of perception thesis that it defends. For my part, I will argue that sensing is the body's primary mode of engagement, that sensing operates below the level of intentionality and is even more basic than operative intentionality, which is defined as the "natural and antepredicative" form of perception. Operative intentionality is what first opens us to the phenomenal field, "furnishing the text which our knowledge tries to translate [via deliberate judgments] into precise language" (PP xviii/xiii). Like operative intentionality, sensing lends continuity to the body-world relation and is fundamental to the nondualism of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, although his privileging of perception often threatens to reinstate a discontinuity between subject and object.

¹⁹¹ See Daniel Guerrière, "Table of Contents of 'Phenomenology of Perception:' Translation and Pagination," *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 10, no. 1 (1979): 65-69.

Merleau-Ponty recognizes a distinction between sensation and perception. Whereas perception is constantly striving to pull objects out of their ambiguous presence and into a practicable relief, it is sensation that can occasionally break up the synchrony accorded to perceptual experience. To claim that such an interruption is *merely an invitation* to explore the undiscovered meanings contained in the perception horizon is to miss the qualitative difference between an experience that engages our attention and one that simply happens to our bodies.¹⁹² Sensation, however, is often assimilated to perception in Merleau-Ponty's texts. This entails a reduction of the alterity of sensation, as well as a glossing of the problem of passivity posed by sensory experience.¹⁹³ But a healthy ambiguity inhabits the border between sensation and perception. For instance, it is in his treatment of sense experience that the affective and passive dimensions of embodiment turn up. The question now becomes, are these dimensions recuperated as forms of (perceptual) activity or are they afforded an irreducible otherness?

Perhaps anticipating that privileging embodiment is not sufficient to free phenomenology from transcendental idealism, Merleau-Ponty suggests that it is the "primary layer of sense experience [*sentir*]" that allows perception to "break with the critical attitude" (PP 238, 239/276). It is here that I think Merleau-Ponty most deliberately departs from his precursors, Kant and Husserl, in order to champion the existence of an experience that is not prey to any kind of subjective synthesis. By beginning with the sensible, Merleau-Ponty begins with an always already synthesized form and content instead of positing a form and content that can only be brought together

¹⁹² This is not to say that sensation is just a suffering of the body, but it is sometimes just that. Perception, for Merleau-Ponty, is never merely passive. Moreover, nothing ever just "happens" to the body for Merleau-Ponty. That is, there are no nonsubjective events (PP 411/470), although there are "vital event[s]" (Nature 174).

¹⁹³ "With the problem of sense experience, we rediscover that of association and passivity" (PP 53/65).

by a unifying faculty.¹⁹⁴ This latter way of proceeding begins with abstractions, not with what is given, and is responsible for the mistaken view that the subject's role in experience is to imprint the chaotic world of sensation with form.

Merleau-Ponty's concern is to keep the subject always in touch with the objective world and to demonstrate how this immanent relation provides the sole content of perception. This results in the view that the world does not achieve an *explicit* form unless it is put into dialogue with a human agent (PP 320/370).¹⁹⁵ Oftentimes the subject of perception is described as immediately in touch with a semi-determinate, but never amorphous, world of things which is always on its way to becoming more precisely formed and therefore more hospitable to the body's motor capacity. This ambiguous and anonymous "lifeworld" provides the transcendental conditions of perception (PP 365/418-419).¹⁹⁶ More fundamental than the lifeworld is, I believe, the realm of the sensible.

Both sensation and perception are sometimes designated as anonymous, as when Merleau-Ponty writes that "Sensation [*sensation*] can be anonymous only because it is incomplete." Or: "Perception is always in the mode of the impersonal 'One'" (PP 216, 240/250, 277). These remarks have generated consistent criticism from feminist philosophers who charge that by affirming the reality of an anonymous body, Merleau-Ponty overlooks the role that gender plays in the construction of experience. This

¹⁹⁴ "I start from unified experience and from there acquire, in a secondary way, consciousness of a unifying activity when, taking up an analytical attitude, I break perception into qualities and sensation, and when, in order to recapture on the basis of these the object into which I was in the first place blindly thrown, I am obliged to suppose an act of synthesis which is merely the counterpart of my analysis" (PP 276-277/275; cf. PrP 25/69).

¹⁹⁵ About the body as the "vehicle" of intercorporeal relations and reality as fundamentally a "dialogue" between subject and object, Merleau-Ponty writes: "The thing is inseparable from a person perceiving it, and can never be actually *in itself* because its articulations are those of our very existence...."

¹⁹⁶ On the transcendental status of the lifeworld, see Husserl, *The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, 139-141. On the anonymity of the lifeworld, see §29.

criticism is justifiable, but it does not apply to all of the senses of “anonymous” intended by Merleau-Ponty. That is, I do not think it applies to the anonymity of sensation insofar as sensation is something undergone by the body unconsciously or prepersonally. Before explicating this level of sensation, we need to see what anonymity refers to.

There are at least four ways to understand anonymity. First, there is the precommunicative stage in the psychogenesis of the child, where his or her body is not yet distinguishable from the other’s body. Here “there is not one individual over against another but rather an anonymous collectivity, an undifferentiated group life” (Child 119/33). Second, there is the anonymity of habitual actions. It is true that a person’s habits inform their style, and thus their personal identity. But to the extent that habits can be triggered unthinkingly or operate automatically, they possess a certain anonymity. Third, Merleau-Ponty sometimes speaks of the body in general, by which he means the organic body that lives “as a prepersonal cleaving to the general form of the world, as an anonymous and general existence” (PP 84/99). The idea that there is a general—i.e. gender-free, race-free—body “beneath” the personal is problematic because, as Sullivan argues, it suggests a neutral ground upon which our bodies communicate with other bodies. But no such ground exists, as our bodies are always individuated by habits and other particularized bodily behaviors. When I assume that the gestures of the other are understandable because we share a common body, then I run the risk of deciphering the other in terms of my corporeity (or the myth of a universal body), rather than trying to *achieve* a site of communication that preserves the other’s particularities.¹⁹⁷

Johanna Oksala rejects the view that an anonymous body subtends the intersubjective relation and that intersubjectivity is something that needs to be achieved.

¹⁹⁷ Sullivan, *Living Across and Through Skins*, 71, 74.

She argues that the body-subject is historically generated all the way down by “language, tradition, and community.”¹⁹⁸ Even the anonymous body is structured by environmental and social conditions. We have already seen that Merleau-Ponty does not quite offer a fully historicized body, that there are certain structural invariants that assume different modes but are not open to historical transformation. Or, as Butler argues with reference to his treatment of sexuality, Merleau-Ponty’s appeal to “the universal structures of bodily existence” “prefigures the analysis of lived experience, investing the body with an ahistorical structure which is in actuality profoundly historical in origin.”¹⁹⁹ Whether he subscribes to an invariant body in general or not, it seems that Merleau-Ponty recognizes at least one anonymity that is at once historical and radically ahistorical—this is the anonymity of sensation, “which remains forever anterior to our perception [*qui reste toujours en deçà de notre perception*]” (PP 238/275).

There are two forms of sensation at play in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, one that he criticizes (call it “substantive” sensation) and one that he endorses (call it “transitive” sensation). The transitive form is conceived under two registers: the phenomenological and the transcendental. Despite what has been said about Merleau-Ponty’s impure transcendental philosophy, he does provide a concept of sensation that seems like a pure a priori, in which case sensation would serve as a condition of perceptual experience. To argue for the *primacy of sensation* in Merleau-Ponty, it is necessary to read closely the Sense Experience chapter of *Phenomenology of Perception* and contrast the notion of

¹⁹⁸ Johanna Oksala, “Female Freedom: Can the Lived Body Be Emancipated?,” in *Feminist Interpretations of Maurice Merleau-Ponty*, eds. Dorothea Olkowski and Gail Weiss (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2006), 212.

¹⁹⁹ Judith Butler, “Sexual Ideology and Phenomenological Description: A Feminist Critique of Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*,” in *The Thinking Muse: Feminism and Modern French Philosophy*, eds. Jeffner Allen and Iris Marion Young (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 95.

sensing (*sentir*)²⁰⁰ developed there with the classical conception of sensation (*sensation*) found in modern philosophy, which Merleau-Ponty critiques in the opening chapter of the *Phenomenology*. The classical notion of sensation views sensations as data, as discrete bits of material received from the external world and processed by the mind into representations. Merleau-Ponty rejects this view as a fiction that betrays the evidence of experience. Merleau-Ponty's positive thinking about sensation is often overshadowed by his critique of sensation as a "unit of experience." This is unfortunate because his own theory of sensing forms the basis of his theory of painting in essays like "Cézanne's Doubt" and "Eye and Mind," and since he proclaims that "any theory of painting is a metaphysics" (EM 171/42), an understanding of his conception of sensing can reveal features of his metaphysical commitments.

The classical conception which he rejects gets reinforced in everyday language when we speak of sensations as discrete properties that cause us to see, for example, a book as red or to feel it as smooth. Red and smooth, we say, belong to the cover of this book, but they affect our senses separately. Color is received by the eyes; texture is apprehended by the fingertips. It is the task of the mind to reassemble these bits of data into representations that correspond to the real world objects that emit them. The problem with this view is that it puts metaphysical prejudices ahead of experience (PP 5/11). As Taylor Carman puts it,

Nowhere in our perceptual awareness do we come across discrete qualitative bits of experience fully abstracted from the external, perceptually coherent environment. [...] This is in part just to say that perceptual experience is *intentional*, that it is of something, whereas impressions, sensations, and sense data are supposed to be the nonintentional stuff from which the mind somehow extracts or constructs an experience of something.²⁰¹

²⁰⁰ *Sentir* denotes at once "to sense" and "to feel" and thus contains, like *sens* (sense, direction), an affective and detective valence. It is synonymous with *percevoir*, which means "to detect."

²⁰¹ Taylor Carman, "Sensation, Judgment, and the Phenomenal Field," in *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, eds. Taylor Carman and Mark B.N. Hansen (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 52.

We perceive *things*, not sensory units. Sensations are inferred from perception when we reflect on how it is that an object, which is “not completely our work,” can transmit its qualities to us (PP 37/46). This line of thinking assumes that objects exist apart from us, fully formed with sharp boundaries and fixed properties. It puts an objectivist metaphysics ahead of the ambiguous content of perception, which for Merleau-Ponty is the first and final arbiter of what exists. “Experience,” writes Carman, “rarely exhibits such sharply defined features...and no analysis of perception into discrete attitudes with crisply defined contents intending isolated qualities can capture the peculiar ‘perceptual milieu’, always at once a ‘behavioral milieu’, in which things show up for us under meaningful aspects.”²⁰² When we attend to what we are actually given, we never discover sensations. Instead, we find figures against backgrounds and semi-determinate bodies which become more determinate via perceptual adumbrations. We find qualities that entice and repel us, a sensible realm that perception “infuses” [*imprègne*] with significance and style (PP 34/43).

What is required is a concept of sensation that does not reduce the style of the sensible to the intentional life of the perceiving subject and which does not completely subject the materiality of sensation, its affective and directive force, to the formality of the understanding. Turning away from the language of sensation, Merleau-Ponty thus begins to speak of sense experience (*le sentir*) as “an experience in which we are given not ‘dead’ qualities, but active ones” (PP 52/64). This is what I am calling the shift from a substantive to a transitive notion of sensation. In Merleau-Ponty’s terms, “Sense experience is that vital communication with the world which makes it present as a familiar setting of our life.” It “invests the quality with vital value, grasping it first in its

²⁰² Carman, “Sensation, Judgment, and the Phenomenal Field,” 54.

meaning for us, for that heavy mass which is our body, whence it comes about that it always involves a reference to the body” (PP 52-53/64-65). By taking sensation to be communal, Merleau-Ponty shows that there is an active and a passive dimension to sensing. By making it a corporeal event, he puts the subject immediately in touch with the object itself.

The insistence that sensing is a bodily event at once active and passive is taken over from Husserl and Straus. In addition to the kinds of sensations that make up the appearance or representation of what we perceive, Husserl’s *Ideas II* describes the role that kinaesthetic sensations play in the constitution of perception. Kinaestheses are the nonrepresentational sensations basic to motility. They denote “one’s inner sense of the movements, tensions and possibilities of one’s own Body,” as Alia Al-Saji puts it. As the body moves about its environment and encounters other bodies, it responds almost automatically to the directives and solicitations communicated to it. This practical know-how, or competence, requires no mediating idea or judgment in order to be executed, although it typically draws on habits. As Al-Saji says, “there is no question of mimesis between kinaestheses and the qualities of the perceived thing. It is rather by moving around things and tracing their contours that kinaestheses make perception, as a concrete dynamic process, possible.”²⁰³ She concludes: “Kinaesthetic sensations are hence a function of my Body’s orientation in the world; they are my way of feeling the active engagement of my Body with an outside.”²⁰⁴

A similar view of the nonrepresentational directive function of sensations is to be found in the work of Erwin Straus, a figure Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology* appeals to

²⁰³ Al-Saji, “The Site of Affect in Husserl’s Phenomenology,” 52.

²⁰⁴ Al-Saji, “The Site of Affect in Husserl’s Phenomenology,” 53.

and whose analysis of sensing clearly influenced the latter's own position. In his *The Primary World of Senses*, Straus argues that Descartes is responsible for the view pervasive that sensations are conscious, mental events. "As mere ideas of color, light, and the like, sensations to Descartes lack any intrinsic contact with physical things. This relationship is only inferred...."²⁰⁵ On this view, the subject has sensations but does not suffer them. This is because the subject that senses, for Descartes, is "removed from time and becoming" and "receives indifferently and unmoved."²⁰⁶ For Straus, this entails the elimination of the "life" of sensing, by which he means its dialogical or communal character as well as its affective valence. He writes:

All sensory impressions are answers to questions; they are not simply there in the way in which the physiological processes underlying them are. We receive sensory impressions insofar as we orient ourselves within our primary relationship with the world by questing, seeking, expecting.²⁰⁷

Sensing and knowing are sharply distinguished in Straus's view. When we know something, we grasp its meaning by suspending our vital commerce and rendering a dispassionate judgment about the thing in question. This image of cognition is analogous to what Merleau-Ponty calls intentionality of act. "Sensing," which is closer to Merleau-Ponty's operative intentionality, is "a sympathetic experiencing. It is directed to the physiognomic characteristics of the alluring and the frightening." Straus writes, in language echoed in *Phenomenology of Perception*,

When we grasp an expression, a communion is established which seizes and changes *us*, which holds and confines us; while in knowing, it is we who seize the world, who appropriate it and detach ourselves from the particular, attaining the full scope of an horizon which, ultimately, we transcend.²⁰⁸

²⁰⁵ Erwin Straus, *The Primary World of Senses*, 7.

²⁰⁶ Straus, *The Primary World of Senses*, 18.

²⁰⁷ Straus, *The Primary World of Senses*, 101.

²⁰⁸ Straus, *The Primary World of Senses*, 200.

We see Straus here appreciating the ambivalence of sensations, their ability to provide us with appearances as well as their capacity to direct and transform our corporeal identities. He even acknowledges their disabling potentiality: “it is just in sensations of pain that we feel the world attacking and invading us.”²⁰⁹ It is this last point that gets covered over when the perceptual field is regarded primarily as a totality of tools or equipment to be handled.

Straus’s theory of sensing is useful here because it brings out the material, vital dimension of sensing that is endorsed by Merleau-Ponty but sometimes overshadowed by the latter’s commitment to describing the body’s instrumental life. Straus demonstrates that the body’s sensibility is neither constituted by a series of passively received stimuli, nor is it the strictly human faculty which projects a spatiotemporal grid into the sensible field. As Renaud Barbaras says of Straus,

sensibility must be apprehended in the form of sensing, understood as a specific mode of relation, as the communication of the living being with a world. Sensing is the mode according to which the living being *as such* is linked with the world (and this is why it defines a common ground between human and animal), it designates the living being’s originary mode of existence.²¹⁰

This is a more naturalistic view of the lived body than we usually find in Merleau-Ponty. Straus’s phenomenology of sensory communion is inflected with a biological perspective adopted, however, by Merleau-Ponty in his *Nature* course at the Collège de France.²¹¹ But it is not so much a biological conception of human embodiment that Straus is concerned with articulating. He is much more interested in drawing a distinction between the affective and cognitive modes of existence, or what he calls the “pathic” and

²⁰⁹ Straus, *The Primary World of Senses*, 208.

²¹⁰ Renaud Barbaras, “Affectivity and Movement: The Sense of Sensing in Erwin Straus,” trans. Elizabeth A. Behnke, *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 3 (2004): 218-219.

²¹¹ See Merleau-Ponty’s discussions of the *Umwelt* and Uexkull in the *Nature* course, 167ff.

“gnostic” modes. These modes correspond for Straus to sensing and perceiving, respectively, and *do not display a continuity*.²¹² Needless to say, Straus spends most of his energy unpacking the mode of sensing, which Barbaras says “corresponds, in fact, to a mode of immediate communication, to a sympathy with the world that does not entail any thematic dimension.”²¹³

Although he does not draw such a definitive distinction between sensing and perceiving, Merleau-Ponty displays a similar concern with the immediate, affective dimension of body-world contact. When describing the transitive form of sensation, or sensation as communion, he refers to sensing as the “primary layer [*couche originaire*]” (PP 238/) of perception. He does not regard sensing as modally distinct from perceiving, although it is not always clear precisely what their relation is. One thing is clear, however: sensation is not just the inferred material of perception or the passive reception of stimuli; it is a material event undergone by the subject and constitutive of the body’s integrity.

A purely physiological perspective cannot capture the phenomenon of sensation because it is blind to intentional dimension of sensing, as the *Phenomenology* says:

Sensation is intentional because I find that in the sensible a certain rhythm of existence is put forward—abduction or adduction—and that, following up this hint, and stealing into the form of existence which is thus suggested to me, I am brought into relation with an external being, whether it be in order to open myself to it or to shut myself off from it. (PP 212-213/247)

As can be gleaned from this passage, “intentionality” does not just denote the fact that all sensory experience is directed toward an object. It suggests that to have a sensation involves being taken into or pushed out of an situation. Intentionality and affectivity are

²¹² Barbaras, “Affectivity and Movement,” 219. Cf. Straus, *The Primary World of Senses*, 211ff.

²¹³ Barbaras, “Affectivity and Movement,” 220.

conflated here. To sense is to be directed by an external object, to be carried or assailed by its rhythm. This is what it means for sensation to have a “motor physiognomy” or “living significance” (PP 209/242-243). If it is the case that “the world ceaselessly assails and beleaguers subjectivity as waves wash round a wreck on the shore” (PP 207/240), then we must regard the directives of sensations as fundamental to the constitution and “power” (*puissance*) of subjectivity (PP 210, 211/244, 245). We will see this theme recurring in some of Levinas’s writings on sensation and aesthetics.

As Alphonso Lingis argues in “The Sensitive Flesh,” sensation for Merleau-Ponty is able to play a part in the arrangement of our subjectivity because sensibility is internally related to our postural schema and the practical objectives it means to accomplish. Lingis writes that “the postural schema is not simply a diagram of the way all the parts are equilibrated: the body does not tend to a state of rest, but tends to maintain a state of tension centered in a particular direction.” This centering is directed by the body’s posture, “that is, the motile way the body centers and converges all its receptor surfaces upon an objective.”²¹⁴ But we also cannot forget that the body “is itself a sensible being that continually schematizes itself, makes a gait of its movement, a gesture of its displacement, makes of each of its here-now particular configurations or positions into a posture or attitude maintaining itself or varying itself continuously.”²¹⁵ This means that the body’s rhythm remains always susceptible to the sympathetic and antipathetic physiognomies of its environment.

For the most part, Merleau-Ponty regards sensing as an amicable affair, the mutual completion of subject and object. He speaks of it, after Straus, as a “sympathetic

²¹⁴ Alphonso Lingis, “The Sensitive Flesh,” in *The Collegium Phaenomenologicum: The First Ten Years*, eds. J.C. Sallis, G. Moneta, and Jacques Taminiaux (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1989), 234.

²¹⁵ Lingis, “The Sensitive Flesh,” 239.

relation” with objects. “Apart from the probing of my eye or my hand, and before my body synchronizes with it, the sensible is nothing but a vague beckoning [*une sollicitation vague*]” (PP 214/248). Despite the fact that consciousness is “saturated” with the sensible, Merleau-Ponty insists that “the sentient and the sensible do not stand in relation to each other as two mutually external terms, and sensation is not an invasion of the sentient by the sensible” (PP 214, 215/247-248).²¹⁶ The tireless influx of sensory stimuli is no affront to the subject’s sensibility, but rather an invitation to mutual animation. Sensation under this rehabilitated model is the primary mode of contact with being, neither completely active nor passive, and the means by which bodies originally respond to one another.

Exactly what Merleau-Ponty means by sensation is perhaps best illustrated when he is writing about painting. The painter, unlike the scientist, is someone who foregoes the manipulation of objects and “returns to the soil of the sensible” (EM 159, 160/9, 12). Bypassing the formal and practical aspects of things, the painter tries to capture the birth of the thing by depicting the self-organization of its qualities and its “internal animation” (EM 182/71). This is possible, says Merleau-Ponty, because the painter’s body is “immersed in the visible” and can be used by the visible to give artistic expression to its many senses (EM 162/17-18). The painter is in the midst of a sensory environment that will direct his or her body’s affective and motor capacities, and so the painter must be willing to lend his or her body to the visible in order to communicate its nascent meaning. And this is precisely what painting is: it is the “transubstantiation” (EM 162/16) of the

²¹⁶ Merleau-Ponty only apparently contradicts this statement later on in the *Phenomenology* (PP 317/367), when he writes, “Hardness and softness, roughness and smoothness, moonlight and sunlight, present themselves in our recollection, not pre-eminently as sensory contents, but as certain kinds of symbiosis, certain ways the outside has of invading us and certain ways we have of meeting this invasion....” The qualification of sensing as a “symbiosis” tempers his use of “invasion” in this passage.

sensible from the sensory field to the canvas, a process which is made possible by complicity of sensitive subject and sensible object.

By situating the painter and painted on the same plane—namely, the visible—Merleau-Ponty is able to collapse the distinction between art and nature, on the one hand, and the distinction between reality and representation, on the other. These distinctions are replaced by a general economy of sensation and expression, which is to say that sensation becomes for Merleau-Ponty the means by which the material and imaginary realms enter into communion. He cites Cézanne in “Cézanne’s Doubt:” “Art is a personal apperception, which I embody in sensations and which I ask the understanding to organize into a painting” (CD 13/22). To do this, the painter must become an articulation of the sensible, the mechanics of which are key to grasping Merleau-Ponty’s nondualist, nonrepresentational theory of painting.

Central to his theory is the idea that painter and painted, the seer and the seen are of the same flesh. In “Cézanne’s Doubt,” there is a flesh of nature, whereas in “Eye and Mind” (which is contemporaneous with *The Visible and the Invisible*) it is the visible/sensible that defines this flesh. In both instances Merleau-Ponty wishes to demonstrate how subject and object participate in a “locus of reversibility”²¹⁷ which allows them to work together to generate the aesthetic dimension of being. In the role of painter, the subject catches onto the rhythm of the visible and allows it to commandeer his or her body’s intentions and gestures. In this way, “the visible world and the world of my motor projects are each total parts of the same Being” (EM 162/17). It is this overlapping of seer and seen, this chiasm of visibility, that disallows us from positing a distinction between the interiority of the subject and the exteriority of the world.

²¹⁷ Michael B. Smith, “Merleau-Ponty’s Aesthetics,” in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, 209.

To understand the act of transubstantiation carried out by the painter, the image to be rendered and the gestures required to render it must be seen as continuous with each other. There cannot be a gap between the sensible and its representation, for this would violate Merleau-Ponty's doctrine of the flesh, which maintains the seer and seen are the two sides of a single visibility (EM 163/19-20). As Michael B. Smith says, "Merleau-Ponty's aesthetics of painting is grounded in a metaphysics of vision, and vision, in turn, in an ontological description of the body subject as a seeing seenness."²¹⁸ Vision is not something controlled by the viewer; it is not at first a form of thought, but rather "‘incited’ [*excitée*] to think by the body" (EM 175/51). For the painter, this thinking is embodied in the painterly gesture itself. The unique contours of the visible spectacle seize upon the painter's body and, catching the painter in a circuit of immanence, induces that body to adopt a physiognomy that expresses the "carnal formula" of the object to be painted. This entire process is made possible by the reversibility of visibility or, more generally, the "duplicity of sensing" (EM 164/23, translation modified) which is the animating principle of both body and world.

Sensing occurs neither inside nor outside the subject. It is a liminal event, and originally responsible for the style adopted by the body and the aesthetic style of the painter. "Style is what orients and shapes in view of a revelation," says de Waelhens.²¹⁹ Before it becomes a defining trait of an artist, or an object of reflection for the artist, it "germinates at the surface of the artist's experience" (ILVS 53/66).²²⁰ The "exigency" of style is compromised by an overly intellectualized encounter with the sensible.

²¹⁸ Smith, "Merleau-Ponty's Aesthetics," 208.

²¹⁹ Alphonse de Waelhens, "Merleau-Ponty: Philosopher of Painting," in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, 178.

²²⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence," in *Signs*.

Intellectualism in philosophy and objectivism in art both eliminate the contingency of experience (PP 38-39/48-49) and thereby undercut its volatility. Our style is our manner of accessing the real or negotiating its rhythms. These rhythms are first received, as directives of *sens*, by sensibility; secondarily they become habits, gestures, clichéd expressions. The problem, for someone concerned with portraying their immediacy, like Cézanne, is to portray these directives as communicated to sensibility—“to make *visible* how the world *touches* us” (CD 19/33)—without imposing a form that is not given by the sensible itself. Instead, the style of the painting should reflect the immanent negotiation of subject and object that takes place at the level of “viscous, equivocal” appearance (CD 17/30), rather than at the level of pragmatic manipulation.²²¹

It is Cézanne’s painting, argues Merleau-Ponty, which is exemplary in its attempt to render perceptual the “chaos of sensations” (CD 13/22). This is why his work is populated by figures which seem to be on the verge of breaking down or losing their form; or, on their way to metamorphosing into an altogether different figure. It attempts to bring to appearance what he refers to as the “unstable, and alien” element of “natural perception” (PP 225/260). Cézanne, says Merleau-Ponty, “wanted to depict matter as it takes on form, the birth of order through spontaneous organization” (CD 13/23). If this organization is to be truly spontaneous, and therefore not mediated by the artifices of technique or idealization, then Cézanne would have to develop a style that matched the immediacy of his theme: the emergent sensory order, or the world as it acquires its contours. “The outline should therefore be a result of the colors if the world is to be given

²²¹ As de Waelhens puts it (“Merleau-Ponty: Philosopher of Painting,” 187), “The painting gives visible presentation to what is not visible for the pragmatic eye, and is normally ‘possessed’ by the sense of contact: movement, volume, lightness, or mass, as they obviously are presented in the work of Degas, for example.”

its true density. For the world is a mass without gaps, a system of colors across which the receding perspective, the outlines, angles, and curves are inscribed like lines of force; the spatial structure vibrates as it is formed” (CD 15/25-26). This conception of spatiality is antithetical to Kant’s in that it makes spatial organization a product of the sensory manifold, thereby locating the principle of animation in the matter, rather than the form, of perception.²²²

How is the painter animated by the sensible? Like his or her chosen subject, the painter possesses a physiognomy that can adapt to the physiognomy or “motif” (CD 17/29) of still-life objects, landscapes, the faces of others, etc. This motif, which is “no more than a combination of colors” (CD 16/27), provides the body of the artist with directives which initiate the creative event, “an event which grips [the] body, and this grip circumscribes the area of [*sens*] to which it has reference” (PP 235/272). Art is not first and foremost an act of symbolism. It is an affective response engendered by the body’s sensibility. The artist’s body “is an object which is *sensitive to* all the rest, which reverberates to all sounds, vibrates to all colors, and provides words [or lines, colors] with their primordial significance through the way in which it receives them” (PP 236/273).

Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of Cézanne suggests a distinction, but not a division, between sensation and perception. This is discernible in his remark that Cézanne breaks with the Impressionists by rejecting the latter’s attempts to “capture, in the painting, the very way in which objects strike our eyes and attack our senses.” This attack, he says, occurs at the level of “instantaneous perception” (CD 11/19) and appears as the “chaos of

²²² “It is necessary that meaning and signs, the form and matter of perception, be related from the beginning and that, as we say, the matter of perception be ‘pregnant with its form’” (PrP 15/48).

sensations” mentioned above. The *Phenomenology of Perception* also implies that sensation is part of perception, but distinguishable from what is ordinarily perceived—whole objects projected against a background and graspable by the body. “What is called sensation is only the most rudimentary of perceptions, and, as a modality of existence, it is no more separable than any other perception from a background which is in fact the world” (PP 241/279). Merleau-Ponty finds continuity (unlike Straus) between sensation and perception because he wants to avoid making the latter the “form” and the former the “matter” of experience. Phenomenologically, no such distinction exists.

Despite his allegiance to the thesis that all consciousness is both directed toward an object and always projected against a horizon of meaning, Merleau-Ponty does concede that a nonintentional form of sensing exists, which he describes as “forever anterior to perception” (PP 238/275). This formulation opens a distinction between sensing and perception and points to an originary, prephenomenological encounter with the sensible. When Merleau-Ponty speaks of the anonymity of the body, it seems to me that it is this encounter—rather than a neutralized conception of embodiment—that he intends. Moreover, this conception of sensibility situates sensing on something like a transcendental level, or in “a kind of original past, a past which has never been present” (PP 242/280). It is into this original past that perception must reach in order to apprehend what is there to perceive. This is because, as Al-Saji argues, “perception lags behind sensibility—so that consciousness and being do not coincide, despite Merleau-Ponty’s claim in the ‘Temporality’ chapter [of *Phenomenology*].”²²³

²²³ Alia Al-Saji, “‘A Past Which Has Never Been Present’: Bergsonian Dimensions in Merleau-Ponty’s Theory of the Prepersonal,” *Research in Phenomenology* 38 (2008): 63.

There is, then, more than a distinction to be drawn between perception and sensation. Sensation and the prepersonal actually take precedence over perception and the personal on Merleau-Ponty's model, even though he usually includes these disparate experiences in the image of perception as communion. There is a fundamental diachrony, or non-coincidence, at the heart of perception that breaks up its synchronization with the sensible. This diachrony is the work of sensation, the "'primary layer' of sense experience" (PP 227/262) "which at once grounds perception and assures its opacity and non-coincidence," in Al-Saji's terms.²²⁴ Upon this ground lie at least three other layers which comprise the perceptual experience. These are outlined in a discussion of hearing.

Admittedly, these layers of sound are only identifiable once the unified experience of listening, say, to a piece of music is analyzed by reflection. After making this phenomenological point, Merleau-Ponty ventures to speculate about the multidimensionality of the sensation of sound itself: "there is an objective sound which reverberates outside me in the instrument, an atmospheric sound which is *between* the object and my body, a sound which vibrates in me 'as if I had become the flute or the clock'; and finally a last stage in which the acoustic element disappears and becomes the highly precise experience of a change permeating my whole body" (PP 227/263). This describes the liminal nature of sensation—it "is *between* the object and my body"—and its capacity to subject the body to transformation. This transformation could manifest itself in dance, which is arguably the most obvious example of the body communing with its sensory environment. However, given Merleau-Ponty's description here, we cannot posit the dance as primary. What comes first is the "objective sound which reverberates outside me in the instrument." This reverberation reaches us in a highly complex

²²⁴ Al-Saji, "'A Past Which Has Never Been Present,'" 47.

situation, against a background of noise and silence, and in principle could drown out this background by reaching an oppressively loud volume. That is, the sound is potentially hostile to the body and the body's communion with its aural environment. This power results from the fact that its liminality places it outside the world *as perceived*: it is there whether anyone is there to perceive it or not.

Since we never experience the pure reverberation of an instrument outside of an aural context, and yet Merleau-Ponty claims that this objective sound occurs in the instrument rather than in our ears, it is helpful to think of our perception of sound or any other sensation as delayed, as Al-Saji does. "We *learn* to perceive according to Merleau-Ponty," she says.²²⁵ The world possesses rhythms that solicit synchronization from our bodies; it challenges us with dissonant rhythms; it meets our bodies' gropings with inconvenient designs and incapacitating rhythms. Our sensory environments are not always ergonomically advantageous: they contain sensations that are "alien" and "unstable," but whose meaning we are nevertheless saturated by (PP 214, 215/248, 249). In a sense, perception "converts the elements of the sensory encounter into recognizable and representable identities" and effects a "transformation of the inherent ambiguity and intertwining of the sensory—a transformation that the sensory suggests but as a result of which it comes to be overlaid and forgotten qua sensory life."²²⁶ On this reading, sensory life becomes the virtual dimension of perceptual life. Always beyond the reach of perception, but nevertheless serving as the "unreflective fund" (PP 242/280) that provides it with phenomenal content, the sensory life of the body must be seen as the anonymous, objective ground of any actualized perception. In Al-Saji's words,

²²⁵ Al-Saji, "A Past Which Has Never Been Present," 55.

²²⁶ Al-Saji, "A Past Which Has Never Been Present," 58.

Perception may be a prospective actualization, but it is experienced as the discovery of what was always already there. It is this anteriority that makes objects appear real to us—our experience of their presence being given though their inexhaustibility and alterity. This inexhaustibility is due to the coexistence and non-coincidence of rhythms in sensory life, a life which at once constitutes the ground of perceptual experience while being irreducible to perceptual form. What allows the experience of anteriority to be more than an illusion for Merleau-Ponty is that it relies on, and holds the trace of, a more original delay—that of sensory life as forever past with respect to perception.²²⁷

So it is not so much that Merleau-Ponty subscribes to the view that there is an anonymous body subtending the historically and culturally inscribed body, but that he acknowledges a carnal sensibility which cannot be exhausted by consciousness. This sensibility is basic to the prepersonal identity of the body, and thus is constitutive of an “unconscious” dimension of subjectivity. Put otherwise, only a portion of what the lived body senses makes its way into perception, and even less becomes the object of reflection. When Merleau-Ponty writes that “Perception is always in the mode of the impersonal ‘One’” (PP 240/277), we have to take this to mean that perception is at every moment the renewal of the synthetic act²²⁸ which reaches into the past while projecting into the future in order to fix the object of perception before us. Perception is an “ever-recurrent failure” [*échec perpétuel*] to hold onto what is given in sensation (PP 240/277).

Perception apprehends a phenomenal field which is “never presented in any other way than integrated into a configuration and already ‘patterned’ [*mise en forme*]” (PP 159/186). Following Gestalt principles, this basically means that no sense experience happens outside of the horizon subtended by my personal intentional arc and the historico-cultural horizon in which I am always situated. However, this phenomenal field

²²⁷ Al-Saji, “‘A Past Which Has Never Been Present’,” 67.

²²⁸ This is not an act of judgment, but the work of operative intentionality, or what Husserl calls “passive synthesis.” Speaking of this synthesis, Merleau-Ponty writes: “What is called passivity is not the acceptance by us of an alien reality, or a causal action exerted upon us from the outside: it is being encompassed, being in a situation—prior to which we do not exist—which we are perpetually resuming and which is constitutive of us” (PP 427/488).

cannot be identical to the field engaged immediately by the senses, for the latter is marked by a singularity which resists entry into the intentional horizon. Sensibility, then, remains bound to a prepersonal field wherein “each sensation, being strictly speaking, the first, last and only one of its kind, is a birth and a death” of the body which encounters it.

Moreover,

the subject who experiences it begins and ends with it, and as he can neither precede nor survive himself, sensation necessarily appears to itself in a setting of generality, its origin anterior to myself, it arises from *sensibility* which has preceded it and which will outlive it, just as my birth and death belong to a natality and a mortality which are anonymous. (PP 216/250)

The carnality of the subject inhabits two distinct spheres, the practico-personal, on the one hand, and the sensual-impersonal, on the other.

The tension between the personal and impersonal body is palpable in Merleau-Ponty’s reluctance to disengage sensation from perception, and potentially allow the former to devolve into the formless data of the empiricists or the pure sensory manifold of Kant. This is why sensation appears sometimes as a rudimentary form of perception (thus guaranteeing its inherent form) and at other times as the transcendental condition of perception (which ensures Merleau-Ponty’s anti-idealist credentials). In the last analysis, Merleau-Ponty wants to maintain the primacy of perception while at the same time championing its irreducibly carnal dimension—which is clearly endorsed in his analysis of Cézanne’s painting and its ability to express the dialogue of physiognomies which is the body-world relation. By contrast, if there is a truly anonymous and preperceptual form of sensing acknowledged in the *Phenomenology*, then there is reason to suggest that the sensations undergone by the body’s organs house an a priori that is better depicted by

the Impressionists, however speculative or nonphenomenological their aesthetic might be.

As Merleau-Ponty tells us, Cézanne breaks with the Impressionists because the latter try to portray how objects strike our senses (CD 11-14/19-23). The Impressionists, then, are wont to paint what would be the pure a priori of perception, or sensation, whereas Cézanne's painting exhibits nature as it emerges into an organized form. On this reading, the Impressionists would be the painters of the "non-thetic, pre-objective, and pre-conscious experience" that depicts "sensation as a private phenomenon" (PP 242/279). It is this private sphere that is most problematic from the perspective of perception, which "The Primacy of Perception" determines to be a fundamentally intersubjective experience (PrP 17-18, 26-27/52, 70-71). As Merleau-Ponty writes in "The Philosopher and His Shadow:"

The fact is that sensible being, which is announced to me in my most strictly private life, summons up within that life all other corporeality. It is the being which reaches me in my most secret parts, but which I also reach in its brute or untamed state, in an absolute of presence which holds the secret of the world, others, and what is true. (Shadow 171/215)

Sensation, then, appears problematic because it harbors a form of solipsism. The touch of sensation opens the body to the world of objects, others, and communication. But in itself it cannot be represented or articulated. The problem of solipsism raised by the "aesthesiological" is resolvable only when it is assimilated to perception, for perception, writes Merleau-Ponty, "is never a matter of anything but co-perception. I see that this man over there sees, as I touch my left hand while it is touching my right" (Shadow 170/215). As he will write elsewhere, perception is always already *reversible*. If there is

solipsism, then it must be wrested from the intersubjective sphere and therefore no solipsism at all.

Merleau-Ponty's entire critique of sensation derives from the observation that we do not really encounter much of what the classical empiricists and rationalists say we do. For the most part, he is right: we do not perceive sense impressions or sense data. We perceive things. Against classical theory he claims that we only arrive at the imperceptible through analysis, which must necessarily begin with the perceptible. This may be true phenomenologically, but it does not foreclose the possibility that, ontologically speaking, perception is a derivative experience, subtended by a more rudimentary form of embodiment.

Merleau-Ponty acknowledges the existence of imperceptible encounters with things, which is why I think the realist strand of his analysis of sensing supports the thesis that perception derives from the transitive form of sensation. When he speaks of the sound reverberating in the instrument before it reaches the ears of the listener, he acknowledges the primacy of a liminal sensory atmosphere: here lies the anonymity of sensory experience that saturates our bodies and cannot be recuperated by the subject-object dialogue. The concept of flesh develops this anonymous sensibility into a general theory of carnal being.

The flesh (*la chair*) radicalizes insights from the *Phenomenology* by replacing its residual subject-object dualism with a monistic account of the sensible. Our bodies and the bodies of others (humans and nonhumans) are said to only achieve full expression through the co-constitutive dialogue of perception. This dialogue is made possible because both subject and object belong to a common "element," the sensible as such, or the flesh. It is this element that brings together while at the same time separating the poles of perception: "the thickness of flesh between seer and the thing is constitutive for

the thing of its visibility as for the seer of his corporeity” (VI 135/178). The separation of bodies, then, is derivative of the fundamental narcissism at the heart of the sensible. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, it is no longer perception that gives birth to discrete objects, but the so-called dehiscence (*écart*) of the flesh. Dehiscence is the name Merleau-Ponty uses to describe the fission of the sensible into sentient body and sensible world; it denotes the coiling back or enfolding performed in vision:

[The flesh] is the coiling over of the visible upon the seeing body, of the tangible upon the touching body, which is attested in particular when the body sees itself, touches itself seeing and touching the things, such that, simultaneously, *as* tangible it descends among them, *as* touching it dominates them all and draws this relationship and even this double relationship from itself, by dehiscence or fission of its own mass. (VI 146/191-192)

At bottom, it is the dehiscence of flesh that constitutes my body as an individual that senses (VI 140/185) and can assume a distance from what is perceived. Since individuation results from the separation (*écart*) of the flesh understood as a single element, it entails a kind of reversibility between bodies. At the crossing where reversibility occurs, “perception is born” (VI 154/202).

By “reversible,” Merleau-Ponty means that at any moment the one who sees can become the one seen, or the one who touches can become the touched. The possibility of a passive body becoming active or an active body becoming passive is immanent to embodiment as such. He holds that the reversibility of the sensible is analogous to what happens when I touch my left hand with my right. This is the narcissistic element of the flesh: “the seer and the visible reciprocate one another and we no longer know which sees and which is seen” (VI 139/183). Sensing is here attributed not to individual subjects who exist apart from their worlds, but to the flesh as a substance that divides itself into

sensible and sentient beings.²²⁹ Thus, sensing takes on less humanistic form. Merleau-Ponty explicitly points out that the presumed reversibility of sensible and sentient is always imminent, never accomplished (VI 147/194). In other words, my left and right hands cannot both be touching each other at the same time; one of the pair must play the role of passive object while the other actively senses. More generally, sentient/subjective and sensible/objective never fully synchronize.

The impossible coincidence at the center of reversibility is, in part, a product of the analogy of self-touching employed by Merleau-Ponty. It does not seem to apply to what we typically consider an intercorporeal relation, however. Nor does it apply universally to sensing. For instance, smelling, tasting, and hearing do not bear the kind of symmetry necessary for reversibility. Sure, I can be smeller or smelled, but the scent that invades my nose is in no position to take in my scent. The same could be said of a taste or sound. These sensations are more invasive than the tactile and give us a good idea of the basically irreversible or dissymmetrical nature of sensing. Something like a handshake, by contrast, appears to offer a better analogy for reversibility.²³⁰ But even the handshake proves irreversible—perhaps it is exemplarily irreversible—since the strength and delicacy of the persons shaking will most likely be disproportionate. This is why Beata Stawarska argues that the flesh performs a “massive reduction of the specifically *intersubjective* experience of the body manifest in an encounter with another embodied

²²⁹ This is the primary dualism, it seems to me, of *The Visible and the Invisible*. It is not clear, however, how the flesh becomes sentient or why some beings achieve sentience while others remain merely sensible. “For if the body is a thing among things, it is so in a stronger and deeper sense than they,” Merleau-Ponty asserts. (VI 137/181). It seems possible to overcome this dualism by broadening the scope of sentience to include any entity that can receive sensory stimulation. If this stimulation is regarded as an objective event, and is not confined to the interior life of humans or other animals, then we can begin to speak of the sensations experienced by inanimate objects. I will argue for a broadened view of sensation in Chapter 4 below.

²³⁰ Merleau-Ponty defends this point in VI 142/187: “The handshake too is reversible; I can feel myself touched as well and at the same time as touching.”

person to the corporeal dynamic operative within the body proper.”²³¹ Self-touching offers us a helpful image of reflection, but not an accurate account of the intercorporeal encounter.

The experience of the handshake illustrates that intercorporeal touching and self-touching maintain a basic difference. The handshake exhibits an *exchange* of sensations that is not present, in the case of self-touching, when I shift my attention and convert my touched hand into the hand doing the touching. As Stawarska writes, “What distinguishes the intercorporeal relation from the intracorporeal one is that the passivity of my hand touched by the other—unlike the passivity of my hand that I touch—*cannot reverse into an activity (of touching) for me*, even though I can respond to the other touching me by touching them in turn.”²³² The idea that bodies are reversible assumes that any passive relation is potentially convertible into an active relation, even if this reversal is an impossible one.²³³ (Torture and death are exemplary here.) Such a presupposition effectively neglects a fundamental feature of violence: the bilateral nature of the sensations exchanged. Bilateralism is precisely what makes intercorporeity irreversible.

Rewriting the Cartesian cogito, Merleau-Ponty argues that the subject is an “I can” [*je peux*] before it is an “I think” (PP 137/160). But this formulation is only partially true, because the subject is also equally an “I can’t,” a perpetually constrained

²³¹ Beata Stawarska, “From the Body Proper to the Flesh: Merleau-Ponty on Intersubjectivity,” in *Feminist Interpretations of Maurice Merleau-Ponty*, 92.

²³² Stawarska, “From Body Proper to the Flesh,” 99.

²³³ Elie Wiesel illustrates and emphasizes this point in a passage from *Night*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), 53, which recounts his experience in a WWII German concentration camp: “One day when Idek was venting his fury, I happened to cross his path. He threw himself on me like a wild beast, beating me in the chest, on my head, throwing me to the ground and picking me up again, crushing me with ever more violent blows, until I was covered in blood. As I bit my lips in order not to howl with pain, he must have mistaken my silence for defiance and so he continued to hit me harder and harder. Abruptly, he calmed down and sent me back to work as if nothing had happened. As if he had taken part in a game in which both roles were of equal importance.”

actor whose abilities cannot be privileged over its inabilities. Nowhere is this more evident than in the disabled body or the corpse. If the subject, on Merleau-Ponty's model, is to be identified with the body in all of its materiality (not just the body insofar as it is animated by an incorporeal consciousness or mind, i.e., the lived body), then each of the body's manifestations must be taken into consideration when embodied subjectivity is in question. Moreover, the intercorporeal relation cannot just be the site where perception is born. It must also serve as the site where perception disintegrates.

Merleau-Ponty does not completely neglect the reality of violence; he at least recognizes the inherent vulnerability of the body in the face of the other. Not unlike Sartre, who theorizes the gaze of the other as an instrument of objectification or seizure, Merleau-Ponty considers how the presence of the other entails a conflict of interpretations where the truth of the object is concerned (PrP 18/53). Just as I do, the other seizes his or her grip on objects and appropriates them in the system of holds that make up their own practical horizon. My body, too, can be seized by perception. Merleau-Ponty speaks of a "passive vision...as in the case of a dazzling light," wherein perception is rendered incapable of making sense of what is seen (PP 315/364). He recognizes the impact of pain and fatigue on our capacity for action (PP 441/504; SB 189/204). Ultimately, he will define the freedom of the body negatively as "tolerance" of institutional and physical stimuli, thus eschewing the ideal of a pure subject who remains invulnerable to material forces (PP 454/518).

In order to accurately portray intercorporeity (especially its violent form), a strong notion of irreversibility or alterity must be provided. This does not mean that reciprocity should be deemed impossible between bodies (which seems to be implied in Levinas's

ontology, as we will see in Chapter 3). What we need is a model that allows bodies a distance from each other, but also enables them to exchange a common currency and participate in a common economy. I think we can understand sensations as providing this currency. Moreover, I think Merleau-Ponty noticed this possibility. It is present in his recognition of sensation as the past that never presents itself to perception; it is there in his acknowledgement of the affective quality of sensing (PP 53/65). These are the moments of divergence and diachrony in Merleau-Ponty, places where he rejects the happy alliance of body and world. The dehiscence of the flesh, what Hass calls the “constitutive difference in the fabric of experience,”²³⁴ offers another form divergence. But if it is not the work of perception, then the mechanism of this folding of the sensible remains a metaphysical mystery. In the *Phenomenology* it is time that drives the dehiscence of being, but time is conceived there as “born of my relation with things” (PP 412, 426/471, 487, translation modified). Merleau-Ponty’s later philosophy does not provide us with a metaphysical explanation of dehiscence or an adequate account of how bodies are *individuated* from out of the singular flesh of being.²³⁵

Merleau-Ponty acknowledges that the (real or apparent) gap between entities never reaches closure; that is, reversibility is “always imminent” (VI 147/194). Nevertheless, his analyses most often suggest the possibility of convergence: the subject is always on the way to better understanding the object; the left hand is always on the verge of touching instead of being touched; perception is perpetually on its way to

²³⁴ Hass, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy*, 129.

²³⁵ The idea that the flesh is “narcissistic” does not help explain the individuation of bodies, which seems to me to be a major shortcoming of *The Visible and the Invisible’s* metaphysics. To explain individuation and intercorporeal conflict, we would need a story about how and why the narcissistic flesh turns against itself and, ultimately, destroys the bodies that emerge out of it.

expression.²³⁶ This faith in reversibility effectively misrepresents, once again, the intercorporeal relation by mitigating the volatility introduced by the transcendence of the other. Levinas would say that Merleau-Ponty's ontology ultimately reduces the other to the same and that reversibility denotes a relation whose "terms are indifferently read from left to right and from right to left" and which has been reduced to a "simple correlation" (TI 35/5).

Levinas's charge is a bit hyperbolic in the case of Merleau-Ponty since the latter's treatment of intersubjectivity cannot be reduced to a simple correlationism and, indeed, actively works to overcome such a reduction. He does, however, tend to subordinate what Levinas calls the "enigma of sensation-feeling [*l'énigme sensation-sentiment*]"²³⁷ to the competent grasp [*prise*] of perception. Merleau-Ponty writes:

my body, as the system of holds on the world, founds the unity of the objects which I perceive, in the same way the body of the other...tears itself away from being one of my phenomena, offers me the task of true communication, and confers on my objects the new dimension of intersubjective being or, in other words, of objectivity. (PrP 18/53)

The world is not what eludes my grasp; the other is not what threatens my subjectivity. Both of these offer possibilities for being because they belong to the phenomenal field which is open before me and essentially synchronized with my body's practical horizon. Between seer and seen there is "an intimacy as close as between the sea and the strand" (VI 130-131/173).²³⁸

²³⁶ As Fred Evans, "'Solar love': Nietzsche, Merleau-Ponty, and the Fortunes of Perception," *Continental Philosophy Review* 31 (1998): 178, points out, this is not a typical teleology. "The 'imminent coincidence' that haunts the chiasms of the flesh is less restrictive than the teleological form of convergence; it acknowledges only that flesh tends (though without success) to rejoin itself and does not specify more particular horizons that must be fulfilled. But imminent coincidence still serves to ensure stability and the community suggested by the idea of a common flesh."

²³⁷ Levinas, "Sensibility," 66/171.

²³⁸ Irigaray, commenting on the privilege of the seer and visibility in Merleau-Ponty, writes the following: "A carnal look, which becomes that which gives perspective to 'things': shelters them, gives birth to them,

The ideal of reversibility fails to notice that sensation, even in Merleau-Ponty's own terms, is precisely what cannot become phenomenal if phenomenality is synonymous with perception. Sensation remains forever out of step with the unfolding of perception; it is the dark side of visibility and ideality, what gives birth to perception and, perhaps, what accounts for its disintegration.

If we are going to talk about the centrality of the body, then it is necessary to attend to every aspect of its environmental sensitivity, the physiological as well as the phenomenal, insofar as this sensitivity gives rise to the corporeal structures that inform the contours of our perceptual and practical engagements. A neglect of the autonomy of sensation, by which I mean the sensible events which take place below the level of intentional consciousness and which remain "unstable" and "alien" (PP 225/260-261)²³⁹ can only hinder a philosophy that seeks to overcome the conceit of an idealism which refuses to recognize the corporeal dimension of subjectivity, freedom, and responsibility. Despite whether sensation is a viable phenomenological concept or not, it is necessary to conceptualizing embodiment. And we risk misconception when we overemphasize the constitutive activity of the subject, or when we reject its susceptibility, incompetence, disintegration, and mechanical or autonomic²⁴⁰ responses.

wraps them in the touch of a visibility that is one with them, keeps them from ever being naked, envelops them in a conjunctive tissue of visibility, an exterior-interior horizon in which, henceforth, they appear without being able to be distinguished, separated, or torn away from it." The privileging of vision effects a "reduction of the tactile to the visible" and fulfills a form of "idealism, under its material, carnal aspects." Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 153-154; 175.

²³⁹ "Sensory experience [*l'expérience sensorielle*] is unstable, and alien to natural perception, which we achieve with our whole body all at once, and which opens on a world of inter-acting senses [*un monde intersensoriel*]."

²⁴⁰ I am thinking here of the function of our autonomic nervous system, which for the most part regulates organ function and controls the body's homeostasis. It is possible to see proprioception as a form of autonomic regulation and to consider the sensory life of the body as a predominantly autonomic system.

Merleau-Ponty's privileging of perception entails a misrepresentation of how the body's identity is informed by its sensory environment. He endorses the dialogical notion of identity offered by Cézanne. Though instructive, this view does not do justice to the irreversibility of sensation. The pixelated images of the Impressionists, by contrast, may offer us a better representation. Impressionism gives something like a snapshot of sensation; it captures the sensory event which, "strictly speaking," is "the first, last and only one of its kind, is a birth and death" (PP 216/250). These images ring false from a phenomenological perspective, but this is because the latter eschews speculation, preferring to derive ontology from what is given to consciousness. For a philosopher like Merleau-Ponty—unlike, say, Hume—the chaos of sensation can only be hypothesized from the more coherent world of perception, which is why he favors Cézanne over the Impressionists. But once again, Cézanne is a painter of reversibility, of sensing taken as an amicable dialogue. He bypasses the immediacy of sensation.

One of the problems here is to theorize the distance between bodies without succumbing to the allure of absolute transcendence, as Levinas does. Failure to concede the continuity or immanence of the intercorporeal realm results in a failure to capture the demands communicated directly to the subject by the sensory environment. A notion of sensible directives or immanent imperatives is crucial to understanding the emergence of the body's competence and integrity. There are solicitations issued by the environment that the body *must respond to* in order to effectively adapt. Thus, they are more than mere solicitations: they are *imperatives*.²⁴¹ Sometimes these responses are pleasurable, sometimes painful. They can end in bodily obliteration, which is an extreme form of

²⁴¹ On the carnal form of the imperative, its practical and ethical force, see Lingis, *The Imperative*. I will expand on this theme below.

incompetence but nonetheless a form of responsiveness. Merleau-Ponty appreciates this to some degree, but he mitigates the imperceptible quality of sensation, its objective power, and pathologizes the vulnerability of the body. The tension between sensation and perception, which is clearly evinced in excessive or limit situations that threaten the coherence of perception and the organizational capacity of the body's schemata, is passed over in favor of a more sympathetic reciprocity or the ideal of "maximum clarity"/"optimum balance" in perception (PP 318/367).²⁴²

Merleau-Ponty's philosophy has the virtue of being grounded in the carnality of life, and it does so without submitting to physicalism. Indeed, the depth of his phenomenological descriptions are borne out of the concrete practices of the self as it engages other bodies, human and nonhuman. The ontogenetic narrative Merleau-Ponty tells about the subject's embodiment, which is first and foremost a story of the body's anonymity and passivity, is grounded in the sensitivity of the body, what we could call its *carnal sensibility*. This sensibility is at work in the sensuous communion of subject and object in *Phenomenology of Perception*; it is at the heart of *The Visible and the Invisible*'s notions of flesh, chiasm, and *écart*; and it is crucial to the psychogenesis of the child in "The Child's Relations with Others" and his analyses of Cézanne's style of painting. The problem we are left with is how to disengage the notion of carnal sensibility—which is anonymous and productive of the body's organizational capacity rather than its product—from the intentional structure(s) of perception. Only after sensibility is differentiated from perception can we understand both the passivity of the body and its nonintentional responsiveness to sensations, that is, its obedience to the immanent directives embedded in the environment.

²⁴² For further critique of convergence, cf. Evans, "'Solar Love,'" section 4.

Reading Merleau-Ponty, it is easy to get the impression that the body is operating as a tool or prosthesis of consciousness, rather than as a post-Cartesian surrogate. This is because he sometimes speaks of perception or consciousness as though they were not identical to the body: “Consciousness is being-towards-the-thing through the intermediary of the body” (PP 138-139/161). In his more radical formulations we *are* our bodies, nothing more. Establishing a nonreductive version of this identification of self and body is the most promising prospect of working through Merleau-Ponty’s ontology.

To overcome modern dualism, it is necessary that he collapse consciousness and body. If we are going to avoid conceiving the body as merely a vessel for the mind or consciousness or perception, there cannot be any mysterious elements of subjectivity or suspicious gaps between subject and world. This means emptying transcendence from ontology, something Merleau-Ponty only begins to accomplish in his unfinished later work. The challenge is formulated by Deleuze in *Pure Immanence* when he says that “consciousness becomes a fact only when a subject is produced at the same time as its object, both being outside the field and appearing as ‘transcendents’.”²⁴³ In other words, a truly immanent ontology, like the one championed by the primacy of perception thesis or the ontology of the flesh, has to embrace an impersonal transcendental field, one free from the syntheses of a subject and the configurations of intentionality.

Merleau-Ponty’s treatment of sensing in *Phenomenology of Perception* is the most promising concept upon which to develop an immanent conception of embodiment. Here we find a concept of sensibility that reverses the Kantian view which maintains the formality of the subject’s aesthetic faculty. Merleau-Ponty provides us with the means to envision sensibility as a kind of material transcendental. Recasting the continuities and

²⁴³ Gilles Deleuze, *Pure Immanence: Essays on a Life*, trans. Anne Boyman (New York: Zone, 2001), 26.

discontinuities of the intercorporeal relation in terms of sensations and affects, rather than perception or flesh, resolves many of the problems raised by Merleau-Ponty's carnal ontology. Indeed, his reversibility thesis is more persuasive when we distinguish the sensible and perceptual life of the body, and restrict reversibility to the level of perception while assigning an irreducible alterity to sensing.

The relation between perception and sensation has a double character. In one sense, these two activities are coextensive; in another sense, perception is the product of sensation, the latter serving as the "rudimentary" form of the former (PP 241/279). A tension between the impersonal, nonintentional layer of experience (sensation) and the personal, intentional (perception) arises at this point. If perception is given primacy in this tension, then experience must be always regarded as organized by the telos of our intentional arc. By the same token, if sensation is cast as the most basic form of perception, it can only appear as phenomenal and, in some sense, coordinated by the subject. But certainly there are sensations received by the body (what Leibniz would call *petites perceptions*)²⁴⁴ that are never elevated to the level of consciousness and remain at the level of proprioceptive information.²⁴⁵ Merleau-Ponty insists that every perception has something anonymous about it and that this is linked to the body's habits and schemata as well its "unsophisticated" (i.e., sensory) life (PP 238/275). Therefore, to

²⁴⁴ In Leibniz's philosophy of mind, *petites perceptions* are perceptions which are not apperceived, that is, are in a sense "unconscious." Macroperception, or perception of things, is said to arise from aggregates of these microperceptions. See the Preface to G.W. Leibniz, *New Essays on Human Understanding*, eds. Peter Remnant and Jonathan Bennett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

²⁴⁵ Proprioception is the body's means of maintaining its posture and keeping aware of its ecological positioning. Gallagher distinguishes proprioceptive awareness, a conscious process, from proprioceptive information, a nonconscious process. The latter is denoted as "the result of physiological stimuli activating certain proprioceptors, but not consciously experienced by the subject. On this view, proprioceptive information, generated at peripheral proprioceptors and registered at strategic sites in the brain, but below the threshold of consciousness, operates as part of the system that constitutes the body schema. This aspect of proprioception is not something we can be directly aware of." *How the Body Shapes the Mind*, 46. On a certain Leibnizianism in Merleau-Ponty, see Barbaras, who does not introduce the notion of *petites perceptions* or Leibniz's perception-apperception distinction (*The Being of the Phenomenon*, chapter 13).

delimit the sensory life of the body and see how it functions transcendently for perception, it is necessary to remain open to speculation about the “impersonal ‘One’” (PP 240/277) whose sensations condition the perceptual life of the phenomenological subject.

CHAPTER 3

TRANSCENDENTAL AESTHETICS AND THE SUSCEPTIBILITY OF THE BODY

*Even when unformed, or deformed, by knowing,
sensible intuition can revert to its own meaning.*
– Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*

In Levinas's philosophy of the body we find an explicit commitment to the primacy of sensation that is only implicit in Merleau-Ponty. Levinas's analyses of embodiment display a marked interest in the materiality of the subject, which is most evident in his remarks about sensation and the affective life of the I, as well as in his critique of intentionality and opposition to phenomenological method. In his early texts *Existence and Existents*, *Time and the Other*, and *Totality and Infinity* this materialism appears through an ontogenetic account of the emergence of subjectivity; later, in *Otherwise than Being*, it is via accounts of sensibility and vulnerability that we find Levinas defending a materialist ontology. It is in the later work that Levinas's emphasis on the vulnerability of the body—i.e., its susceptibility to wounding—goes too far in its appreciation of the reality of violence. The enabling aspects of the body-world relation are overshadowed by the exigency of violence that Levinas sees as basic to intersubjectivity. Here I will not rehearse the drama of the same and the Other (*autrui*)²⁴⁶ which dominates Levinas's ethics, but I will reinscribe Levinas's phenomenology into the discourse of ontology and focus on the significance of sensation in this ontology. This is admittedly an heretical reading of Levinas, but one that is not forced upon him.

²⁴⁶ Following convention, when I capitalize "Other," I am referring to the human other. Otherwise, "other" refers to otherness generally, whatever is not-I.

Levinas is not the first person invoked when the philosophy of the body is up for discussion. His exploration of embodiment is not as broad as Merleau-Ponty's; it is certainly less direct. To unpack Levinas's ontology of the body the theme must be approached obliquely through his treatment of concepts like sensibility, alimentation, fecundity, living from, and enjoyment. These concepts and others fall into line with Levinas's general concern with affectivity. As does sensation: following Merleau-Ponty, Levinas affirms sensation as basic to embodiment and the constitution of subjectivity. He goes further than Merleau-Ponty in pursuing sensation as a transcendental phenomenon, however. His analyses of sensation and sensibility try to fully appreciate the primacy of sensation and, in particular, its materiality.²⁴⁷

Claiming that Levinas is engaged in ontology is contentious because so much of the force of his philosophy operates as an evasion of ontology. This is because he regards ontology as fundamentally violent toward beings in their singularity. Instead of approaching beings as unique individuals, ontology subsumes, or "totalizes," their uniqueness under a general system, thus reducing their otherness. To avoid this violence, Levinas consistently argues that ethics, rather than ontology, is first philosophy. This means that we maintain a peaceful, responsible, and heteronomous relation to the Other which is prior to our representation or understanding of him or her. Civil discourse forms the basis of the community of knowers, and therefore is the condition of possibility of any theory of being or epistemology (TI 72-77/44-49).²⁴⁸

²⁴⁷ When I speak of Levinas's "materialism," I mean that his descriptions of embodiment display a marked concern for the physicality of subjectivity. But, of course, he is not interested in properly physiological or mechanistic accounts of bodily action. Instead, he offers us a phenomenology of things like nourishment, effort, and labor. If his approach on this score is close to another materialist, it is perhaps Marx.

²⁴⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, "Is Ontology Fundamental?", in *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 7-9.

The thrust of Levinas's argument depends on a particular construal of ontology. Levinas can assign a priority to ethics only if he understands ontology as an epistemological endeavor. It is only if he construes discourse as basically an expressive/revelatory affair, and ontology as a theory of our *knowledge* of being (and the being of Others), that he is able to claim the ethical relation—which is, at bottom, a relation between beings—as a non-ontological condition.²⁴⁹ He writes in *Totality and Infinity* about how ontology “reduces the other to the same” by making the Other appear through a “third term, a neutral term, which is itself not a being” (TI 42/12). This third term, through which the “shock of the encounter of the same with the other is deadened” is the theory of being, or ontology understood as a system of knowledge about being. Prior to any conceptualization of the Other, Levinas argues, is the “calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other,” or ethics (TI 43/13). But is not this calling into question an event that requires us to understand its conditions and terms? That is, is it not necessary for us to comprehend the constitution of the subject and the Other in order to realize the force of ethics?

I think Levinas's critique of ontology is strongest when it is seen as an internal critique of prior ontologies, rather than as an evasion of ontology. Moreover, it seems that Levinas's position would be strengthened if he would allow that what he calls ethics is actually endemic to ontology. On this reading, our understanding of ourselves, Others, and our basic relationality would be seen as at least equiprimordial with, if not prior to,

²⁴⁹ In his defense of Levinas's critique of ontology, Heidegger in particular, Manning conflates, like Levinas, “ontology” with “knowledge of Being” in order to argue his case. But this conflation reduces the autonomy of being, or existence in general, to what can be known about being. Manning writes, for instance, “In Heidegger's ontology...ethics cannot be subordinated to knowledge of Being because within the knowledge of Being as Heidegger depicts it there is a distinct ethical moment such that Heideggerian ontology includes very significant ethical content.” See Robert John Sheffler Manning, *Interpreting Otherwise than Heidegger: Emmanuel Levinas's Ethics as First Philosophy* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1993). 95.

our ethical responsibility.²⁵⁰ This reading gains plausibility when we consider that it is not possible to see what is “called into question” by the Other until we have laid bare the constitution of the egocentric subject—the individual who cultivates a life of enjoyment and material security.

An understanding of the ontology that informs Levinas’s theory of the subject is essential for contrasting Levinasian and Kantian ethics.²⁵¹ It is through a rejection of the Kantian subject as an immaterial agent that Levinas is able to make his case for the vulnerability of the subject and, consequently, the ethical responsibility entailed in that vulnerability. Levinas argues in *Existence and Existents* that the Kantian subject, the transcendental ego, remains always at a distance from the effects of the world. As that which allows things to appear and be apprehended by cognition, the Kantian ego presents “a way of relating to events while still being able to not be caught up in them. To be a [Kantian] subject is to be a power of unending withdrawal, an ability always to find oneself behind what happens to one” (EE 42/77). The Levinasian subject, by contrast, is caught up in, *produced* as an “ontological event” by the world. Indeed, the entirety of *Existence and Existents* can be read as the tale of the subject’s emergence from bare existence, the taking up of a “position” in what Levinas calls the *il y a* (EE 66-67, 88/120, 149; TI 175/149). This positioning is the material substantialization, or “separation,” of the subject, which is recounted in *Totality and Infinity* in terms of the body which enjoys, nourishes, and “lives from” (*vivre de*) the world: “Enjoyment accomplishes the atheist separation: it deformatizes the notion of separation, which is not a cleavage made in the

²⁵⁰ David Wood, “Some Questions for My Levinasian Friends,” in *Addressing Levinas*, eds. Eric Sean Nelson, Antje Kapust, and Kent Still (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2005), argues that “we cannot separate ontology from ethics” (156) and also displays some of Levinas’s basic ontological prejudices, like his Cartesian notion of substance (158).

²⁵¹ For an account of Levinas’s affinity with Kantian ethical theory, see Catherine Chalié, *What Ought I to Do? Morality in Kant and Levinas*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002).

abstract, but the existence at home with itself as an autochthonous I. The soul...dwells in what is not itself, but it acquires its own identity by this dwelling in the 'other'" (TI 115/88). At bottom, it is the "invulnerability" of the subject—interpreted as an untraversable distance separating subject and world—in the face of affection that Levinas objects to in Kant.²⁵² It is in this context that Levinas will highlight the affectivity, and ultimately the a priori vulnerability, of the subject.

The story of the emergence of the embodied subject, especially in *Totality and Infinity* but in other texts as well, is guided by the concept of enjoyment (*jouissance*). It is precisely the being that enjoys life—and is individuated as a responsive agent by this enjoyment—that is summoned by the Other to respond. So what does it mean to enjoy, then? The analysis of enjoyment is wrapped up with companion concepts like living from, nourishment, alimentation, and need. These concepts possess physiological and phenomenological senses, both of which Levinas attends to. The scope of enjoyment is not restricted to what can be consumed, nor is it interpreted as a phenomenon that is exclusively attached to the practice of living, using, and doing. Enjoyment is what effects our separation and enables our manipulation of things; it conditions the economic/practical life that Heidegger sees as primordial to human existence.²⁵³ The content of this individuation, or independence, is primarily affective:

One does not only exist one's pain or one's joy; one exists from pains and joys. Enjoyment is precisely this way the act nourishes itself with its own activity. To live from bread is therefore neither to represent bread to oneself nor to act on it nor to act by means of it. To be sure, it is necessary to earn one's bread, and it is necessary to nourish oneself in order to earn one's bread; thus the bread I eat is also that with which I earn my bread and my life. But if I eat my bread in order to labor and to live, I live *from* my labor and *from* my bread. (TI 111/83)

²⁵² Emmanuel Levinas, "From Consciousness to Wakefulness," in *Discovering Existence with Husserl*, trans. Richard A. Cohen and Michael B. Smith (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 154.

²⁵³ On the primacy of the practical/equipmental, see Heidegger, *Being and Time*, §15.

Sallis is too quick to reduce enjoyment to a consumptive form of alimentation when he characterizes enjoyment in the following way: “the determination by which to comport oneself to an object is to appropriate the object, that is, to cancel its otherness and affirm its sameness with oneself. As in eating.”²⁵⁴ This not only overlooks affective engagements with what could never be consumed (the elemental, the non-possessable), it also restricts the meaning of the alimentary. As we will see, alimentation has a much broader sense.

Enjoyment is a phenomenon analogous to desire²⁵⁵ in that it feeds upon and produces itself, unlike need which is satisfied once its lack has been filled. Hunger, for instance, results from a privation of food, and when I eat my hunger subsides. The structure of nourishment which is displayed by enjoyment is of a different order than satiable hunger. Levinas’s treatment of enjoyment belongs to his general phenomenology of alimentation and his exposition of the concrete features of the interiority, or economy, of subjectivity.²⁵⁶

Nourishment, as a means of invigoration, is the transmutation of the other into the same, which is in the essence of enjoyment: an energy that is other, recognized as other, recognized...as sustaining the very act that is directed upon it, becomes, in enjoyment, my own energy, my strength, me. All enjoyment is in this sense alimentation. (TI 111/83)

To live is to enjoy life and to have that life nourished by the acts which make up living: sensing, knowing, imagining, and so on. Each of these brings us an immediate joy that

²⁵⁴ John Sallis, “Levinas and the Elemental,” *Research in Phenomenology* 28 (1998): 156.

²⁵⁵ On the productivity of desire, see TI 33-35/3-5.

²⁵⁶ On the alimentary aspects of Levinas’s ethics, and the phenomenology of alimentation generally, see Sparrow, “Enabling/Disabling Sensation.”

feeds the egoism at the core of life (TI 112/84). And it is in this enjoyment that the “very pulsation” of the I occurs (TI 113/85). “Subjectivity originates in the independence and sovereignty of enjoyment,” says Levinas (TI 114/86). This conception of enjoyment is significant because it makes little to no appeal to the absolute transcendence which is often cited as the condition of possibility for subjective individuation.²⁵⁷

Correlative with Levinas’s emphasis on the irreducible and absolute transcendence of the Other is an attempt to think the immanent production of subjectivity. This is evident in the language he employs to describe the movement of the subject in enjoyment. He speaks of the subject as “coiling” (*enroulement*), “folding back” (*repli*), as “spiral” (*spirale*) and “involution” (*involution*) (TI 118/91; EE 81/138; OB 73/92). Enjoyment is denoted as the “eddy of the same” (*le remous même du Même*) (TI 115/88). The imagery here suggests that Levinas is trying to conceive individuation without recourse to some external factor.²⁵⁸ It is true that the call to responsibility commanded by the Other singles me out, or individuates me as an ethical agent, but this can only occur once I have become someone capable of responding—that is, become a subject who can be subjected. Individuation and subjection can be equiprimordial, of course. But for the subject to be responsible and capable of substituting him- or herself in the place of the Other, which is precisely what Levinas wants to affirm of each one of us, must not the

²⁵⁷ It should be noted that Levinas often speak of the encounter with the face of the Other as that which *accomplishes* my subjectivity as an ethical subject. For instance: “It is only in approaching the Other that I attend to myself.” And: “The face I welcome makes me pass from phenomenon to being in another sense: in discourse I expose myself to the questioning of the Other, and this urgency of the response—acuteness of the present—engenders me for responsibility; as responsible I am brought to my final reality” (TI 178/153). It is true that for Levinas we are always already discursive, responsible beings; but he also seems to be implying that there is a form of subjectivity—incomplete, to be sure—which precedes our subjection to the Other. This latter is what I am particularly interested in here.

²⁵⁸ For an alternative discussion of individuation, which compares Levinas and Heidegger and focuses on the individuating function of death, see Michael Lewis, “Individuation in Levinas and Heidegger: The One and the Incompleteness of Beings,” *Philosophy Today* 51, no. 2 (Summer 2007): 198-215.

subject already have something to give? That is, it seems necessary for the subject to have not only emerged as an individual, but to have also already acquired possessions which it can offer to the destitute Other, before it can be designated as a responsible/responsive being. There must be some form of subjectivity in Levinas's thinking which is not a subjection to the Other.

Levinas seems to be grappling with the problem of immanent individuation in *Otherwise than Being* when he writes that,

Matter "materializes" in satisfaction, which, over and beyond any intentional relationship of cognition or possession, of "taking in one's hands," means "biting into...." It is irreducible to a taking in one's hands, for it is already an absorption of a "within" including the ambiguity of two inwardnesses: that of a recipient of spatial forms, and that of an ego assimilating the other in its identity, and coiling in over itself. (OB 73/92)

And a little further along, he remarks how "there is enjoying of enjoyment before any reflection, but enjoyment does not turn toward enjoyment as sight turns toward the seen. Beyond the multiplication of the visible in images, enjoyment is the singularization of an ego in its coiling back [*enroulement*] upon itself" (OB 73/93). What Levinas calls the "advent" of the subject from out of the anonymity of existence is not a movement of transcendence, but the taking up of a position through effort, labor, and the consequent enjoyment which results from these acts. As this enjoyment multiplies, it folds back upon itself and wrests the I free and gives substance to the individual (EE 81/138). The substance of this subject would be little more than the thickness or viscosity of its affective life.²⁵⁹

²⁵⁹ It may be asked what the subject could possibly be prior to its taking up of a position. I think an answer could be sought in Levinas's view that we, as embodied creatures, live a life prior to reflection which is characterized by a nearly pure affective life. Fatigue and indolence, for instance, first and foremost belong to the affective realm before they become cognitive objects (EE 11/30). They belong to a prereflective sphere which, if it does not precede, it at least takes priority over, consciousness. And insofar as, for the phenomenologist, subjectivity requires conscious reflection, a preconscious event would have to be granted

Levinas's apology for the primacy of affectivity and the sensuous life of the embodied subject operates as a response to a perceived deficiency in the phenomenological method devised by Husserl, in particular its principle of objectifying intentionality. It also continues his critique of the Kantian subject sketched above. Against these two figures, he attempts to rethink the subject as a material event, rather than as a transcendental ego that would be the condition of possibility for representing or giving meaning to events. Insofar as his philosophy attempts to supplant the privileged place of intentionality in phenomenology; as it attempts to install affectivity, alterity, and the like at the base of experience, Levinas's philosophy works against phenomenology in the name of a materialist metaphysics. His interest in phenomenology comes less out of a desire to contribute to a science of phenomena than it aims to give a nonreductive account of events that could otherwise be explained by the physical sciences or recuperated by a representationalist epistemology. In a strong sense, Levinas's critique of intentionality is an allergic reaction to what he sees as the hegemony of representation in phenomenological approaches to otherness (TI 122-127/95-100).

Levinas's objection to phenomenological method is straightforward: if the objectifying acts of theoretical consciousness, what Husserl calls meaning-giving (*Sinngebung*) acts, are our primary mode of access to things, then those things can only appear to us as representations whose content are predetermined by intentional acts. In short, phenomenology becomes transcendental idealism. The problem is that this kind of transcendental philosophy leaves no room for the kind of radical passivity Levinasian

a certain anonymity, and thus belong to no subject in particular. What is perhaps needed here is an analysis of maternity (Levinas provides content for this in OB) and the prenatal life of the infant. Intrauterine existence seems a good contender for anonymity from the perspective of conscious reflection, but of course it is beyond the reach of the phenomenologist.

ethics requires, and it fails to appreciate the ambiguity of the given (TI 123, 125/96, 97). “The ‘act’ of representation discovers, properly speaking, nothing before itself” (TI 125/97). From the practical perspective, the subject who constitutes the content of its world through representations retains an identity that remains the same throughout all of its experiences. The spontaneity of its freedom to represent is never compromised by the objects to be represented. As Levinas says, “in representation the I precisely loses its opposition to its object; the opposition fades, bringing out the identity of the I despite the multiplicity of its objects, that is, precisely the unalterable character of the I. To remain the same is to represent to oneself” (TI 126/99).

Levinas supplants objectifying acts of consciousness in the order of experience and installs sensation at the beginning. An analogous move is made by Merleau-Ponty when he places operative intentionality before intentionality of act. Levinas’s move is more radical, however, because it makes sensation discontinuous with perception and cognition. It is prior to intentionality of any form that Levinas situates sensibility. This means that our sensuous contact with what is exterior remains forever anterior to our representations. Our sensuous contact with the Other, as well as with matter and the sensible as such (the diminutive other), constitutes the transcendental in Levinas’s philosophy. This does not mean that Levinas must break completely with phenomenology in order to rediscover the force of sensation; in fact, he finds that “intentionality rehabilitates the sensible [*réhabilite le sensible*].”²⁶⁰ How so? Levinas points to the tacit dimension of intentional acts, or that which “consciousness sees without seeing.”²⁶¹ This tacit dimension is not just the unintended horizon of unfulfilled intentions which

²⁶⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, “The Ruin of Representation,” in *Discovering Existence with Husserl*, 112/127.

²⁶¹ Levinas, “The Ruin of Representation,” 115/129.

accompany explicit intentions, but is the very excess of intentionality which “is inconstestably akin to the modern conceptions of the unconscious and the depths.” There is then a reciprocal constitution at play in intentionality, whereby the object which is supposedly constituted by consciousness proves to contain more than its explicit constitution and this “more than” reveals itself as always already conditioning thought.²⁶² “A new ontology begins: being is posited not only as correlative to a thought, but as already founding the very thought that nonetheless constitutes it.”²⁶³ Levinas’s new ontology signals the “ruin of representation” and the decentering of the Kantian subject. Kant’s schema requires an imperceptible layer of content that lies below the level of representation, but his transcendental method disqualifies the admittance of such a layer:

The idea of a necessary implication that is absolutely imperceptible to the subject directed on the object, only discovered *after the fact* upon reflection, thus not produced in the present, that is, produced *unbeknownst to me*, puts an end to the ideal of representation and the subject’s sovereignty, as well as to the idealism according to which nothing could enter into me surreptitiously. A deep-seated *passion* is thus revealed in thought.²⁶⁴

As the transcendental support of representation, the sensible and sensible qualities constitute the milieu in which the subject perceives. *Totality and Infinity* gives a lengthy description of this ungraspable milieu of things under the name “the element.” The element has no profiles, is a pure quality that we enjoy before we make categorical judgments about it (TI 131-133/104-107). As Sallis characterizes it, the element is “irreducible to a system of operational references” and “has its own thickness and density...[a]nd unlike the things that come to us in the medium, the medium itself is

²⁶² John E. Drabinski, “From Representation to Materiality,” in *International Studies in Philosophy* 30, no. 4 (1998): 30, writes of this sensible horizon: “The sensible surrounds and structures the movement toward the object and thereby structures the very possibility of the noematic horizons that form the field of transcendental exposition. The sensible is transcendental, not in the sense that it is already and ideality, but rather that it is a presupposed condition of all reflective life.”

²⁶³ Levinas, “The Ruin of Representation,” 116/130-131.

²⁶⁴ Levinas, “The Ruin of Representation,” 116/131.

nonpossessable.” “The depth of the element does not, as with a thing, conceal a series of other profiles that could be offered to various perspectives.”²⁶⁵

Lover of ambiguity that he is, the element appears to be missing in Merleau-Ponty. For Levinas, on the other hand, the element is the very locus of ambiguity; this is its value. The elemental/sensuous milieu “is privileged, because within it that ambiguity of constitution, whereby the noema conditions and shelters the noesis that constitutes it, is played out.”²⁶⁶ Levinas notes that Husserl wanted to designate the sensuous as objective, i.e., independent of subjective constitution, but that Husserl’s adherence to the primacy of intentionality prevents him from doing so. This is because intentionality “plays the role of an apprehension with regard to those contents upon which it bestows an objective meaning and which it animates or inspires.”²⁶⁷ By contrast, Levinas insists that we live through the objectivity of sensations and that Husserl recognized this too. We should say that the “materiality of sensations [*matérialité des sensations*]”²⁶⁸ is, borrowing Levinas’s own expression, lived *from* or enjoyed, never apprehended or grasped by the intellect. In addition to acting as a resistance to representational thinking, sensation would provide the aliment which gives birth to the subject who is capable of representing. Sensation, then, would not be an effect of the objective on the subject, but a “complicity” between the materiality of subject and object: “the corporeity of consciousness is in exact proportion to this participation of consciousness in the world it constitutes, but this corporeity is *produced* [*produit*] in sensation.”²⁶⁹ In *Otherwise than Being* this complicity is explored in Levinas’s analysis of sensibility and in terms of

²⁶⁵ Sallis, “Levinas and the Elemental,” 157.

²⁶⁶ Levinas, “The Ruin of Representation,” 119/134.

²⁶⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, “Intentionality and Sensation,” in *Discovering Existence with Husserl*, 139/149 (translation modified).

²⁶⁸ Levinas, “Intentionality and Sensation,” 139/150.

²⁶⁹ Levinas, “Intentionality and Sensation,” 145/156.

“contact” with otherness, all of which contributes to Levinas’s transcendental aesthetics of embodiment.²⁷⁰

The complicity in sensation between subject and object recalls Merleau-Ponty’s idea of sensing as communion. The key difference between the two thinkers, however, is that Merleau-Ponty sees this communion as synchronous, whereas Levinas recognizes it as the locus of vulnerability and diachrony. What is also lacking in Merleau-Ponty’s understanding is the idea that corporeity is produced materially by sensations. In Merleau-Ponty’s subject-object dialogue, it is movement of perception and the posture of the body that is produced, whereas for Levinas sensation actually produces the body *qua* living, sensing, enjoying being.²⁷¹ In biology there is a name for this process—metabolism.²⁷² For Levinas, sensing is a metabolic event. It is an intimate kind of transaction, beyond mere commerce or exchange.

There is a distinct shift of emphasis in the analyses of sensibility given in *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*. In the earlier text Levinas concentrates in his narrative of the constitution of the subject on the enabling features of sensibility and the dependence of the body on the material environment. In the later text he tends to cast sensibility as that which leaves the subject precariously exposed to the outside and vulnerable to wounding. That is, a nonreciprocity is implied between subject and other:

²⁷⁰ I am skeptical that there is a continuity between Husserl’s and Levinas’s conceptions of the sensible. I have noted a few of my concerns with Husserl’s theory of sensation in my introduction. Because I cannot here explore the merit of Levinas’s interpretation of Husserl here, I point the reader to John E. Drabinski, *Sensibility and Singularity: The Problem of Phenomenology in Levinas* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001).

²⁷¹ The difference may be more palpable if Levinas’s position is rendered in neuroscientific discourse, which regards “the conversion of what is felt into nervous material [as] nonstop” (Bernard Andrieu, “Brains in the Flesh: Prospects for a Neurophenomenology,” *Janus Head* 9, no. 1 (2006): 138). For Levinas, sensations and affects are converted—and this he tries to account for phenomenologically—into the content of life, or the feeling of living. Insofar as we live from this feeling and gain a desire to continue living, we can say that sensations are converted into material life.

²⁷² I retrieve this concept in the following chapter, drawing out its implications for a plastic conception of embodiment.

the Levinasian body ultimately becomes a *susceptible* body, where susceptibility is understood as a radical passivity. In both instances sensibility is given a prereflective and prerepresentational role, and it is clear that Levinas understands it as prior to the emergence of objectifying consciousness. He affirms, following Descartes, the irrationality and ambiguity of sensation. And, like Kant, he separates sensibility from the understanding and relegates “matter” to a place beyond “the synthetic power of representation” (TI 135-136/109). I will try to adduce in the remainder of this chapter Levinas’s “phenomenology of the sensible” (TI 136/109) and his divergent perspective on sensibility.

Totality and Infinity ties sensibility to enjoyment, calling enjoyment the “essence” of sensibility. Conversely, sensibility is determined as the “*mode* of enjoyment” (TI 134, 135/107, 108). Sensibility is therefore determined as a mode of affectivity or point of access for pleasurable and painful encounters. Its modality is undirected and sufficient to itself (TI 135/108-109), which means that it does not belong to the order of instrumentality that Levinas assigns to the economy of possession—the hand that grasps objects as tools/implements (as in Heidegger or Merleau-Ponty) or the mind which grasps objects as concepts (as in Hegel).²⁷³ Sensibility is neither a means to... nor in the service of..., despite it being basic to labor, work, effort, dwelling, and so on. Above all, it is an encounter with the otherness which is given through sensations and materiality, which is not for Levinas simply a question of resistance to action or opposition: sensibility establishes our relation to the elemental through our corporeal enjoyment of qualities (TI

²⁷³ In TI 167/141 Levinas speaks of the action of the body which would seek to escape its entrenchment in being as unfolding according to a “final” causality which is guided by the hand. “The end is a term the hand searches for in the risk of missing it. The body as possibility of a hand—and its whole corporeity can be substituted for the hand—exists in the virtuality of this movement betaking itself toward the tool.” This criticism of this discussion is certainly aimed at Heidegger’s ontology (with its primacy of the ready-to-hand), but it applies as well to the privilege of the grasp or hold (*prise*) in Merleau-Ponty, as does Levinas’s examination of “the caress.”

136/109). This enjoyment is discontinuous with the synthetic acts of consciousness; it is not a stage toward representation, but a pulsating rhythm of the I; or, as Merleau-Ponty has put it, a mode in which the subject is born and dies as each instant (TI 136, 143/109-110, 117; PP 216/250).

Silvia Benso adduces the concrete form of this process: breathing. Breathing is a twofold process, inspiration and expiration. Inspiration and expiration, which are structurally equivalent to birth and death, embody the animation of the subject by the element. “Such an animation does not occur as the level of cognition, theory, or intentionality, claims Levinas. Rather, it is only possible at the level of the body, through an incarnation.”²⁷⁴ This interpretation of sentience disengages the body from its reliance on the soul by localizing the animation of subjectivity in the intercorporeal, rather than spiritual, realm. “The body thus is retrieved from its confinement in that Cartesian...order of materiality for which the body and the soul ‘have no common space where they can touch’.”²⁷⁵

The pulsation of the I is supported by the sensible, but the sensible itself remains groundless, anarchic. The insecurity entailed in this anarchy is not a precisely a material threat, but a question of the temporality of the sensible. The sensible world “precedes me as an absolute of an unrepresentable antiquity” that is perhaps only apprehensible by imagining the total destruction of the world, an impossible thought experiment (TI 137/111; EE 51/93). We cannot know from whence it comes or whether it will continue in the future. Its promise is precarious, without guarantee.

²⁷⁴ Silvia Benso, “The Breathing of the Air: Presocratic Echoes in Levinas,” in *Levinas and the Ancients*, eds. Brian Schroeder and Silvia Benso (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 20.

²⁷⁵ Benso, “The Breathing of the Air,” 20.

It is true that we always access the sensible in the present and, affective encounters notwithstanding, via representation. But “the represented, the present, is a *fact*, already belonging to a past” (TI 130/103). To apprehend the sensible as such would be analogous to encountering the *il y a*, bare existence, in its purity. Despite the impossibility of this feat—since we are always already caught up in a world of thought, language, perception—Levinas says that we do in fact come face to face with formless phenomena (TI 139/112). In *Totality and Infinity* he speaks of how our identities are haunted by the elemental and the insecurity this brings us,²⁷⁶ while in *Existence and Existents* he speaks of the horror of the *il y a* that we experience in the night. But how are these senseless phenomena revealed, that is, accessed phenomenologically?

Existence and Existents traces the genesis of the individuated existent out of the anonymity of pure existence, being qua being. This anonymity, although not temporally prior to individuation, maintains an ontological priority over the subject who thinks, acts, and feels as a singular ego or person. On Levinas’s account, the existent breaks free from anonymity by taking up a position or assuming an identity—exerting itself against the indeterminacy of being. It is only when we make an effort through labor that a rift is created in being: “Effort is the very effecting of a present,” says Levinas (EE 23/48), because the fatigue which results from effort dislocates the existent from its synchrony with the uninterrupted duration of existence.²⁷⁷ As an affective (the experience of pain)

²⁷⁶ The anarchic and unrepresentable source of the elemental belongs to an unstable future that brings with it the disintegration of what has been done in the past. It is the promise of insecurity, the constant threat of the end of enjoyment, “menace and destruction.” We combat this insecurity with work and labor. (TI 141-142, 146/115, 120).

²⁷⁷ Levinas is drawing here upon a tradition in French philosophy concerned with thinking the autoaffection of the body as the initiation of subjectivity. This tradition includes modern figures like Maine de Biran and Ravaisson, and is best represented contemporarily by Michel Henry. Ravaisson notes how effort is suspended between action and passion, and how effort comprises “not only the primary condition, but also the archetype and essence, of consciousness.” It is evident that he, like Levinas, is trying to conceive the

rather than reflective event, this retroactive movement awakens us to our interminable contract with existence; it is not an escape from existence: “Fatigue is to be sure not a cancellation of one’s contact with being. The delay it involves is nonetheless an inscription in existence...” (EE 25/51). We catch sight of our struggle with existence in insomnia as we seek, through what Levinas calls “vigilance,”²⁷⁸ to wrest ourselves free from the indeterminacy of the night.²⁷⁹ The insomniac experiences a wakefulness at night that contests the spontaneity of the will: he or she wants and wills sleep, but sleep will not come. Instead, “One watches on when there is nothing to watch and despite the absence of any reason for remaining watchful” (EE 61/109). It is as though, in the grip of the night, the restlessness of the insomniac’s body has extinguished the freedom of the ego. “I am, one might say, the object rather than the subject of an anonymous thought” (EE 63/111). And this, says Levinas, is a horrifying condition (EE 55/98).²⁸⁰

birth of consciousness in the voluntary initiation of a position against the resistance of the material world. See Ravaissou, *Of Habit*, 43.

²⁷⁸ Vigilance is the condition of the ego “riveted” to being, that is, unable to *not* exist. “The ego is swept away by the fatality of being,” says Levinas (EE 61/110). Whereas consciousness would be an escape from existence, vigilance is an encounter with existence that lacks intuition, illumination, and attention. Indeed, it is an event wherein the ego given over to the existence as though existence, rather than the ego, were consciousness. In the vigilance of insomnia the ego becomes the object of the night which subjects it (EE 62-63/EE; TO 48-51/27-30).

²⁷⁹ Particularly in *Existence and Existents* the night figures as the experiential form of the *il y a*, or pure being. In the night, Levinas tells us, things lose their form and the dark matter of existence encroaches upon us. Being takes on a menacing aspect through which we are confronted with the anonymity of our own existence. In the night, in insomnia, we are reminded that we are not completely in control of our own being. Levinas suggests that a direct encounter with the *il y a* is perhaps possible through a thought experiment wherein we imagine the total destruction of everything, but such a feat of the imagination seems dubious. In any case, it is nonphenomenological. See Levinas, EE 31, 35, 44, 51/60-61, 66, 80, 91-92.

²⁸⁰ From a methodological perspective, it is important to note that Levinas sees his descriptions of vigilance, insomnia, and so on as going beyond the limits of phenomenological description. They are beyond intuition and argued for analogically (see EE 8/26, where Levinas writes that our relationship with being “is called a relationship only by analogy”). The subject is cast as an object, the ego is suspended, and the phenomena being examined are supposed to take place *before* the advent of consciousness. Thus, Levinas writes: “Our affirmation of an anonymous vigilance goes beyond the *phenomena*, which already presupposes an ego, and thus eludes descriptive phenomenology” (EE 63/112). The direct experience of insomnia allows us to *infer* a possible relationship with being in which we are rendered anonymous beings.

The horror of existence is articulated with the insecurity bestowed upon our bodies by our sensibility, a condition which is warded off (for a time) in dwelling (TI 137/110-111). In dwelling we shelter ourselves from the elements, and this sheltering offers the nourishment of enjoyment. We shelter ourselves because we are incapable of getting a hold on or containing the elements that, beyond a certain threshold, begin to deteriorate instead of nourish us. The themes of fatigue and effort found in *Existence and Existents* recur in the narrative regarding dwelling and possession contained in *Totality and Infinity*. The phenomenon of dwelling is elaborated against the backdrop of enjoyment, on the one hand, and the insecurity involved at the heart of enjoyment, on the other.

Dwelling is an event of alimation which gives rise to representation and, ultimately, possession of objects. There is more than one kind of alimation involved in dwelling, some of them affective and some consumptive. In the home the subject takes up a position and takes refuge from the elements. Only after this position is established can labor be undertaken, and it is labor, for Levinas, that gives form to matter and produces the world of graspable/consumable things—possessions (TI 156, 157, 159/130, 131, 133).²⁸¹ “A subject does not exist before the event of its position. The act of taking a position does not unfold in some dimension from which it could take its origin; it arises at the every point at which it acts” (EE 81/138). Taking a position, which is a condition of laboring, is not yet acting, which is a transcendent movement. It belongs to the immanent

²⁸¹ Merleau-Ponty likes to speak of the matter of perception as “pregnant with its form” (PrP 15/48) so as to avoid the notion that it is perception or consciousness that informs matter. Levinas, by contrast, holds that matter lies in the depths of things, but is *concealed* by the light of intentionality which shrouds it with forms (TI 192-193/167). Against the tradition, the image of light at work in Levinas’s texts opposes the idea that light illuminates and unconceals. Matter, he says, is the “dark background of existence.” It is this materiality that “makes things appear to us in a night, like the monotonous presence that bears down on us in insomnia” (EE 55/98).

movement, or involution, of effort and fatigue. Positioning and dwelling are the concrete modes through which the subject comes to be situated in the objective world. They lend us a support from which to take hold of the elemental through labor (TI 158/131). Yet, this is the kind of support that must be constantly taken up, rebuilt, and maintained: a Sisyphean labor.

Labor leads to possession and is guided by what Levinas calls the final causality of the hand. “Possession is accomplished in taking-possession or labor, the destiny of the hand” (TI 159/132).²⁸² It is contrasted with the enjoyment of sensibility, which is characterized precisely by its nonpossession. Levinas wishes to designate possession as an ontological affair, but one which assuages the insecurity brought on by our exposure to the elemental: “Possession masters, suspends, postpones the unforeseeable future of the element—its independence, its being” (TI 158/132). Despite its attachment to ontology, however, Levinas refuses here to call labor a violence. This is because “it is applied to what is faceless, to the resistance of nothingness” (TI 160/134).

All of this involves and influences the constitution of the body of the dweller or laborer. First of all, the hand is what substantializes things, traces their contours and draws them out of the pure quality of the element. Things are not first there, waiting to be given.²⁸³ Second, Levinas argues that the subject is originally influenced by its affective commerce with the element; it is “the product of the medium.” Life is the lived body *and* the body-effect, active and passive at once. This is not an endorsement of the duality of

²⁸² “The hand *comprehends* the thing not because it touches it on all sides at the same time...but because it is no longer a sense-organ, pure enjoyment, pure sensibility, but is mastery, domination, disposition—which do not belong to the order of sensibility” (TI 161/135).

²⁸³ On the human-centered nature of Levinas’s take on things, see Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, chapter 3 and Graham Harman, “Levinas’s Threefold Critique of Heidegger,” *Philosophy Today* (forthcoming, 2010). On the negative implications of Levinas’s position for environmental philosophy, see Christian Diehm, “Facing Nature: Levinas Beyond the Human,” *Philosophy Today* 44, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 51-59.

the body, but of its “ambiguous” nature, which Levinas identifies with consciousness (TI 165/139). Consciousness, he says, is not an incarnation, but a “disincarnation,” a “positioning of the corporeity of the body” which emerges in the “concreteness of dwelling and labor” (TI 165-166/140). Consciousness, then, arises out of the body’s pulsations in labor: the rhythm of labor, and the tension involved therein, give rise to consciousness. One is reminded here of Nietzsche’s remarks on the origin of consciousness in *On the Genealogy of Morality*, where the inhibition of our physical activity gives birth, in a folding back upon oneself, to the “*internalizing of man*”—conscious reflection.²⁸⁴ Only after the fact of embodiment does representational activity become possible. Appreciating the ambiguity of the body’s relation with the other, Levinas writes:

In its deep-seated fear life attests this ever possible inversion of the body-master into body-slave, of health and sickness. *To be a body* is on the one hand *to stand [se tenir]*, to be master of oneself, and, on the other hand, to stand on the earth, to be in the *other*, and thus to be encumbered by one’s body. But—we repeat—this encumbrance is not produced as a pure dependence; it forms the happiness of him who enjoys it. (TI 164/138)

The body’s capacity to work on things acts as a consolation for its inability to rend itself from being; its consciousness relieves it from the physical realm, postponing the disintegration and death proper to it. Nevertheless, and at the same time, the body remains prey to the other which “paralyzes possession” (TI 170, 171/145).

Levinas’s prioritizing of sensibility over the grasp and comprehension works as a critique of Merleau-Ponty, in particular the latter’s insistence that our basic *modus operandi* involves an initial hold on things which increasingly converges upon an even better hold. While Levinas certainly appreciates that our practical relations with things,

²⁸⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Maudemarie Clark and Alan J. Swensen (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998), Second Treatise, §16.

our treatment of them as implements, is our primary means of handling the world, he likewise wants to remind us that below the equipmental and perceptual level lies the level of sensation. *Sensation is not perception*: perception belongs to the intentional sphere, the realm of consciousness, whereas sensation has a transcendental affective function that remains anonymous.²⁸⁵ “The very distinction between representational and affective content is tantamount to a recognition that enjoyment is endowed with a dynamism other than that of perception” (TI 187/161). Levinas realizes that such claims stretch the limits of phenomenology, but he aspires to a phenomenology of sensation nonetheless. His entire ontology of the sensible is built on his claim that the pure quality of existence is independent of us, anarchic, and ungraspable—and yet, it is given. There is no reversibility between us and the purely sensible because its exceeding of our representational and practical capacities leaves us vulnerable to its precarious future. At the heart of sensibility is a diachrony, or dehiscence, that interrupts the synchrony of body and world just as a caress of the skin defers the immediacy of contact.²⁸⁶

In “Reality and Its Shadow,” one of his most sustained treatments of aesthetics and art criticism, Levinas argues for the diachrony of aesthetic experience. Here he is close to Deleuze in at least one respect: both thinkers see the effects of aesthetic “rhythm” as constitutive of aesthetic experience. For Levinas, rhythm is the means by

²⁸⁵ If it is conceded that sensation for Levinas is analogous to what Merleau-Ponty calls operative intentionality, then the prereflective content of the latter must be stressed in contrast to its complicity with intentionality of act. That is, the anonymous dimension of sensing must be regarded as discontinuous with the content of perception. The difference is subtle, but important: it results in the de-centering of the lived body, which in turn implies a de-centering of the primacy of perception.

²⁸⁶ “In a caress, what is there is sought as though it were not there, as though the skin were the trace of its own withdrawal, a languor still seeking, like an absence which, however, could not e more there. The caress is the not coinciding proper to contact,” says Levinas (OB 90/114). The resistance to possession inherent in the caress suggests an ethical interpretation which would oppose the apprehension of the caress to the ability of the grasp. This notion is at play in Irigaray, “The Fecundity of the Caress: A Reading of Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, ‘Phenomenology of Eros’,” in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*.

which we are affected, against our will, by the work of art. This affection, however, is different from that which we undergo when faced with the *il y a*, which Levinas says “lacks rhythm” (EE 62/111), suggesting that the pure encounter with being is basically outside aesthetics. Rhythm conducts the passive moment of sensing, the moment in which our active representation is converted into a passive reception:

Rhythm represents a unique situation where we cannot speak of consent, assumption, initiative or freedom, because the subject is caught up and carried away by it. The subject is part of its own representation. It is so not even despite itself, for in rhythm there is no longer a oneself, but rather a sort of passage from oneself to anonymity.²⁸⁷

This is applicable not only to music, but to poetry and painting as well. Rhythm is precisely that sensible content that detaches itself from the artwork and seizes upon our sensibility, bypassing consciousness, and folds us into the aesthetic event.²⁸⁸ “To insist on the musicality of every image is to see in an image its detachment from an object, that independence from the category of substance which the analysis of our textbooks ascribe to pure sensation not yet converted into perception (sensation as an adjective), which for empirical psychology remains a limit case, a purely hypothetical given.”²⁸⁹

Apart from the figure and form of representational content lies the sensory content which informs the rhythm of the aesthetic. Granted, we may not apprehend the latter content phenomenologically. But that is just the point: the function of sensation is to affect sensibility directly and render the viewer/listener captive. This is why Levinas says

²⁸⁷ As Levinas says, “our consenting to [rhythm] is inverted into a participation.” Emmanuel Levinas, “Reality and Its Shadow,” in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 4.

²⁸⁸ I take it this is what Levinas is implying when he says, “An image is interesting, without the slightest utility, interesting in the sense of *involving*, in the etymological sense—to be *among* things which should have had only the status of objects” (“Reality and Its Shadow,” 3-4). Contained in the Latin for “involve” is the sense of folding into, as one would fold together the ingredients of a recipe.

²⁸⁹ Levinas, “Reality and Its Shadow,” 5.

that sensibility is “realized only by the imagination.”²⁹⁰ Only the imagination can represent the aesthetic event which sensibility comes into contact with, i.e., pure sensation. Sensation is an interpellation, a kind of imperative that cannot be dodged because it operates immediately on the body, below the level of perception or apperception. Insofar as it engages us simultaneously at the level of perception and sensation, the aesthetic dimension operates diachronically. Since the sensory event is always happening behind the scenes, animating the present representation but never rising to the level of representation, it remains forever in the past.²⁹¹

Rhythm affects sensibility directly, as a “distinct ontological event.”²⁹² Deleuze has argued a similar point about the effects of Francis Bacon’s painting. For Deleuze, rhythm is the “logic” of sensation, or what animates/unifies the senses and their discrete sensory experiences.²⁹³ This logic does not correspond to the physiological layout of the organic body, but rather it grasps the body “at the point where rhythm plunges into chaos, into the night, at the point where the differences of level are perpetually and violently mixed.”²⁹⁴ Because the body is not just an organized set of organs, but also an event (“at one and the same time I *become* in the sensation and something *happens* through the sensation...”) ²⁹⁵ whose integrity is constituted by thresholds and limits, the body can be seen as organized by the sensations it receives or gives off. Deleuze speaks of how sensation is *in* the body and how the sensory event, rather than the stable form of the body, is what Bacon aims to paint: “what is painted on the canvas is the body, not insofar

²⁹⁰ Levinas, “Reality and Its Shadow,” 5.

²⁹¹ See Levinas’s remarks on “the meanwhile” in “Reality and Its Shadow,” 8-11, and “Diachrony and Representation,” in *Entre Nous*, 159-177/177-197.

²⁹² Levinas, “Reality and Its Shadow,” 5.

²⁹³ Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 37.

²⁹⁴ Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, 39.

²⁹⁵ Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, 31.

as it is represented as an object, but insofar as it is experienced as sustaining *this* sensation.”²⁹⁶ In a sense, what Bacon paints is the “accumulation” of sensations that make up the identity of the body—its sensory fingerprint, so to speak. This fingerprint is, however, never fixed or properly personal: it belongs to the anonymous rhythm of the sensible and is always prone to the “violence” of sensations emitted by other bodies.²⁹⁷

Taken together, Levinas’s and Deleuze’s analysis of rhythm allow us to glimpse a dynamic conception of identity. On this model, identity is constituted by the exchange of sensations between bodies. Corporeal identity, by the same token, is determined by the process of aesthetic exchange: bodies are delimited by the sensations they offer to and receive from other bodies. They are, as Spinoza has it, capacities to affect and be affected. Or, as Hume might have said, I am only the sensations which pass across my body. I, for instance, am little more than the sounds, smells, images, and so forth emitted from my body. We saw a similar notion of identity take shape in our discussion of Merleau-Ponty and style in chapter 1.

The significance of this conception of bodily identity is ramified in Levinas’s work because he regards sensation as foundational. Levinas’s brief discussion of the “transcendental function” (TI 188-189/162)²⁹⁸ of sensation circles back to the analysis of enjoyment and testifies to the immanent constitution of the subject by its other. But we must always keep in mind that sensation, for Levinas as for Deleuze, is never just a matter of the “ambivalence” of feeling.²⁹⁹ With the explicit affirmation of its

²⁹⁶ Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, 32.

²⁹⁷ Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, 33-35.

²⁹⁸ “A phenomenology of sensation as enjoyment, a study of what we could call its transcendental function, which does not necessarily issue in the object nor in the qualitative specification of an object... would be required.” “A transcendental phenomenology of sensation would justify the return to the term sensation to characterize the transcendental function of the quality corresponding to it.”

²⁹⁹ Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, 35.

transcendental function we see Levinas appreciating the force of sensation more than Merleau-Ponty.³⁰⁰ To do so, however, Levinas must venture outside of phenomenology and into metaphysics, affirming the reality of sensation not only as something that informs the content of cognition, but also as something that directly shapes the integrity of the subject. Sensation, then, names a fundamental, but not radical, passivity of the subject. (Radical passivity is proper to the human other for Levinas, because the human other is elevated to a quasi-divine status which renders their vulnerability unique, even sacred, and my responsibility for them infinite.)³⁰¹ The subject, as a body, finds itself always already in a heteronomous position—affected and nourished by what is other than it. Its first receptivity is its sensibility; it lives from sensations which provide the alimentary content of its representations. This alimentary layer of sensation “recovers a ‘reality’ when we see in it not the subjective counterpart of objective qualities, but an enjoyment ‘anterior’ to the crystallization of consciousness, I and non-I, into subject and object” (TI 188/162).³⁰² Sensation here names the experience of the body in immanence, but an immanence which is constantly broken up by the tension between the temporality of the represented and the temporality of the sensed.

³⁰⁰ This is how Levinas understands his relation to Merleau-Ponty on the issue of sensation: In Merleau-Ponty “[there is a] priority of the flesh affirming itself in human spirituality and to the detriment of another ambiguity or ambivalence, that of the enigma of sensation-sentiment, which is played out in the passivity of the *senses affected* [*sens affectés*] by the sensorial, between the pure undergoing or suffering and eventual pain, and the *known* [*su*] of knowledge that remains behind as its residue or trace.” See Levinas, “Sensibility,” 65/170.

³⁰¹ See the section entitled “The Glory of the Infinite,” especially the remarks on infinity and *illeity*, in OB 140-153/179-195.

³⁰² Given this remark, I think a fruitful exchange over the question of identity can take place between Levinas and architecture theorist Michael Benedikt, who writes in *For An Architecture of Reality* (New York: Lumen, 1987), 4, that “we build our best and necessary sense of an independent yet meaningful reality” when we take part in “*direct esthetic experiences of the real*.” If our direct aesthetic experiences are sensuous and constitutive of our subjectivity, as Levinas suggests, then the aesthetics of built space takes on an ethical quality. I will explore this possibility further in my conclusion.

No one has appreciated the alimentary or enabling dimension of sensation more than Alphonso Lingis. In fact, Lingis goes so far as to defend the ethical valence of the direct force in sensation. Before any formal imperative imposed on the intellect by reason is the imperative we receive from the environment, which orders our bodies to adapt themselves to the contour of the land, the tool we take up in our projects, or the elements which envelop us.³⁰³ This contact with things is received as sensations which are assimilated into the posture of our bodies and, ultimately, our body schema. Or, to put it more radically, the body *is* schematized by the sensuous environment. Sensation and schematization name an identical process:

The imperative in our environment is received, not on our understanding in conflict with our sensuality, but on our postural schema which integrates our sensibility and mobilizes our motor forces. It is received on our sensory-motor bodies as bodies we have to center upon things that orient our movements, bodies we have to anchor on the levels down which our vision, our touch, our listening move, on which we station ourselves and move in the heart of reality. It orders our competence.³⁰⁴

Of course, we always negotiate with the layout of the environment as we make our way through it. But there is a sense in which our bodies are *made* to move in certain nonnegotiable (i.e., imperative) ways: reflexes and other autonomic responses, for instance. Levinas speaks of how the face of the other does not compel me to accept its solicitation after I have considered it: “In the proximity of the face, the subjection precedes the reasoned decision to assume the order that it bears.”³⁰⁵ Lingis finds this kind of subjection in sensation writ large, not just in the human face. In any case, these

³⁰³ Lingis writes in *Foreign Bodies* (London: Routledge, 1994), 210, of “the imperative that our sensibility expose itself to the *element* in which sensory patterns and forces take form: the earth, the flux, the air, the light.”

³⁰⁴ Lingis, *The Imperative*, 67-68. For a further exploration of sensation, see the collection of essays published as *Sensation: Intelligibility in Sensibility*.

³⁰⁵ Levinas, “Diachrony and Representation,” 171/190. For another discussion of the ethical implications of this a priori subjection and the role of sensibility in it, see Chalier, *What Ought I to Do?*, 87, 93.

responses cut straight to our sensibility and *would be* apprehended as pure sensations if our perception were not permeated by representations. This is the speculative point. We live from these responses because they enable our bodies to move through and work competently on the material world. However, we do not constitute them. And all of this because our bodies are immanent to, and in many respects dependent upon, other bodies like (animate) and unlike (inanimate) our own. Violins, animals, flowers, and people impress us with their sensuous content.

Immanence takes on a graver tenor in Levinas's late major work, *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*. As Stella Sandford argues, "Both stress the corporeality of the subject as sensibility, but in *Totality and Infinity* the emphasis falls on pleasure, while in *Otherwise than Being* the keynote is suffering."³⁰⁶ The heteroaffection³⁰⁷ of sensibility now becomes a kind of transcendental vulnerability and the animation of the subject is cast as the "body exposed to the other" (OB 69/87). The alimentary function of sensation which is apparent throughout Levinas's exploration of dwelling and enjoyment in *Totality and Infinity* is displaced by a desire to articulate the way in which sensibility leads to the break up of identity, and is the means by which the subject is subjected to the diachrony of the sensible (OB 14-15/17-19).³⁰⁸ Levinas goes so far as to identify subjectivity with the vulnerability of sensibility (OB 15, 50, 54/18, 65-66, 70). This vulnerability is given a carnal form, the skin, but a phenomenological interpretation.

³⁰⁶ Stella Sandford, "Levinas in the Realm of the Senses: Transcendence and Intelligibility," *Angelaki* 4, no. 3 (1999): 66.

³⁰⁷ For Levinas, heteroaffection precedes autoaffection. This is a point of contrast with one of Levinas's allies in the theological turn in French phenomenology, Michel Henry. For Henry, immanence means autoaffection; for Levinas, immanence involves a constitutive heteronomy. See Michel Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation*, trans. Girard Etzkorn (Dordrecht: Springer, 2008) and *Philosophy and Phenomenology of the Body*, trans. Girard Etzkorn (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1975).

³⁰⁸ Sensation is the divergence of temporality, whereas sensing reveals the temporality of being (OB 34, 63/43, 79-80).

Levinas once again points to labor, fatigue, and effort to highlight the embodied aspect of subjectivity. But the exposure of the subject to the other is interpreted as obsession, pain, and the interruption of enjoyment. Corporeality “is the pain [rather than enjoyment] of effort, the original adversity of fatigue, which arises in the upsurge of movement and in the energy involved in labor” (OB 54/70). Levinas has replaced the originary enjoyment of labor with an originary suffering: “As a passivity in the paining of the pain felt, sensibility is a vulnerability, for pain comes to interrupt an enjoyment in its very isolation, and thus tears me from myself” (OB 55/71). It is difficult to discern whether enjoyment or pain takes precedence now, or whether they are equiprimordial modes of existence. For instance, Levinas says that, “It is with savoring and enjoyment that the analysis of sensibility will have to begin” (OB 56/72), but this does not mean that sensibility is originally savoring and enjoyment. Nor does this statement outweigh what he says in defense of the primacy of pain in *Otherwise than Being*. What is clear is that pain and enjoyment both belong to sensibility, which in either case provides the body’s first opening onto its other.³⁰⁹

The immediacy and materiality of sensibility lends it its susceptibility. Levinas writes of how matter “materializes” in enjoyment and satisfaction, “which, over and beyond any intentional relationship of cognition or possession, of ‘taking in one’s hands’ [*prise en mains*], means ‘biting into....’” (OB 73/92). The materiality of enjoyment can

³⁰⁹ Dennis King Keenan, *Death and Responsibility: The “Work” of Levinas* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 43, points out a similar ambiguity regarding Levinas’s position on sensibility. It is not clear, says Keenan, whether enjoyment of sensibility is an exposure to the other or a singularizing involution, or whether our relationship with the other should “be characterized as enjoyment, menace/necessity, or responsibility, all of which are singularizing *and exposure*. Despite Levinas’s attempts in *Totality and Infinity* to establish and maintain a rigid distinction, there is blurring.”

then be correlated with the excess of meaning involved in alimentation.³¹⁰ But, at the same time, what we are nourished by is what threatens the stability or integrity of our embodied being. The material which we come into contact with through our sensibility contains a basic ambivalence: it enables us, but remains perpetually capable of disabling us. Sensibility, as a form of contact, is the reversion of our grasp on things into our being grasped by them, a situation which can be described “in the ambiguity of a kiss” (OB 75/94). This ambiguity cannot be equivalent to the reversibility that Merleau-Ponty sees in the handshake, because for Levinas the supposed imminence of reversibility is precisely what remains in question and precarious.³¹¹ It is as though the ambiguity of the kiss as well as the handshake is what short-circuits or prevents reversibility: one never knows whether the encounter is reciprocal or violent; both are equally viable possibilities. “[Sensibility]” writes Levinas, “reverts from the activity of being a hunter of images to the passivity of being prey, from being aim to being wound, from being an intellectual act of apprehension to apprehension as an obsession by another who does not manifest himself” (OB 75/95).

Contact has a technical sense for Levinas and describes a precise situation. It is basic to the embodied form of the subject and it describes the “proximity of the other” as “the immediate opening up for the other of the immediacy of enjoyment, the immediacy of taste, materialization of matter” (OB 74/94). Contact likewise describes the original exposedness of sensibility to the other, that is, the transcendental aspect of

³¹⁰ Alimentation denotes a surplus of meaning beyond the conditioned or represented; this meaning “conditions the very thought that would think it as a condition” (TI 128/101; see also, TO 62-64/45-49).

³¹¹ The relation between self and other is never a reversible one for Levinas, but always a matter of irreversibility. As he writes in TI 35-36/5-6: “The metaphysician and the other do not constitute a simple correlation, which would be reversible. The reversibility of a relation where the terms are indifferently read from left to right and from right to left would couple them the *one* to the *other*. [...] The intended transcendence would be thus reabsorbed into the unity of the system, destroying the radical alterity of the other.”

heteroaffection. The subject who enjoys and is born from enjoyment is always already enjoying the other as element, sensation, matter. Levinas gives contact/proximity a carnal signification:

Sensibility—the proximity, immediacy and restlessness which signify in it—is not constituted out of some apperception putting consciousness into relationship with a body. Incarnation is not a transcendental operation of a subject that is situated in the midst of a world it represents to itself; the sensible experience of the body is already and from the start incarnate. The sensible...binds the node of incarnation into a plot larger than the apperception of the self. In this plot I am bound to others before being tied to my body. (OB 76/96)

Proximity, then, is prior to the emergence of the subject who can represent or whose body is an “I can.”³¹² It opens the subject to the approach of the other, which arrives “as though from an immemorial past, which was never present, began in no freedom” (OB 88/112).

Our contact with this transcendental past is embodied in the skin, which Levinas, sounding like Merleau-Ponty, calls “the divergency [*l'écart*] between the visible and the invisible” (OB 89/113). The skin is not a flesh in which each one of us participates, but a surface that at once keeps us separated and yet in contact. It is the liminal site, “the gap [*décalage*] between approach and approached,” where alterity is produced (OB 90/114; TI 26-27/xiv-xv).³¹³

The skin is naturally vulnerable because it is a permeable surface. As Rudolf Bernet explains,

³¹² Sandford, “Levinas in the Realm of the Senses,” 67, captures the carnality nicely when she writes: “It is the respiration of the skin prior to any intention, a being turned to the Other as a being turned inside out, a going beyond the skin, to the underside of the skin, a getting underneath the skin, an obsession, a nakedness more naked than any excoriation (*dépouillement*). This is proximity.”

³¹³ In *Totality and Infinity* (26-27/xiv-xv) Levinas explains that the idea of infinity—which is synonymous with the revelation of the other—is *produced* in me, “in the improbable feat whereby a separated being fixed in its identity, the same, the I, nonetheless contains in itself what it can neither contain nor receive solely by virtue of its own identity.” It seems to me that the skin, insofar as it is receptive to an influx of sensory material which it could never hope to process completely, is the site where the depths of things—their matter, according to Levinas—is produced/revealed. That is, the skin is the place where the excess of our objectifying representations is produced.

Even a tight and thick skin has small and large holes that one can adequately call ‘openings’. There are natural openings as well as artificial or forced openings called ‘wounds’. Natural openings are still subject, however, to being forced and wounded. The natural openings allowing for a passage and exchange between the inside and the outside of a body cannot prevent the violence of a traumatic intrusion or expulsion.³¹⁴

Levinas must have something like this in mind when he argues that sensibility *is* vulnerability and exposure to the other. Bernet goes on to point out that the singular nature of the skins involved in contact lend their quality to the intersubjective encounter, and help to determine whether the encounter is friendly or violent.³¹⁵ The skin, or contact/proximity, cannot be deemed violent a priori. And if we are going to allow Levinas to say that the sensitivity of the skin—sensibility generally—is susceptibility, then this condition must be taken in an ambivalent sense. Above all it should be maintained that my exposure to the other equally enables and disables my body, and that a priori this exposure is neither painful nor pleasurable.

I have tried to argue here that the aesthetic dimension of existence is foundational for Levinas’s ontology of the body. In fact, I would go so far as to say that aesthetics—understood broadly—must be first philosophy for Levinas.³¹⁶ The subject’s primary opening onto the other is the body’s sensibility—that is, its capacity to sense and be affected by the material it lives and dies from. Sensibility is the condition of possibility for enjoyment, and therefore a condition of possibility for ipseity, or selfhood. It is this ipseity which is interpellated by the Other and called into question. But this ipseity must

³¹⁴ Rudolf Bernet, “The Encounter with the Stranger: Two Interpretations of the Vulnerability of the Skin,” in *The Face of the Other and the Trace of God*, ed. Jeffrey Bloechl (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 45-46.

³¹⁵ Bernet, “The Encounter with the Stranger,” 46.

³¹⁶ Graham Harman argues this same point, albeit for different reasons and with different metaphysical concerns, in “Aesthetics as First Philosophy: Levinas and the Non-Human,” *Naked Punch* 9 (Summer/Fall 2007).

first be won through effort and labor before it can answer the call of the Other responsibly.

We have also seen that for Levinas sensation has an affective dimension, as is connoted in the French *sentir*, but it is also a distinct ontological event. This event is marked by the passivity of the subject who undergoes the sensation, on the one hand, and the objectivity of the sensation which comes from the outside and directs sensibility, on the other. Levinas's disqualification of the view that sensation is purely subjective, something that happens inside the mind, commits him to a form of ontological realism. Unlike Kant or Husserl, whose methodological commitments prevent them from speaking about what lies beyond the bounds of the phenomenal, Levinas is entitled to make claims about the nonintentional/transcendental realm of sensation. He openly admits that these claims are metaphysical and beyond the phenomenological method. They are, however, not unintelligible: "This is the whole point," says Sandford.³¹⁷

It is precisely because sensations come from outside that Levinas can characterize sensibility as vulnerability. Indeed, he requires this corporeal vulnerability in order to prioritize ethics before any other branch of philosophy. Or, as David Michael Levin has said, "The embodiment of the categorical imperative cannot be understood...until our way of thinking about the body undergoes a radical revision."³¹⁸ If sensibility were merely ambivalent, then the exigency of ethics would dissolve and ontology would once

³¹⁷ Sandford, "Levinas in the Realm of the Senses," 69-70, makes the point about method with concision: "Levinas's philosophical method therefore consists in a series of metaphysical declarations apparently extrapolated from and further supported by phenomenological evidences. Metaphysical truths are revealed through phenomenology, both in the sense that phenomenology allows one to encounter them and that it functions verificationally after the event of disclosure. In this way, the strong claim for the intelligibility of transcendence is apparently based on, revealed through or justified by the appeal to the phenomenology of the ethics of affect."

³¹⁸ David Michael Levin, "The Embodiment of the Categorical Imperative: Kafka, Foucault, Benjamin, Adorno and Levinas," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 27, no. 4 (2001): 13.

again become first philosophy. Levinas would have us believe that our bodies are constantly under attack from the outside, and at times it seems as though he were arguing that intercorporeal encounters are *essentially* violent. He speaks of our openness to exteriority as “the vulnerability of the skin exposed, in wounds and outrage” and of sensibility as

a nakedness more naked than that of the skin which, as form and beauty, inspires the plastic arts, the nakedness of a skin presented to contact, to the caress, which *always*—even, equivocally, in voluptuousness—is suffering for the suffering of the other. Uncovered, open like a city declared open upon the approach of the enemy, the sensibility, *prior to* all will, action, declaration, all taking up of positions, is vulnerability itself.³¹⁹

Like a faithful phenomenologist, Levinas notes that this susceptibility is not reducible to the physiological body’s causal relations. No, this susceptibility is a passivity “more passive than every passivity,” which is to say, a transcendental passivity. “It is the aptitude... ‘to be beaten’, ‘to receive blows’.” “In vulnerability there then lies a *relationship with the other* which causality does not exhaust, a relationship antecedent to being affected by a stimulus.”³²⁰

It is one of the virtues of Levinas’s analyses that they fully appreciate the reality of violence and the fact that an adequate account of alterity is needed in order to render this reality intelligible. A conception of alterity which acknowledges that some of our experiences do not submit to our representational capacities, that is, exceed what we can know or think about them, is required to explain the inevitable encroachment of death, for instance. Levinas writes in *Totality and Infinity* (224/199-200):

The notion of a mortal but temporal being, apprehended in the will...differs fundamentally from every causality leading to the idea of the *causa sui*. Such a being is exposed, but also opposed to violence. Violence does not befall it as an

³¹⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, “No Identity,” in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 146/92-93 (emphasis added).

³²⁰ Levinas, “No Identity,” 146/93.

accident that befalls a sovereign freedom. The hold that violence has over this being—the mortality of this being—is the primordial fact.³²¹

There is no need, however, to accept that the susceptibility of the body is basically a vulnerability. Of course, it is that too. But it is also a capacity to be affected with joy or pleasure and to have the body enabled in its posture and kinaesthetic responses by the sensations it receives from the other. In short, the sensitivity of the body is a priori ambivalent. We can have this ambivalence while at the same time affirming the constitutive alterity of embodiment, as Merleau-Ponty does. “Merleau-Ponty,” writes Dan Zahavi, “can describe embodied self-awareness as a presentiment of the Other—the Other appears on the horizon of this self-experience—and the experience of the Other as an echo of one’s own bodily constitution.” For Merleau-Ponty, the Other can be received as such because its exteriority mirrors my own exteriority to myself. “The reason I can experience Others is because I am never so close to myself that the Other is completely and radically foreign and inaccessible. I am always already a stranger to myself and therefore open to Others.”³²² It is not necessary for alterity to be a matter of pure transcendence—a transcendence, it must be said, whose alignment with humanism and a certain religious tradition excludes the nonhuman from ethical consideration³²³—for it to command ethical consideration. That our relation with otherness is ambivalent, and that we can be enabled as well as disabled by that which we rely upon for our very being, is enough to give us pause.

³²¹ More succinctly put in Levinas, TO, 75/63: “In death the existing of the existent is alienated.”

³²² Dan Zahavi, “Alterity in Self,” in *Ipsivity and Alterity: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Intersubjectivity*, eds. Shaun Gallagher et al. (Rouen: Presses Universitaires de Rouen, 2004), 145.

³²³ For a non-anthropocentric engagement with Levinasian ethics which extends ethical consideration to inanimate things, see Benso, *The Face of Things*.

It is true that Levinas gives a richer, more complex description of alterity than Merleau-Ponty. As well, he does much, contra Kant, to give a corporeal form to subjectivity and, consequently, the ethical imperative. But in the process he sacrifices our actual experience of embodiment in the name of a transcendental responsibility whose foundation remains a hyperbolic claim about the vulnerability of subjectivity. This hyperbole respects the reality of sensation while at the same time betraying the plasticity of our sensibility. To avoid the ethical exclusivity of Levinas's anthropocentrism, which is most pronounced in the moral privilege he grants the human others,³²⁴ and remain true to the ambivalence of our sensuous existence, it seems advisable for us to develop a more mundane or immanent form of the imperative, situating its force in the sensuous economy in which existents and objects interact. But first we need a conception of embodiment that avoids the excesses of both Merleau-Ponty and Levinas. That is, we need an adequate account of the plasticity of the body.

³²⁴ It is tempting to call this privileging a humanism, but such a denomination requires a qualification. Levinas places such an emphasis on the passivity, responsibility, and subjection of human beings that it seems as though he could be called an antihumanist. Indeed, I am arguing here that the material/sensuous world enacts a certain displacement of human sovereignty. But this is from an ontological perspective. Given Levinas's explicit ethical commitments, it is clear that humans remain central, as both moral agents and as objects of moral consideration.

CHAPTER 4

ON CORPOREAL PLASTICITY

...we should try to discover how it is that subjects are gradually, progressively, really and materially constituted through a multiplicity of organisms, forces, energies, materials, desires, thoughts, etc.
– Foucault, “Two Lectures”

...sensation is the master of deformations, the agent of bodily deformations.
– Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*

The argument thus far has followed two main trajectories, one critical, the other productive. First, it has argued that the two visions of embodiment offered by Merleau-Ponty and Levinas are inadequate for thinking how our bodies actually interact with the material world. Second, it has assembled evidence which suggests that both phenomenologists were cognizant of the function which sensation plays in the constitution of experience, Levinas perhaps more so than Merleau-Ponty. The precise function of sensation, and in particular its difference from perception, has been adduced. In this chapter I will build upon the analyses of sensation and sensing given by the phenomenologists as I develop a conception of embodiment that balances their competing views. In place of the reversible and susceptible bodies I offer the *plastic* body, whose dynamism is truer to the aesthetic dimension of existence and the transactional nature of intercorporeal encounters.

Methodologically, there is more than one way to elaborate and defend the body’s plasticity. Because plasticity is at work in poststructuralist philosophers like Foucault and Deleuze, and increasingly dominant in the work of embodied cognition theorists, a wholesale assault on the phenomenological body could be launched from a nonphenomenological camp. This could be construed as a clash between modern and

postmodern views of the body.³²⁵ Such a neat division, however, does not do justice to the degree of overlap which obtains between phenomenological and nonphenomenological treatments of embodiment. This is why I have chosen for my defense of plasticity to synthesize the insights of Merleau-Ponty and Levinas with a number of nonphenomenologists, from Spinoza and James to Mark Johnson and Catherine Malabou.

It should be noted, however, that what I find most productive in the phenomenologists is not always what they produce from a phenomenological perspective. In fact, as I have argued in earlier chapters, it is often the phenomenological method itself which constrains some of the most fertile insights stumbled upon by Merleau-Ponty and Levinas. Oftentimes it is when these two thinkers are on the verge of transgressing the strictures of phenomenology that their thinking takes off in (metaphysically) interesting directions.

What does it mean for a body to be plastic and why is it necessary to conceive the body in this way? The term has a popular aesthetic sense and is now common currency in the discourse of neuroscience. But I first ran across the term reading William James, who writes in *The Principles of Psychology* that plasticity broadly “means the possession of a structure weak enough to yield to an influence, but strong enough not to yield all at once.”³²⁶ Plasticity not only provides a useful means of imagining the structure of the body, it also offers a means of thinking the dynamic integrity of the embodied subject.

³²⁵ John Mullarkey notes a “conflict of attitudes” between thinkers like Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, and David Levin, on the one hand, and Bataille, Deleuze, and Foucault, on the other. While I agree that this divergence of attitude is palpable, it cannot be taken to indicate two fundamentally opposed philosophies of the body. Mullarkey concurs that the two positions are not incompatible. See John C. Mullarkey, “Duplicity in the Flesh: Bergson and Current Philosophy of the Body,” *Philosophy Today* 38, no. 4 (Winter 1994): 340.

³²⁶ James, *Principles*, volume 1, 105.

Assuming, with Merleau-Ponty, that we simply *are* our bodies. This absolves us from positing a self-identical core of subjectivity which would remain untouched throughout any and all intersubjective (physical, social, cultural) engagements. In short, it gives a fully immanent version of subjectivity, and yet it does not force us to grant the body an indeterminate fluidity which would make it difficult to explain how stability emerges and is maintained.

There are empirical and ethical reasons for favoring the plastic body over the reversible and susceptible bodies. First, the body disintegrates, decays, and dies. Its relation to other bodies—and sometimes to itself, as in the case of autoimmune disorders—is often violent, as I have argued. Innumerable examples of nonreversible situations can be given. These are defined by the powerlessness of human beings in the face of a materiality which exceeds them. As Ronald Bruzina expresses it, “human powerlessness is fundamentally that of being subject to structures around and within itself that are not of a human individual’s own doing.”³²⁷ A piano is pushed out a window and crushes someone on the sidewalk below. An airplane plunges into the ocean and is obliterated along with all of its passengers. These are situations wherein the bodies involved are not on the verge of reversal: the person on the sidewalk has no chance of becoming the crusher, nor will the piano become the crushed in this scenario. The airline passengers will be killed, their perceptual capacities extinguished, but the material reality which destroyed them will remain. Perhaps the perceptual situation is reversible, but asymmetrical bodily contact between bodies powerful and powerless is certainly not. Our

³²⁷ Ronald Bruzina, “Method and Materiality in the Phenomenology of Intersubjectivity,” *Philosophy Today* 41, SPEG Supplement (1997): 131. Bruzina enumerates four primary modes of powerless, which are derived from our finite relationship to nature: object independence; exposure to accident; sleep and fainting; dependence on temporality.

bodies, I would contend, sense this in themselves and build upon this sense when forming bonds with other bodies.³²⁸

On the other hand, the body is a resilient thing. It resists disintegration by nourishing itself, defends itself from assault, and deftly assembles resources which enable it to postpone death. It clothes and shelters itself, devises means of repairing itself when wounded, and takes measures to prevent further wounding. It gathers these resources from its environment and from others; it is enabled by otherness just as much as it can be disabled by it. It is true that tragedy can befall the body at any moment, so it is indeed a susceptible entity. But the threat of violence cannot be the ground upon which the body is defined as a body. It is much more than a passivity: it preserves itself and pushes itself to become more powerful; it adapts and evolves, yes, but it also destroys and gives form. These are Nietzsche's lessons.³²⁹ That the body is threatened by violence and prone to disintegration, but at the same time enabled by what resists its efforts and movement, leads us to consider the ethical import of its plasticity.

A body whose integrity is plastic is determined by its thresholds. This means, as we saw with Merleau-Ponty's notion of style, that its identity is constantly shifting and constituted by temporary, fragile relations. These shifts can be induced by a breakdown in the body's own maintenance or by pressures exerted by an external force. In both cases what gets compromised is an alliance maintained between a collective of bodies functioning together as a singular body (friendship, neighborhood, soccer team) and working together to reciprocally determine each individual body's identity. Such a view

³²⁸ Bruzina writes in "Method and Materiality" (131) that the "independence of nature, and the correlative powerlessness human being feels regarding it, is internal to human being precisely in its bodiliness." It is in this "materially functioning feeling that the interaction of human persons in a bond of community must be explicated...."

³²⁹ On the malleability of form and the primacy of power over purpose, see Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Second Treatise, §12.

of identity obliges us to imagine the substance of identity as fleeting rather than enduring and self-sufficient. As Mach proclaims, “The ego is as little absolutely permanent as are bodies. That which we do much dread in death, the annihilation of our permanency, actually occurs in life in abundant measure.”³³⁰ The meaning of death is likewise reoriented.

Spinoza employs the term *ratio* to denote the alliances that compose corporeal identities. He speaks of thresholds as ratios of motion and rest, speed and slowness.³³¹ Following on his heels, Deleuze and Guattari elaborate the Spinozan conception of bodily identity with concepts like assemblage, machine, multiplicity, and body without organs. These concepts provide an understanding of bodily identity that makes no appeal to an immutable organic (biological, physiological, neuronal) structure: they leave the body fully open to deformation and reconstitution, and therefore to the aleatory and to alterity. Spinoza begins to build the plastic body.

For Spinoza, a body is never purely individual in an atomistic sense; it is always a composite or collective of bodies. What individuates a body from the single substance (God, or Nature) in his monistic ontology is its effect, which is always singular.³³² A body, then, is determined as *this* body by what it can do or what it can effectuate materially (efficient causes), psychologically (affects), politically (uprisings, policing), and so forth. The capacity of the body to create a singular effect, or what we can call the body’s power, will always remain variable and vulnerable to disintegration because this

³³⁰ Mach, *The Analysis of Sensations*, 4.

³³¹ See the “brief preface concerning the nature of bodies” in Part II (pp. 72-76) of Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*, trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992).

³³² Spinoza defines a singular thing as a thing that has a finite, determinate existence. “If several things concur in one act in such a way as to be all together the simultaneous cause of one effect, I consider them all, in that respect, as one individual.” An individual *is* a singularity. Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part II, Definition 7.

power will only subsist so long as the collective of bodies working together to create a singular effect maintain their particular ratio of motion and rest. Spinoza writes:

When a number of bodies of the same or different magnitude form close contact with one another through the pressure of other bodies upon them, or if they are moving at the same or different rates of speed so as to preserve an unvarying relation of movement among themselves, these bodies are said to be united with one another and all together to form one body or individual thing, which is distinguished from other things through this union of bodies.³³³

Now, this ratio is not precise: it is plastic, which is to say its identity is marked by a threshold of formal variability.³³⁴ The form is not what determines the body ultimately, it is the kinetics of the body's composition that expresses its individuality. "The important thing," Deleuze tells us, is to see individuality "as a complex relation between differential velocities, between deceleration and acceleration of particles." This is what Deleuze calls Spinoza's "kinetic proposition."³³⁵

Deleuze distills the Spinozan problematic regarding bodies into the question, *What is a body capable of?* He asks the question in this way in order to suggest that the power of the body is unknown to us and that we are far from fathoming the possibilities for action, change, and enhancement that new technologies and new modes of collective existence have in store for us. (I am thinking in particular of human-computer interfaces (cyborgs), prostheses, genetic manipulation, and the whole range of what Deleuze and

³³³ Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part II, Proposition 13, Lemma 3, Definition.

³³⁴ As Spinoza puts it in Part II, Proposition 13, Lemma 4: "If from a body, or an individual thing composed of a number of bodies, certain bodies are separated, and at the same time a like number of other bodies of the same nature take their place, the individual thing will retain its nature as before, without any change in its form."

³³⁵ Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, trans. Robert Hurley (San Francisco: City Lights, 1988), 123. Deleuze draws here in the text an analogy between this kinetics and musical form, particularly how the latter is determined by the relations of speed and slowness between the sound particles of a given piece. What Deleuze is calling musical form is here quite close to what Merleau-Ponty calls style. It is possible to think of painting, especially that of Cézanne with all of its visual mobility, in this way too.

Guattari call “unnatural participations.”)³³⁶ But Deleuze’s question also pinpoints the ontological claim advanced by Spinoza: bodies just are their capacity to affect and be affected. Deleuze writes, “a body affects other bodies, or is affected by other bodies; it is this capacity for affecting and being affected that also defines a body in its individuality.”³³⁷ This notion of individuality yields a new method of taxonomy, one whose principle of differentiation is produced immanently along with individuation itself.³³⁸

This method prefers a genetic conception of form over ancient hylomorphism and regards the genesis of form as initiated by the contact of heterogeneous material elements, which result in multiplicities that endogenously give rise to singular bodies.³³⁹ Dewey’s definition of aesthetic form is representative here: “*Form may then be defined as the operation of forces that carry the experience of an event, object, scene, and situation to its own integral fulfillment.*”³⁴⁰ This formulation crucially acknowledges the centrality of circumstance for the determination of capacity, and locates the operations of form in the materials and energies which compose an aesthetic event which is, at bottom, rhythmic.³⁴¹ Similarly, Deleuze writes about how

relations of speed and slowness are realized according to circumstances, and the way in which these capacities for being affected are filled. For they always are, but in different ways, depending on whether the present affects threaten the thing (diminish its power, slow it down, reduce it to the minimum), or strengthen,

³³⁶ Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, 125; Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 241.

³³⁷ Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, 123.

³³⁸ “You will define an animal, or a human being, not by its form, its organs, and its functions, and not as a subject either; you will define it by the affects of which it is capable. Affective capacity, with a maximum threshold and a minimum threshold, is a constant in Spinoza.” Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, 124.

³³⁹ For a remarkably clear exposition of this idea, see Manuel DeLanda, “Immanence and Transcendence in the Genesis of Form,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 96, no. 3 (Summer 1997): 499-514,

³⁴⁰ John Dewey, *Art As Experience* (New York: Perigee, 1934), 137 (emphasis in original).

³⁴¹ Dewey, *Art As Experience*, 147, 150, 154.

accelerate, and increase it: poison or food?—with all the complications, since a poison can be a food for part of the thing considered.³⁴²

The point here is that the maintenance of corporeal identity is not only a matter of intersubjective/intercorporeal relations; identity is also dependent on environmental conditions and the nourishment they provide (or fail to provide)—the ambivalence of the environment is recognized as fundamental to corporeal power and action.

One of the advantages of working with the Spinozan definition of bodies endorsed by Deleuze is that it frees us from entrenched binaries like artificial/natural and organic/inorganic. This results from the fact that, for Spinoza and Deleuze, all bodies belong to the same ontological plane and can be evaluated in terms that do not force us to distinguish between, say, the human and nonhuman. As a consequence of undoing old binaries we are free to imagine new composite bodies and, therefore, new possibilities for embodied experience and bodily identity. Hybridization becomes the norm. As Elizabeth Grosz puts it,

[Deleuze and Guattari] provide an altogether different way of understanding the body in its connections with other bodies, both human and nonhuman, animate and inanimate, linking organs and biological processes to material objects and social practices while refusing to subordinate the body to a unity or a homogeneity of the kind provided by the body's subordination to consciousness or to biological organization. Following Spinoza, the body is regarded as neither a locus for a consciousness nor an organically determined entity; it is understood more in terms of what it can do, the things it can perform, the linkages it establishes, the transformations and becomings it undergoes, and the machinic connections it forms with other bodies, what it can link with, how it can proliferate its capacities....³⁴³

The model of embodiment described by Grosz regards the body, in Deleuze and Guattari's language, as a "machinic assemblage." This concept is radically democratic in so far as it counts a wide range of phenomena as bodies and refrains from privileging one

³⁴² Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, 125-126.

³⁴³ Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 164-165.

kind of body or relation over another. There is nothing special about a naturally occurring body; human bodies are not elevated above their vegetal counterparts. Corporeal difference is a matter of degree: what counts is the effects and affects produced by the body, irrespective of its compositional heritage. The consequences for environmental ethics implied in the concept of machinic assemblage will be explored later.

Thinking bodies as machinic assemblages extends the Spinozan notion of bodies as essentially composites whose identity is determined by the unified effect they produce. An assemblage for Deleuze and Guattari is a multiplicity, or a heterogeneous event that derives its consistency (or integrity) from a certain threshold for change. This threshold is governed by the active conjunctions which make up the assemblage. Assemblages are always provisional, nonhierarchical, and precariously organized.³⁴⁴ They subsist only as long as they actively maintain their constitutive ratio of motion and rest, that is, their intensity.³⁴⁵ An intensity is a bodily event directly related to the “*capacity* to enter into relations of movement and rest”.³⁴⁶ It is the body’s power, which can be assembled in myriad ways and with a variety of inorganic and organic components. Think of a wolf pack or a school of fish darting through the sea. These are natural events, and thus would seem to be governed by a fixed natural law. But this is not the case according to Deleuze and Guattari. Assemblages are dynamic unities, immanently organized and constructed ad hoc—*haecceities*.

Deleuze and Guattari conscript the medieval concept of haecceity because it allows them to think identity and individuation in terms of events, intensities, and

³⁴⁴ Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 167.

³⁴⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 33.

³⁴⁶ Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 15.

becoming. This notion is behind their idea of a body without organs, which is something like an impersonal, roughly delimited, field of desire. An haecceity, in short, is an “accidental form.”³⁴⁷ It contrasts clearly with the notion of substance, substantial form, person, subject, thing, and so forth, each of which is held to be self-sustaining and in some sense necessary. Again, they are thinking along with Spinoza when they define a body as an haecceity, here presented in cartographic terms:

A body is not defined by the form that determines it nor as a determinate substance or subject nor by the organs it possesses or the functions it fulfills. On the plane of consistency, *a body is defined only by a longitude and a latitude*: in other words the sum total of the material elements belonging to it under given relations of movement and rest, speed and slowness (longitude); the sum total of the intensive affects it is capable of at a given power or degree of potential (latitude). Nothing but affects and local movements, differential speeds.³⁴⁸

The concept of haecceity enables us to think of individuation, and therefore identity, as a contingent intercorporeity, or plasticity. This is helpful because we have been arguing against a substantial view of identity while simultaneously trying to articulate a theory of identity which displays fluid as well as stable elements, and determines these elements immanently. Following Spinoza, Deleuze and Guattari provide a number of resources for thinking corporeal plasticity, although they seem to push the fluidity of their body without organs to an untenable extreme. What opens up on this understanding is the potential meaning of “individual” and “body.” Consequently, what a body *is*, as well as what it *can do*, becomes a perpetually open question; the body’s power becomes free to proliferate, and the individual free to develop, under the right conditions. The pragmatic function of conceiving the body as an assemblage will become clearer as we progress.

³⁴⁷ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 253.

³⁴⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 260.

What is more salient in the Deleuzian/Guattarian development of the composite body is the machinic feature. In *Anti-Oedipus*, a machine is defined as what introduces interruptions into otherwise continuous flows of material (*hyle*): a machine is “a *system of interruptions* or breaks.” The orifices of our bodies are machines because they interrupt the flow of air (mouth) and the flow of sound (ear) and the flow of feces (anus).³⁴⁹ Our bodies, then, are complex machines insofar as their sensory apparatus works as a unified device for cutting up the manifold of sensory material which it encounters. At the same time that it cuts, the machinic body is apt to create linkages to other bodies, that is, assemblages composed of intensive relations and affective transactions. Machines engage in transactions that assemble “disparate elements,” which means that they cut into and synthesize material from any and all realms. Think of a soldier with a titanium prosthetic arm. Think of a person whose masochistic desires require leather or stone or plants for them to reach sexual satisfaction.³⁵⁰ These people are machines; their identity, materially composite. There is a certain technique or artisanship to this process,³⁵¹ which the body already possesses insofar as it effortlessly hooks into environments which produce effects that are natural, artificial, physical, linguistic, and abstract. Since the body is never without a nourishing environment composed of disparate elements, or prostheses/tools, we could reasonably assert that it takes no stretch of the imagination to see that the human body just is a machine in Deleuze and Guattari’s sense.³⁵²

³⁴⁹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, trans. Robert Hurley et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 36.

³⁵⁰ On masochism as machinism, see Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 155-156.

³⁵¹ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 344.347.

³⁵² It seems to me that an account of the machinic dimension of the body is lacking in Merleau-Ponty and Levinas. It is true that both thinkers recognize that subjects are in part constituted, and thus never outside, of a sociolinguistic milieu, but the notion that the subject’s body is always caught up in a complex web of materials and material forces that literally sculpt the identity of the body, this seems to be missing. For other accounts of the machinic, the work of Donna Haraway and N. Katherine Hayles are good resources.

Before going any further I want to gather a fuller account of the meaning of plasticity and suggest some of its implications for embodiment and identity theory. This will enable us to understand how the machinic body is plastic and how the integration of body and environment is critical to understanding corporeal plasticity. Finally, it will prepare us to see how the body's plasticity is determined by its aesthetic constitution, that is, the history of its sensory apparatus.

If it is at least plausible to claim that the modern account of embodiment is marked by the view that there is a substantial core or stable structure to the body, whereas the postmodern era is characterized by a desire to see the body vanish into an anonymous field of desire, pleasure, and fluctuation, then the concept of plasticity belongs to neither historical period.³⁵³ Given this partition, it would seem that Merleau-Ponty belongs in neither the modern nor postmodern camp, for he downplays bodily anonymity just as much as he discards modernist substance ontology. Regardless, he does not deliver us a plastic body; the operation of his reversible body is more akin to elasticity. Elasticity is here understood on the model of the rubber band. The rubber band is flexible and deformable, but in the absence of resistance or external force it tends toward a specific formal state. Accordingly, it is not open to permanent deformation. Permanent deformation means breakage and the elimination of the precise disposition which constituted the rubber band—elasticity. The disappearance of its elasticity is equivalent to death for the rubber band.

For a phenomenological perspective, see Don Ihde, *Bodies in Technology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); for commentary on Deleuze's concept of machine, see Slavoj Žižek, *Organs Without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 15-19.

³⁵³ I borrow this facile distinction from Mullarkey, "Duplicity in the Flesh," 340, who argues that Bergson too fits in neither the modern nor postmodern era when it comes to thinking of the body.

In the Merleau-Pontyan lived body there are a number of features which exhibit an elasticity, the absence of which would spell the death of the body-subject. These include the structures of consciousness (intentionality, perspectival perception), the body schema, practical freedom or ability (the “I can,” which effectively operates as a transcendental norm and therefore makes inability a secondary mode of comportment), and the general tendency toward convergence attributed to perception.³⁵⁴ Throughout each of its engagements with the world, others, alterity in general, the reversible body maintains its relative stability by championing a series of quasi-transcendent structures which are admittedly malleable, but not indeterminately so. If anything, their malleability is always seeking to return to the equilibrium point which we defined earlier as body-world synchronization. This view of embodiment is accomplished only by quarantining the objective body and suspending the question of how its physiology and materiality interfere with, as well as support, the phenomenological world of perception. As I have argued, what threatens to undo or undermine the body’s elasticity is the sensory field and its contact with the autonomic system, along with the material composition of the body more generally. This is not to say that Merleau-Ponty lacks any notion of plasticity. On the contrary, style and habit display a marked plasticity in his thinking. And we must take care to situate their plasticity at the material level in addition to the phenomenal.

Plasticity is opposed to both malleability and substantiality. It is, at bottom, neither stability nor instability. Remarking on current research on the brain, Catherine Malabou writes that “the word *plasticity* has two basic senses: it means at once the

³⁵⁴ I mean to suggest here that when Merleau-Ponty writes of “the body,” he often has in mind the average able body, complete with its ability to circumnavigate objects, explore them unceasingly, and move itself about the world with relative freedom. This does not entail that Merleau-Ponty neglects to analyze the disabled body (see his analysis of Schneider, for example), but that one cannot help but see Schneider as somehow deficient when compared to the body which *Phenomenology of Perception* generally speaks about. There is something “special” about Schneider.

capacity to *receive form* (clay is called ‘plastic’, for example) and the capacity to *give form* (as in the plastic arts or in plastic surgery). Talking about the plasticity of the brain thus amounts to thinking of the brain as something modifiable, ‘formable’, and formative as the same time.”³⁵⁵ This conception of plasticity is not meant to suggest that the brain is merely flexible, for as Malabou goes on to show, the brain is at once prone to historical deformations *and* capable to effecting historical deformations. “To be flexible is to receive a form or impression, to be able to fold oneself, to take the fold, not to give it. To be docile, to not explode. Indeed, what flexibility lacks is the resource of giving form, the power to create, to invent or even to erase an impression, the power to style. Flexibility is plasticity minus its genius.”³⁵⁶ The brain is docile to a degree, but this docility is at once a matter of tolerance and creation, taken together as a single trait: creative tolerance. Our brains are, to an extent, genetically determined, but it is this necessary determination that allows for “a possible margin of improvisation” that is at once singularly determined and historically singularizing.³⁵⁷ Every body’s experience will likewise be singular, which means that no two bodies will encounter the same object in identical ways.

Plasticity describes the simultaneous determinacy and indeterminacy of morphogenesis. In other words, the potential of the body to transform its initial determination.³⁵⁸ Even if it is granted that the human brain displays a universal anatomy, or that its physical makeup is structurally invariable, learning and memory—history in general—will guarantee that no two brains are the same. In this history, “repetition and habit play a considerable role, and this reveals that the response of a nervous circuit is

³⁵⁵ Catherine Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, trans. Sebastian Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 5.

³⁵⁶ Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, 12.

³⁵⁷ Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, 6, 8. See also Andrieu, “Brains in the Flesh,” 148.

³⁵⁸ See the “open” and “closed” senses of plasticity discussed by Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, 15-16.

never fixed. Plasticity thus adds the functions of artist and instructor in freedom and autonomy to its role as sculptor.”³⁵⁹ The singular identity of the individual brain will emerge from that gap opened up between freedom and determination, which is to say, in the space of history. The integrity of the individual will be determined by how the body’s mechanisms are transformed by the experiences it suffers. Plasticity is the “eventlike dimension of the mechanical,” which,

between determinism and freedom, designates all the types of transformation deployed between the closed meaning of plasticity (the definitive character of form) and its open meaning (the malleability of form). It does this to such a degree that cerebral systems today appear as self-sculpted structures that, without being elastic or polymorphic, still tolerate constant self-reworking, differences in destiny, and the fashioning of a singular identity.³⁶⁰

Our brains are machines, but machines that repair themselves and reprogram themselves according to information they receive from their surroundings. The identities they achieve strike a balance between passivity and activity, infinite possibility and finite determination. At the end of the day, however, their constitution will give way to the exigencies of the material world, leaving only the trace of their singular destiny.

A similar line of thinking is pursued in Foucault’s work on history and embodiment. He employs the term “docility” to describe the body invested with power and disciplinary techniques, but the manner in which he is thinking docility resonates with the notion of plasticity under discussion. The docile bodies populating *Discipline and Punish* seem, on the one hand, merely pliable, or “flexible” in Malabou’s sense. They are *made* to take on a preprogrammed form, rendered automatic or mechanical by the machinations of state power. Foucault writes of how “the soldier has become something that can be made; out of formless clay, an inapt body, the machine required can be

³⁵⁹ Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, 24.

³⁶⁰ Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, 30, 38.

constructed; posture is gradually corrected; a calculated constraint runs slowly through each part of the body, mastering it, making it pliable, ready at all times, turning silently into the automatism of habit.”³⁶¹ But this is only half the story. The body would not take on this apparent automatism were it not for its capacity to take on any number of historically determined forms. When Foucault says that the body has to be broken down and rearranged, he is acknowledging that disciplinary techniques must grapple with corporeal determinations that offer resistance and harbor their own power. “Discipline increases the forces of the body...and diminishes these same forces.... In short, it dissociates power from the body” and transforms the body into an “aptitude” or “capacity.”³⁶² Recalling James’s definition of plasticity, the disciplined body is given a structure strong enough to resist power, but weak enough to yield to a sufficiently technical and more intense power.

The event-like structure of the body is given further expression in “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” where Foucault explicitly rejects the view that the body is an ahistorical, physiologically determined entity: “The body is *molded* by a great many distinct regimes; it is broken down by the rhythms of work, rest, and holidays; it is poisoned by food or values, through eating habits or moral laws; it *constructs* resistances.” Ultimately, its history is “without constants,” which means that it is plastic in the sense we have been discussing.³⁶³

³⁶¹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1977), 135.

³⁶² Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 138.

³⁶³ Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 87 (emphasis added). Judith Butler has argued that, despite his proclamations to the contrary, Foucault’s body does display certain constants. This is evident in his employment, in “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” of metaphors and figures of inscription, and his description of the body as a “surface.” Moreover, it is present in *Discipline and Punish*, wherein Foucault argues that, for disciplined prisoners, the “law is not literally internalized, but incorporated *on* [their] bodies.”³⁶³ Butler is worried that Foucault is retaining a notion of the body as precultural material medium upon which historical

Malabou's investigation of plasticity is following, in the philosophical tradition, the naturalistic insights of James and Dewey, although she never writes of either. She finds plasticity prevalent in Hegel; I have been arguing that it is basic to Spinozism. What she says about the brain can be profitably broadened to describe the constitution of the body. This need not lead to a reductive physicalism, however. Phenomenology, and the phenomenological sympathies of the pragmatists, can help us avoid that course. For instance, Bernard Andrieu, following Francisco Varela and others, is undertaking a program which he calls "neurophenomenology," which focuses on the genesis and plasticity of the cognitive body, but considers equally legitimate the phenomenological and neuroscientific descriptions of this process. Central to this "dynamic materialism" is an updated notion of Merleau-Ponty's *flesh*, which Andrieu says "defines the historic construction of the nervous system through the interaction of the body with the world and the progressive embodiment of these incorporations."³⁶⁴ The temporal dimension of the construction of the body is linked to the principle of plasticity, which says that the body "must first be understood as an interaction with its environment because it is itself the receptive matter both informed and informing." Merleau-Ponty may not have been willing to subscribe to this materialist program for the flesh, but his thinking does exhibit sympathy for the kind of mutual formation described by Andrieu and Malabou. This is evident in his conception of habit.

significations are inscribed, a notion she completely rejects because of its complicity with naturalized gender norms. Butler's critique is right to target this complicity, but if what we have said about brain plasticity is correct, then we have some reason to imagine the brain (or the body) as a surface of inscription, albeit a surface which is less like a blank slate and more like a rolled out piece of dough. It could be argued that the neuronal determination of the brain is culturally formed, but this does not mean that its form is indiscriminately malleable or without certain biological necessities. See Judith Butler, "Foucault and the Paradox of Bodily Inscriptions," *The Journal of Philosophy* 86, no. 11 (November 1989): 603, 605.

³⁶⁴ Andrieu, "Brains in the Flesh," 137.

Recall that for Merleau-Ponty habits are like original prostheses of the body. Habits offer a stability to the body without fixing it completely. They render the body automatic to a degree, but this automatism is never complete. The body is not born with a set of specific habits, but almost immediately the body adopts habits which endow it with a specific integrity and allow it to negotiate its situations with relative ease. Habits belong among the historical a priori which condition perception and action; they arrange and rearrange the body schema, while leaving the body open to receive new habits. Habits are not just passively received, however: they are projected out into the environment as actions whose repetition wears down the environment in specific ways. The possibilities for habituation are limited by the effects of habit introduced into the layout of the environment. Now, I think a general conception of habit is essential to understanding body plasticity. In fact, we might say that habit is emblematic of plasticity, but it is not sufficient to keep our discussion of habit at the level of perception, without serious consideration of its material aspects. We saw in our earlier discussion that an account of habit is provided by the pragmatists. I turn to them now to consider habit from a naturalistic perspective which is not incompatible with, but rather supplemental to, the phenomenological.

In James's account in the *Principles of Psychology*, habituation takes hold in the neural network of the brain. And it is precisely this network's plasticity which enables the body's acquisition of habits. The "physics" of plasticity, in this case, implies that the nervous system is susceptible to a series of sets of habits which make up its structure at a given historical point; each successive phase of the structure contains a specific integrity,

which resists alteration while at the same time remaining susceptible to influence.³⁶⁵ The influence of the body's sensory life carves pathways in its nervous system, predisposing it to particular patterns of behavior which correspond to these pathways.³⁶⁶

Habits, then, display internal and external aspects.³⁶⁷ Neither of these can be reduced when considering the identity of the body. On the one hand, the neural pathways which are recorded in the material of the body physically determine the range of actions and passions it is capable of at any given time. On the other hand, the range of behaviors which the body exhibits at a specified point in its life will make up its style and will make it recognizable as an individual. The variability of this style—which can come from reflection or situational changes, for instance—introduces a degree of indeterminacy into the practical life of the body that can effect an alteration of its habitual set.

Just as the neural pathway is a kind of circuit along which habits flow, the behavioral aspect of habits can be regarded as circuitous. Doing so allows us to see how the habits which each one of us adopt can come to constitute our bodily identity. Habits economize our actions by locking us into certain behavioral patterns, while also releasing our attention to explore new modes of action. James's description of an habitual circuit of behavior is as mechanical as much as it is phenomenological. "In action grown habitual, what instigates each new muscular contraction to take place in its appointed order is not a thought or a perception, but the *sensation occasioned by the muscular contraction just*

³⁶⁵ James, *Principles*, volume 1, 104-105.

³⁶⁶ James, *Principles*, volume 1, 107-108.

³⁶⁷ For an updated version of how our neural maps are built up from an organism's interaction with the topology of its environment, see Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body*, 126-134. Johnson makes the connection between neural maps and behavior in terms of plasticity, and argues the nonreductionist point I am establishing here: "we must always be clear that an organism never actually experiences its neural maps as internal mental structures. We do not experience the *maps*, but rather *through them* we experience a structured world full of patterns and qualities" (132).

*finished.*³⁶⁸ The idea here is that habits are chains of sensations and muscular responses, set in motion by a single intellectual impulse. The sensations occur below the level of conscious attention, but this does not mean that they are not registered by the body. Indeed, they are situated somewhere between the physiological and phenomenological body: “that they are more than unconscious nerve-currents seems certain, for they catch our attention if they go wrong.”³⁶⁹ Quoting a certain Schneider, James dubs habits “processes of inattentive feeling.”³⁷⁰

Favoring a more holistic rendering of the habitual act, the phenomenologist will want to downplay the inattentive and reflexive elements of this description of habit. Interestingly, it is the phenomenologist who would provide us with an expansive description of the series of sensations and muscular contractions which comprise a given habitual behavior. The key difference between the mechanical and phenomenological accounts of a circuit of behavior will rest with the latter’s insistence on the intentionality motivating the circuit. Now, there is no reason why we cannot regard habits as motivated by intentional aims, but proceeding mechanically. To do so, however, we must admit a certain autonomy—i.e., a degree of nonconscious activity—to the sensations propelling the mechanism.

James’s account of habitual circuits leads us to see that our corporeal identities, insofar as they are comprised of sets of habits, are made up of a series of responses which is correlated to a series of sensations. In other words, our body’s integrity is at least partly determined by the sensory circuits to which it responds. These circuits have aesthetic, phenomenological, and affective elements. They constitute the substratum of our

³⁶⁸ James, *Principles*, volume 1, 115.

³⁶⁹ James, *Principles*, volume 1, 118.

³⁷⁰ James, *Principles*, volume 1, 120.

everyday lives. Of course, we carve out our own circuits, but we just as often adopt them from the rituals and routines of culture. We may commute, dine, and shop like everyone else, but we might also invent, collaborate, and produce like no other. These rituals and routines find themselves recorded in the musculature of our bodies and driven by the mundane sensations of the everyday. These circuits coalesce into a system that subtracts from the abundance of incoming sensations and outgoing efforts required to sustain life. They make up what Schneider calls our “body’s attitude,”³⁷¹ which is analogous to what we have called proprioception. As Massumi shows, the “habitual autopilot” of our daily navigation is linked to the body’s proprioception, and is predominantly a noncognitive orienting.³⁷² Our body’s attitude, its individuality and orientation, emerges from its habitual economy.

To better capture the complexity and diversity of our identities, the notion of circuit can be generalized and applied to all aspects of our existence. This is because circuits, as plastic structures, display a relative stability. This would allow us to speak of political and moral circuits, for example, which might include the patterns of thought, action, and speech typical of a particular political ideology or moral framework.³⁷³ At the base of any circuit would have to be a consideration of the sensory and affective content of that circuit, for these are what regulate and keep us attached to the circuit, even if our attachment results from a diminished or indifferent concern for the circuit’s value. It is arguable that, although we are quasi-automatically attached to our habits, we remain attached to them only insofar as they retain a degree of importance. Importance can come

³⁷¹ Cited in James, *Principles*, volume 1, 118.

³⁷² Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 179-180.

³⁷³ See, for example, Henri Bergson, *Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, trans. R. Ashley Audra and Cloudesley Brereton (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977) and Davide Panagia, *The Political Life of Sensation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

from the understanding, yes, but ultimately importance can only dictate our actions if we are *passionate* about it.³⁷⁴ What we are passionate about is what gives our body incomparable pleasure and draws it near, or what infests our body with frustration and rage, thus repelling it. In short, our affective responses keep us locked into a circuit of behavior or induce us to switch to another circuit. Affects are a currency traded in the habitual economy.

We can think of the totality of the circuits which orient our individual lives as defining our *territory*, while considering each individual habit as a *milieu*. These two terms bear a mutually determining relation in the work of Deleuze and Guattari; they likewise are conceptually specific. Territory is relatively demarcated and abides by a specific set of laws: it is stratified. If we are thinking about bodily habits, their fixed or automatic aspect would be symptomatic of the body as territorialized, or “coded.” The milieu, by contrast, is defined by its instability and liminal nature: a milieu occurs between two clearly defined spaces, like a border, and maintains only a relative or fleeting stability. A habit is like a milieu in that it is susceptible to deformation and dependent on the stability of surrounding environmental conditions; it maintains its integrity in virtue of these conditions, but it is not fully determined by them. This is its plasticity.

Deleuze and Guattari consider milieus in terms of rhythm and haecceity. This will give us a means of understanding the sensory link between our body and its environment.

³⁷⁴ I am following a line of argument that is found in Bernard Williams, Simon Blackburn, and Alphonso Lingis. It holds that, although our ethical commitments may include cognitive processes and the rational weighing of maxims, we really only act on what we value, that is, what we find important. Nothing is important in itself; importance derives from passionate attachment. See Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 182; Simon Blackburn, *Ruling Passions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), especially chapter 5; Alphonso Lingis, *The First Person Singular* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007), chapter 7.

Their position can be compared with Dewey's theories of form and growth, which focus on the qualitative and aesthetic dimensions of embodiment and, not unlike Levinas, offers us an account of the alimentary function of sensation.

Considering the way in which they invest the bodies that populate them, territories, or "territorialities (habitual constellations of affects and patterns of movement),"³⁷⁵ are not very different from what we have been calling circuits. A territory lays down certain laws or codes which organize and are obeyed by the bodies inhabiting their space. *Nomos* becomes *ethos*: This act is performative.³⁷⁶ Territories emerge when the qualities of a milieu or a rhythm are forced to express the marks/coordinates of the territory.³⁷⁷ When formalized or afforded a certain propriety, this expressiveness becomes a signature, or style. Territorialization occurs when an otherwise nonsignifying set of qualities are made to signify or represent a particular style: "One puts one's signature on something just as one plants one's flag on a piece of land." A birdsong, or refrain, works in this way. The birdsong delimits a territory by marking the sonic boundaries of the bird's property. This is accomplished by a "little tune" or "melodic formula" whose performance enacts a territorialization.³⁷⁸ In the same way, our bodies come to function by innumerable cultural refrains, some of which we enact for ourselves, like the frightened child who, "gripped with fear, comforts himself by singing under his breath." Like any body whose posture or gesture reproduces the body language of a particular

³⁷⁵ Brian Massumi, *A User's Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia: Deviations from Deleuze and Guattari* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 135.

³⁷⁶ Fuller analyses of performativity can be found in *A Thousand Plateaus*, but also in the work of Foucault, Butler, and Althusser in the continental tradition; Austin and Searle, in the analytic tradition.

³⁷⁷ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 314-315.

³⁷⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 312.

cultural setting, he builds a little space of comfort around him with a sound that shelters him from the indeterminacy that haunts his imagination.³⁷⁹

Despite the fixity of territory, bodies and spaces display characteristics which operate against and undo territorial codes. Improvisation, for instance. Improvisation, or any chance encounter, is made possible by the “cracks” in territories, which Deleuze and Guattari call milieus. A milieu is like an unstable, but not inconsistent, qualitative dimension of a territory. And just as territorialization operates on milieus, milieus rely upon territories for expression of their style or integrity. The dialectical relation here is not pure, however, because milieus take ontological priority over territories. “The territory is the product of a territorialization of milieus and rhythms.”³⁸⁰ Milieus bear within them rhythms which produce their identities. The rhythm of a milieu is its code,³⁸¹ but it must be noted that this rhythm is never proper to a milieu, but resonates *between* two or more milieus. The rhythm is an haecceity, an intensive threshold which is constantly produced and reproduced—by a movement of involution—by the difference or in-between that constitutes the milieu. It is this “difference that is rhythmic, not the repetition, which nevertheless produces it.”³⁸² Milieus present the transactional space or passage between two heterogeneously coded stabilities, “*the interior milieu of impulses and the exterior milieu of circumstances*,”³⁸³ for instance. As a threshold between inside and outside, a body operates as a milieu and is prone to the same kind of instability and determination.

³⁷⁹ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 311.

³⁸⁰ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 314.

³⁸¹ Rhythm gives us an immanent conception of form or code, as discussed earlier in this chapter. Consider what Massumi, *A User's Guide*, 51, writes: “A pattern or repeated acts is a ‘code’. A code is always of a ‘milieu’, or relatively stable, often statistical, mixing of elements.... A code is the same as a ‘form’ in the sense discussed above (an order and organization of functions).”

³⁸² Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 314.

³⁸³ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 317 (emphasis in original).

This gets a straightforward naturalistic presentation in Dewey's work on habit, a process he explicitly characterizes, following James, as plastic. Dewey explicitly presents two phenomena that are for the most part latent in the phenomenologists: the material *dependence* and *growth* of the subject on its environmental circumstances. It is true that Levinas gets at this aspect of existence in his notion of living from, but his analysis fails to consider dependence from the perspective of natural life and is virtually silent, as is Merleau-Ponty, on the growth of the body.³⁸⁴ In *Human Nature and Conduct*, Dewey speaks about the "plasticity of impulse," whereas in *Democracy and Education* he considers growth in terms of plasticity as well as dependence. In the former text, plasticity *prima facie* denotes a state of complete indeterminacy, as though our impulses were an unrestrained chaos of drives. But we quickly learn that plasticity signifies for Dewey an "original modifiability" that is initially determined by its interactions with the environment. Plasticity, then, signifies neither pure novelty nor pure docility, neither activity nor passivity: "the most precious part of plasticity consists in ability to form habits" which are (1) flexible and (2) modify sedimented customs and institutions.³⁸⁵ Impulses are creative in that they instigate the renewal of habit, which is itself an ability and an art.³⁸⁶ Habits "are adjustments *of* the environment, not merely *to* it. At the same time, the environment is many, not one; hence will, disposition, is plural."³⁸⁷ Our habits are as diverse as the environments they respond to; the latter take on the dispositions we

³⁸⁴ Hans Jonas's *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1966) is a notable exception to the claim that phenomenology generally neglects the natural and material aspects of our dependence on the environment. It's true that Merleau-Ponty thematizes maturation in "The Child's Relations with Others," but I would contend that his concern is fundamentally psychological, and does not consider the growth of the body *qua* material entity.

³⁸⁵ Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 70. An institution for Dewey is an "embodied habit" (77).

³⁸⁶ Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 47.

³⁸⁷ Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 38.

impart to them, the former are symptomatic of how we have been compelled to adapt to resistances.

Much of this sounds like Merleau-Ponty, and we might be inclined to think that the lived body is plastic in some respects. This is correct. Especially with regard to his concepts of habit, style, and postural schema, there is much plasticity in Merleau-Ponty's body-subject. What it leaves out, however, is an account of the growth and disintegration of the body. Even in "The Child's Relations with Others," the body is presented as mature and capable; its relations, habitual yet regulated by "a single global phenomenon," perception. As Merleau-Ponty writes, "the internal characteristics of the subject always intervene in his way of establishing his relations with what is outside him. It is never simply the outside which molds him; it is he himself who takes a position in the face of the external conditions" (Child 108/17). Absent here is the physical growth of the child, which will determine the manner in which he or she will receive and process—or fail to do so—environmental relations. And while it is true to say that this physical development is never simply a matter of the outside "molding" the inside, it must be admitted that the internal relation between subject and object entails, at least initially, an asymmetrical relation of dependence whereby the subject (child) is deeply susceptible to outside influence. This dependence signifies the need for growth as well as a state of immaturity. Neither of these should be interpreted negatively, however. Dependence and immaturity, as Dewey shows, assert their own productive forces.

The child's body is exemplary, but all human bodies develop. After development, disintegration. Both of these stages can be given positive treatments, provided they are taken on their own terms rather than comparatively. Immaturity is not simply an absent or

nascent maturity: immaturity is a power, the capacity to grow. This capacity is at once a dependence and a plasticity, for Dewey. Plasticity here indicates the “specific adaptability of an immature creature for growth.” This is not equivalent to “a capacity to take on change of form in accord with external pressure,” but rather it is the “power to modify actions on the basis of the results of prior experiences, the power to *develop dispositions*. Without it, the acquisition of habits is impossible.” Dewey locates the subject’s plasticity *below* the level of disposition and habit, thus giving it a transcendental aspect. But this aspect is nothing more than the volatility of organic processes. It is not that biology is prior to culture, but that structure is emergent, resilient, and susceptible. In other words, the condition of possibility for habit acquisition is experimentation, or the indeterminate determinacy of a socially embedded impulse and instinct. Growth comes with the acquisition of habits, which enable independence and maturity. This independence comes with increased control of the body, adaptation to the environment, as well as creation of the environment. And it is only when our habits become routine, when we get locked into circuits of behavior, that our plasticity is paralyzed. The tendency toward decreased plasticity, the dissolution of the power to grow, often quickens with age.

Dewey explicitly links the habituation of the subject with his/her qualitative surroundings—the aesthetics of the environment. Our growth depends on the sensations our bodies exchange with others like and unlike our own. Like Levinas, for Dewey we live from our sensations. This is because we are sensitive and susceptible organisms whose habits serve to increase “susceptibility, sensitiveness, responsiveness.” An

individual's capacity to exist, their power, is directly determined by the exchange of habits for new sensations:

Thus even if we think of habits as so many grooves, the power to acquire many and varied grooves denotes high sensitivity, explosiveness. Thereby an old habit, a fixed groove if one wishes to exaggerate, gets in the way of the process of forming a new habit while the tendency to form a new one cuts across some old habit. Hence, instability, novelty, emergence of unexpected and unpredictable combinations. The more an organism learns—the more that is, the former terms of a historic process are retained and integrated in this present phase—the more it has to learn, in order to keep itself going; otherwise death and catastrophe.³⁸⁸

Given that sensitivity here entails a capacity to take on and annihilate form, i.e., indicates a certain plasticity, increased exposure to different sensory environments can lead to the sedimentation or explosion of an individual's ethos (understood here as habituated identity). It is important to note that Dewey regards death here as the inability of an organism to continue learning. In other words, death is the extinguishing of growth, or the slackening of plasticity. Life is the force which enables novelty by replacing old habits with new ones.

In *The Meaning of the Body*, Johnson shows how important the aesthetic dimension is for the body to make sense of its environment. He notes that the aesthetic is usually downplayed in our discussions of experience, precisely because we mistakenly take a conceptual limitation to be a limitation on meaningful experience. Put otherwise, we disregard the qualitative dimension because it belongs to the affective realm, rather than the cognitive or perceptual. Even phenomenology, Johnson notes, “has a hard time with the qualitative dimension, for it is easier to describe the *structural* aspects of experience than it is to describe felt qualities. The tendency is thus always to look for the

³⁸⁸ John Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, (Mineola: Dover, 1958), 281. Malabou discusses the “explosive” connotation of plasticity and links this explosiveness to vitality as such (*What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, 5, 72).

constituting structures of experience, at the expense of the actual experience of qualities.” Following Dewey, Johnson shows that qualities—which occur between bodies, and are thereby liminal events—are felt, and as such allow the sentience of the body to immanently discriminate the meaning of events and objects. “Once we are struck, caught up, seized,” writes Johnson, “only then can we discriminate elements within our present situation.” Sensations instigate the dialogue between subject and object.

What discriminates? Our bodies, whose sensorimotor and neural makeup, both the products of material growth, “determine what stands out, for us, from a situation or scene. Therefore, how we ‘take’ objects would change if our bodies, brains, or environments changed in some radical way.”³⁸⁹ Rarely radical, our bodies are constantly adapting to the aesthetic provocations of their surroundings. Only upon this instigation are they moved to adapt and make sense of things. As Johnson concludes, “we are living in and through a growing, changing situation that opens up toward new possibilities and that is transformed as it develops. That is the way human meaning works, and none of this happens without our bodies, or without our embodied interactions within environments that we inhabit and that change along with us.”³⁹⁰ Our bodies take on the qualitative meaning of their environments, and thus their integrity depends on these environments. The body’s sensibility is just this capacity to be formed and deformed, charged with affects and sensations which it encounters in the qualitative realm.

It must be noted that a similar idea is available in Edward Casey’s work on place. Casey’s phenomenological perspective runs up against the same limitation that we find in Merleau-Ponty, but it helpfully explicates this limitation. Understanding this shortcoming

³⁸⁹ Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body*, 76.

³⁹⁰ Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body*, 83.

allows us to see that the reversible (phenomenological, lived) body must be supplemented with an account of the irreversible and excessive dimension of embodiment. Casey writes of the disorienting effect of wild places or wilderness on the body. Built places, by contrast, serve to orient and sustain the properly human dimensions of the body.³⁹¹ Disorientation in wild or natural places is, he writes, “often radically independent of human corporeal intentionality, to the point of challenging and undermining this intentionality.”³⁹² This point is precisely what we indicated (in terms of violence) as deficient in Merleau-Ponty’s analyses. What we realize in the wilderness, for Casey, is that body and world are only reversible in familiar, manageable places. Everyday places. And yet, the radical independence that wild places present to us is only radical as an excess of intentional content. That is, their independence is only relative to the reach of intentional experience, which means that the source of their disorienting effect can only be inferred. Wild places tell us that the intentional arc of our bodies does not constitute the world. The phenomenology of wild place stops here, however. It cannot tell us what the excess of intentionality is made of.³⁹³

Places are liable to orient as much as disorient us. This is just as true of built places as wild ones, contrary to what Casey says. This is precisely what makes architectural design so important, and why specialists are needed to carry out this design work. Otherwise, disorienting places are more likely to be constructed. My claim at this point is that disorientation as well as orientation spring from the sensory environment, not just the perceptual or intentional realms. On this view, our bodies respond to directives

³⁹¹ Edward S. Casey, *Getting Back into Place* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 223.

³⁹² Casey, *Getting Back into Place*, 224.

³⁹³ I am indebted to Patrick Craig for alerting me to this point in Casey’s work and for much helpful discussion of the problems of phenomenological method. This deficiency in Casey’s early work seems to be overcome in his later book, *The World At a Glance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), although I admit that I have not yet gone carefully through that text.

imparted to them below the level of structured perception. These directives cannot become the object of intentionality, or if they can it is only from the perspective of reflection, because they contact the body's sensibility directly—they *animate* us, sometimes to the point of disorientation. It is in this sense that they exceed the phenomena of perception. These directives, what Lingis calls imperatives, are thus ambivalent. This is their volatility. Every place, I would argue, harbors this volatile dimension because every place is constituted by an aesthetic dimension that affects us in diversifying as well as stultifying ways.

In the previous chapter, I introduced the idea that sensations operate on our bodies as imperatives. Following Kant's distinction, we could say that sensuous imperatives command either hypothetically or categorically.³⁹⁴ As we pursue our practical aims, the aesthetics of our environment offer numerous dimensions and pathways, each with its own sensory atmosphere. In many cases I am able to choose from a finite set of routes the one I wish to take. I leave my house for groceries. There is a busy street with cars, buses, and pedestrians that leads to the market; there is a quieter residential street that also leads to my destination. I must take *a* street, but the specific one I choose is up to me. This is the hypothetical dimension. Now, once I am committed to a single route I find myself inserted in a sensory milieu that makes unique claims on my body's sensory apparatus. My body is commanded categorically by the sensations comprising the milieu; it cannot but receive and respond to these sensations, which are "not reactions to physical causality nor adjustments to physical pressures, nor free and spontaneous impositions of order on

³⁹⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, third edition, trans. James W. Ellington (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), 25.

amorphous data, but responses to directives.”³⁹⁵ Our carnal sensibility obeys environmental commands, but not necessarily as a form of subjection. Sensibility, because it is of the same environment it responds to, is what precisely enables the body to get along in the environment. Sensibility is the body’s freedom.³⁹⁶

To flesh out the sensuous form of the imperative, Lingis takes up Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the levels of perception. Lingis writes of “the level of light which our gaze adjusts to and see with as it looks at the illuminated contours that surface and intensify, the level of the sonority our hearing attunes to as it harkens to sounds and noises that rise out of it, the level of the tangible our posture finds as our limbs move across the contours and textures of tangible substances....”³⁹⁷ What makes the levels different from the objects of perception is that the former are decidedly *ungraspable*. Their adumbrations cannot be explored and enumerated. Our bodies cannot pursue a better hold on them, cannot enter into a dialectical relation which will slowly converge on their essence. To engage a level, the body “adjusts to it, is sustained by it, moves with it and according to it.”³⁹⁸ In a word, the body is animated by the sensoriality of the levels. A place—the world as a whole—is composed of a nexus of levels. Its style is determined by this nexus, and it is a style we cannot “survey from above.” The style of a place is something our bodies “catch on to by moving with it;” it is not given to us in perception, but engaged as an imperative whose force comes from the “sensorial patterns” which order intentionality.³⁹⁹

³⁹⁵ Lingis, *The Imperative*, 3.

³⁹⁶ Lingis, *The Imperative*, 4.

³⁹⁷ Lingis, *Sensation*, 33.

³⁹⁸ Lingis, *Sensation*, 33.

³⁹⁹ Lingis, *Sensation*, 33, 35, 36-37. Lingis’s thought here is that if perception wants to perceive things, it must adjust itself to the levels in which things are situated. To pursue the adumbrations of an objects, the body must subject itself to shifting dimensions of the levels. In a general sense, the levels are elemental and

From an aesthetic perspective, we can think of the identity of places as defined by the sensations they harbor, the nexus of levels they contain, and the circuits of behavioral responses they elicit. The body is susceptible to the imperative force of each of these environmental aspects. And insofar as these elements are perpetually shifting and prone to variation, we could say that a place's sensory identity is never fixed in its form, but maintains an integrity which is that of an haecceity—a relatively stable and coherent, yet precarious, aggregate of sensory qualities. Of course we can say that this aggregate points us toward a thing, but does that not unnecessarily reduce the complexity of the sensory content to a simple substance? Now, given that the bodies which populate a place are partly responsible for the sensory content of the place, and the sensory directives of the place command bodies to respond in particular ways, the identity of the bodies situated within a place will have the character of an haecceity. Consequently, the range of sensation and affects the body will be capable of will be determined by the range of sensations and affects it will be subjected to by its environment. This constitution is made possible by the body's plasticity. The critical point I am driving at here can be illustrated with an appeal to the biological conception of *metabolism*.

In our consideration of the aesthetics of place, the identity of bodies, and the alimentary aspect of sensation, we have worked toward a philosophical encounter with metabolism. Biologically, metabolism is a fact. Ontologically, it describes the genesis of form and exemplifies the plastic nature of bodies, both organic and inorganic. Organic bodies are aggregates of matter and void, “void mostly, crisscrossed by the geometry of

therefore a kind of depth in which the world is immersed. It is because we are immersed in this depth, not set over against it, that it is ungraspable by perception.

force,” as Jonas puts it.⁴⁰⁰ Through the metabolic process, the organic body trades its matter with the matter of its surroundings. This exchange gives rise to a “living form” whose matter is never the same. No identical core persists through the metabolic process, which means that an organism is not the same as a machine understood in the typical sense. As Jonas says, “Metabolism thus is the constant becoming of the machine itself—and this becoming itself is a performance of the machine: but for such performance there is no analogue in the world of machines.”⁴⁰¹ Writing of the body-world interface, Andrieu strikes a similar note about the nonmechanical individuating effect of metabolism:

As an interface, the body doesn’t remain passive: it doesn’t obey the orders of the nervous system in a servile manner, neither is it an objective reflection of the world. Failing to be this recording chamber, according to the mechanical metaphor, the human body is the way in and out, through which the inside communicates with the outside (and vice-versa). This crossing is subjectifying in the sense that the matter of the body is the result of this building up interaction. By ‘subjectifying’ I mean the movement which singularizes each human body by successive incorporations. Subjectivity is a result, in continuous movement, of adaptation and regulation.⁴⁰²

From the perspective of biological metabolism, the organism is a material event, a function of metabolism, not the converse.⁴⁰³ From the ontological perspective, metabolism offers us a conception of identity as active self-integration and renewal, as the integrity of a fluctuating multiplicity. On the one hand, the material exchange our bodies conduct with the world replenishes our form. On the other hand, our perceptual dialogue enables us to maintain a balance on the phenomenal world; it helps to keep the world intact, manageable. The individual on this view—which Andrieu calls “dynamic

⁴⁰⁰ Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, 75.

⁴⁰¹ Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, 75, 76, note 13.

⁴⁰² Andrieu, “Brains in the Flesh,” 137.

⁴⁰³ Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, 78.

materialism”—develops a certain degree of freedom in its form, but it remains bound to the environment by and for its matter. In Jonas’s words, the individual is “needfully free.”⁴⁰⁴ Freedom is our ability to unpack the determinate indeterminacy offered by the world.

The biological concept of metabolism applies only to organic, living beings. It need not be limited to this application, however. The concept can be profitably co-opted by the carnal ontology we are developing here, and extended so as to describe inorganic relations. To best illustrate this we can turn to Yukio Mishima’s autobiographical meditation on identity, *Sun and Steel*. In this text Mishima recounts his turn away from words and toward the body, in particular his initiation into the world of bodybuilding.

Mishima recognizes the human tendency toward automatism of mind and body. But he also sees that habits are not destinies: they can be molded and redirected, not just intentionally but also materially. We are not automata. As Bergson has also shown, following Ravaisson, habits link us into the mechanisms of nature and often act as efficient responses to the directives contained in nature.⁴⁰⁵ The sun provides such a directive for Mishima.⁴⁰⁶ Its rays are absorbed into the body and incorporated onto the surface of the skin. Similarly, the steel of the weights he lifts is incorporated into his musculature. Mishima writes: “Little by little...the properties of my muscles came increasingly to resemble those of the steel. This slow development, I found, was remarkably similar to the process of education, which remodels the brain intellectually by

⁴⁰⁴ Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, 79.

⁴⁰⁵ Henri Bergson, *The Creative Mind*, trans. Mabelle L. Andison (New York: Citadel, 1974), 231. For an ethnographic study of some of the themes under discussion, see Nick Crossley, “The Circuit Trainer’s Habitus: Reflexive Body Techniques and the Sociality of the Workout,” in *Body & Society* 10, no. 1 (2004): 37-69.

⁴⁰⁶ Yukio Mishima, *Sun and Steel*, trans. John Bester (New York: Kodansha, 1970), 24-25.

feeding it with progressively more difficult matter.”⁴⁰⁷ Mishima does not literally ingest steel, although his body does certainly take in the vitamins provided by the sunlight. Nevertheless, Mishima’s body lives from, metabolizes the sun *and* the steel. His body engages organic and inorganic matter and converts both into muscle. Deleuze and Guattari would call this a “double becoming.”⁴⁰⁸ According to Lingis’s description,

In the coupling of organism with steel, the vital substance with the extreme condensation of night and death, there was not competent intentional force shaping inert substance into implements, but *transference of properties*. The properties that came to compose the excess musculature came from the steel and were its own properties. In the contact with the substance of steel, Mishima found a body become ferric substance.⁴⁰⁹

This muscle does not only give him strength, it gives him form as well. The form emerges from the circuitous relation which obtains between organic body and organic/inorganic world.⁴¹⁰

The idea that Mishima metabolizes the sun and the steel is more than a metaphor. His body is sculpted and polished by a repetitive exposure to steel and sun, respectively. He exchanges for these his sweat, energy, calories, pallor. In his words, he transforms “the silence of death into the eloquence of life.”⁴¹¹ His writer’s body, with its distinctive habits and traits, is molded into the body of a weightlifter and begins to signify differently. This signification is transmitted through a new set of sensations. The bodybuilder’s circuit of training lends Mishima’s body its stability, its integrity—its power. His circuit enables him to cut into certain material flows and generate a new form. Mishima is a machine, not in the sense invoked by Jonas, but in Deleuze and Guattari’s.

⁴⁰⁷ Mishima, *Sun and Steel*, 25-26.

⁴⁰⁸ See Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, chapter 10.

⁴⁰⁹ Lingis, *Foreign Bodies*, 82.

⁴¹⁰ Mishima, *Sun and Steel*, 28, 32. “Just as muscles slowly increase their resemblance to steel, so we are gradually fashioned by the world....”

⁴¹¹ Mishima, *Sun and Steel*, 26.

The organic/inorganic metabolism of Mishima exemplifies the machinic process, and allows us to see that insofar as each one of us metabolizes materials from the natural and social environment—I mean affects and sensations, signs and gestures, rituals and mannerisms—our corporeal identity is literally formed by what we live from. Metabolism demonstrates plasticity just as well as any other process.

Some architecture theorists think about body-building relations in a similar way. They consider the sensory design of a building to be fundamental to the experience of a space precisely because the body's sensibility is susceptible to the qualities endemic to a particular built space. There is both an aesthetics and an ethics of design at work in this sentiment. Peter Zumthor writes about how the "atmosphere" of a building is its rhythm, which we pick up "through our emotional sensibility."⁴¹² He elaborates a series of points on how to generate atmosphere, which include sensory and material considerations: "It's like our own bodies with their anatomy and things we can't see and skin covering us—that's what architecture means to me and that's how I try to think about it. As a bodily mass, a membrane, a fabric, a kind of covering, cloth, velvet, silk, all around me. The body! Not the idea of the body—the body itself! A body that can touch me."⁴¹³ He considers temperature: "It is well-known that materials more or less extract the warmth from our bodies."⁴¹⁴ In his meditation on atmosphere, he exhibits a distinct sense of how the body is immediately affected by the building it inhabits, and how the body demands certain architectural qualities for its well-being.

⁴¹² Peter Zumthor, *Atmospheres* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2006), 13. On this point, see Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

⁴¹³ Zumthor, *Atmospheres*, 23.

⁴¹⁴ Zumthor, *Atmospheres*, 33. See also Joy Monice Malnar and Frank Vodvarka, *Sensory Design* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

Juhani Pallasmaa writes, in “An Architecture of the Seven Senses,” about how our bodies adopt the structure of buildings in their skeletal structure and bodily sensations.⁴¹⁵ He says that “Every touching experience of architecture is multi-sensory; qualities of matter, space, and scale are measured equally by the eye, ear, nose, skin, tongue, skeleton and muscle. Architecture involves seven realms of sensory experience which interact and infuse each other.”⁴¹⁶ The identity of a space is distinct and can be apprehended by the senses. Hollow spaces resonate with emptiness, whereas furnished spaces will have an aural identity specific to the arrangement, quantity, and quality of the furnishings.⁴¹⁷ He summarizes how the identity of architect and building merge through interaction, and how this identity is passed on to the building’s users:

...an architect internalizes a building in his body; movement, balance, distance and scale are felt unconsciously through the body as tension in the muscular system and in the positions of the skeleton and inner organs. As the work interacts with the body of the observer the experience mirrors these bodily sensations of the maker. Consequently, architecture is communication from the body of the architect directly to the body of the inhabitant.⁴¹⁸

Pallasmaa’s phenomenological convictions win the day, however, and he concludes that while sensations engage the physical body, “the generative force lies in the intentions.”⁴¹⁹ I would contend that while our intentions do indeed propel our engagement with places, it is the directives embedded in places—built and natural—that initially strike us. It is strange that Pallasmaa does not concede this point, for his analysis emphasizes the role of

⁴¹⁵ See Juhani Pallasmaa, “An Architecture of the Seven Senses,” in Steven Holl et al., *Questions of Perception* (San Francisco: William Stout, 2008), 36-37.

⁴¹⁶ Pallasmaa, “An Architecture of the Seven Senses,” 30.

⁴¹⁷ Pallasmaa, “An Architecture of the Seven Senses,” 31. The “Sounds” chapter of Thoreau’s *Walden* illustrates the aural identity of its namesake. The birdsongs, train whistles and cars, bells, etc. that Thoreau records get coded as “Walden.” From the standpoint of the ear, Walden just is this aggregate of sounds.

⁴¹⁸ Pallasmaa, “An Architecture of the Seven Senses,” 36. Pallasmaa sees the skin as central to this process. He explores this further in *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses*, second edition (Academy Press, 2005).

⁴¹⁹ Pallasmaa, “An Architecture of the Seven Senses,” 41.

the skin in the experience of architecture. The skin, it seems to me, only takes on an intentional aspect when it directly touches some object. And even then it is questionable whether or not it is intentional in the sense that vision or imagination is. I would claim, following Levinas, that the skin is precisely that sense organ which testifies to the primacy of sensation over perception because it is constantly processing environmental information that never rises to the level of consciousness.

Our bodies are of the environment, but not identical to it. Merleau-Ponty says the same thing about the flesh, but his exposition leaves us wanting a fuller account of how bodies are individuated from and annihilated by the flesh's general element. The concepts of metabolism and growth offer us a picture of the individual as at once attached to and independent from its environment. This is not a relation of reversibility, but one of volatile transaction. The transaction can go off well; it can go badly. The individual is not fully determined by its situation, although it is fundamentally enabled by it. Who is this individual? It is this body which refers to itself as "I" and understands itself as a singular locus of sensations, passions, and actions, and which feels itself to be limited by a particular set of material, cultural, and linguistic circumstances.

Following up this view of individuation, we can conceive a body as a singular locus of sensations (an haecceity), or as a specific confluence of environmental impressions which define an exact position, a longitude and latitude (Deleuze and Guattari).⁴²⁰ On this reading, sensations are neither mere epiphenomena produced in the mind nor merely inferred content. They are productive of clearly demarcated bodily responses, what we might call, with Dewey, "experiences." "An experience has a unity

⁴²⁰ Impressions are here taken in Hume's nonrepresentational sense to connote the *force* they exert on us, whether physical (scraping, pinching, cutting) or affective (distress, somberness, elation). Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 10.

that gives it its name, *that* meal, that storm, that rupture of friendship. The existence of this unity is constituted by a single *quality* that pervades the entire experience in spite of variation of its constituent parts.”⁴²¹ This quality need not be simple. Indeed, most experiences are differentiated by a singular complex of qualities. That bodies undergo or suffer experiences implies that experiences are objectively given and generate their own form. That we metabolize the qualities which pervade experiences—that experiences shape who we are and what we can do—means that we become who we are along with our experience. Subjectivity is produced as this becoming.⁴²²

Qualities are neither atomistic nor indeterminate. They do not derive their form from a thing or lose their autonomy just because they are “attached” to a thing, but rather they give rise to the formal identity of the thing as an aggregate of potential sensations.⁴²³ They do the same thing for a space, as well as the bodies that populate that space. As James writes, “Space *means* but the aggregate of all our possible sensations.”⁴²⁴ Consequently, the body is the site of these sensations, each and every one of which leaves a trace that makes it impossible for the body to undergo the same impression twice.⁴²⁵ In this sense, bodies are individual aesthetic events whose power to produce sensible effects is constituted by the aesthetic experiences they suffer. Power, then, is a *plastic disposition*—autonomous in effect but relational in constitution. Death, on this view, is

⁴²¹ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 37.

⁴²² On the production of subjectivity from an empiricist standpoint, with an emphasis on the function of habit, see Gilles Deleuze, *Empiricism and Subjectivity: An Essay on Hume’s Theory of Human Nature*, trans. Constantin V. Boundas (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), especially chapter 5. See also Martin Jay, *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), chapter 4, which stages, between Kant and Dewey, a confrontation over the body’s place in aesthetic experience.

⁴²³ The notion is found also in Mach, *The Analysis of Sensations*, 6-7: “Thing, body, matter, are nothing apart from the combinations of elements—the colors, sounds, and so forth—nothing apart from their so-called attributes.”

⁴²⁴ William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, volume 2 (New York: Dover, 1918), 35.

⁴²⁵ James, *Principles*, volume 2, 8.

simply the exhaustion of the individual's power, or the transgression of the threshold that defines it as this particular event. When your body ceases to produce the sensations that defines you, you have become something else. You begin to produce new sensations, engender a new power, however enfeebled. Your matter continues, reincarnated, in an infinite succession of new metabolisms. This is your immortality.

There is no reductionism involved here. What I have attempted is to render life and individuality in aesthetic terms, and to do so according to an ontology of embodiment that avoids, as much as possible, transcendent appeals and an anthropocentric worldview. This is not in the interest of homogenizing the diversity of life, but in affirming the singular complexity of each individual. Toward this end I have adduced a theory of corporeal plasticity which is both phenomenological and materialist, and derived from this theory an immanent form of the imperative as well as a principle for valuing the diversity of aesthetic experiences. We can call this the *principle of aesthetic individuation*, which reads: since a body's sensory identity is determined by the sensory blueprint of its environment, that body's power to affect and be affected will only be as complex as the totality of its aesthetic experiences. Since this principle has relied on a certain conception of sensation (which I have developed piecemeal in each of my chapters), I would like to summarize the several aspects of this conception here.⁴²⁶

First, sensations are *objective*. An object, for instance, is recognizable as an aggregate of qualities which our senses apprehend. We imagine that even when we are not there to apprehend it the object retains a real power (or disposition) to produce roughly the same aggregate of sensations. In some cases, pain, for instance, we feel ourselves attacked from outside by sensations. Levinas says that sensation breaks up

⁴²⁶ See the Introduction for an alternate exposition of these points.

every system. The objective aspect to is needed to explain where disruptive and violent sensations come from.

Second, sensations are *relational*. They only affect, or make sense, when they come into contact with bodies. Their effects are a matter of contrast, as James notes.⁴²⁷ Put otherwise, we could say that the meaning of a sensation is diacritical; it depends on the field of sensations it is embedded in. As diacritical, a sensation's effect will be neither intrinsically nor extrinsically determined. Its effect will be determined between subject and object, or object and object. This leads us to a more democratic view of bodies which maintains that sensations are traded, liminally, between any and all bodies (inanimate as well as animate). The strange idea that two inanimate bodies can exchange sensations is found in Hippocrates, who "has the verb *aisthanesthai* characterize the effects of the wind on lifeless things."⁴²⁸

Third, since sensations harbor the potential to enable or disable bodies, they are said to be *ambivalent*. This aspect has particular import for the ethics of embodiment. The volatility of sensations must be taken into consideration when designing buildings and public spaces, or when considering the preservation or destruction of a natural environment, for example. We live from our sensations, but we also die by them. This is the fourth aspect: sensations are *alimentary*. But since they are also ambivalent, they need to be regarded as both nourishment and poison. Their quality will determine whether they enable or disable our bodies. Our corporeal plasticity remains needfully vulnerable to them.

⁴²⁷ See what he says about the "law of contrast" in *Principles*, volume 2, 13-31.

⁴²⁸ Daniel Heller-Roazen, *The Inner Touch: Archaeology of a Sensation* (New York: Zone, 2007), 23.

Finally, sensations belong to no one: their liminality, objectivity, and ambivalence entail a certain *anonymity*. When we say that we “have” sensations, what we are describing is a certain bodily response *to* a sensation. The response operates below the perceptual level which would determine it as “mine,” as personal. Once we have noticed it, the sensation has already seized us. When we project sensations from our bodies, they can be attributed to us only to a degree. But insofar as our bodies are a composite of sensations, and we are nothing more than our bodies, there is no substantial person to which the sensations attach as properties. Sensations affect *a* body; they produce *this* body. Never is this body properly “mine.”

I have here presented an image of the body as plastic, which I believe to be superior to both the reversible body of Merleau-Ponty and the susceptible body of Levinas. This image could not have taken shape without certain insights into embodiment ascertained by the phenomenologists. I take my efforts to have balanced their perspective with supplemental evidence from nonphenomenological theorists, and to have rehabilitated the concept of sensation. If my notion of plasticity or the several characteristics of sensation I have gathered and advocated here have already been collected in an earlier theory, then I favor a return to that theory.

CONCLUSION

THE INTEGRITY OF AESTHETICS: TOWARD AN ETHICS OF EMBODIMENT

The palace is the body of the king. Your body sends you mysterious messages, which you receive with fear, with anxiety. In an unknown part of this body, a menace is lurking, your death is already stationed there; the signals that reach you warn you perhaps of a danger buried in your own interior. The body seated askew on the throne is no longer yours, you have been deprived of its use ever since the crown encircled your head; now your person is spread out through this dark, alien residence that speaks to you in riddles. But has anything really changed? Even before, you knew little or nothing about what you were.

And you were afraid of it, as you are now.

– Calvino, “A King Listens”

To conclude, I want to briefly consider some of the ethical consequences of conceiving the body as plastic, and to sketch how these consequences unfold in a few competing theoretical frameworks. Directives for further study will be suggested.

An ethics based on the plasticity of the body as I have described it will necessarily be a kind of environmental ethics. It will pay specific attention to the aesthetics of the environment and the ways in which aesthetics foster and diminish our body’s power to exist. Generally, it will be concerned with the sensory aspect of places, but a theory of art could likewise be envisaged. Above all, given that the body’s composition relies on the composition of its environment, the concept of *integrity*—taken in its structural and moral senses—will be central. What I called the “principle of aesthetic individuation” in the last chapter dictates this.

One of the primary benefits of shifting the discourse of embodiment to the aesthetic level is that it allows us to displace the problematics of environmental philosophy—in particular the animality/humanity, artificial/natural, and nature/culture debates—onto a different plane. This opens new, non-anthropocentric avenues for interrogation and new possibilities for solving old problems. It might be objected that

such a shift of emphasis leads to a reduction of the complexities of our experience and is an attempt to translate the myriad qualitative aspects of life into quantities of stimuli. The preceding analyses, I would maintain, have sought to establish a concept of sensation whose richness and complexity resists such a reduction.

I have used the Kantian language of imperatives to describe the kinaesthetics of embodiment and how it informs bodily integrity. A Kantian or deontological approach to plasticity seems possible. Kant holds that our practical maxims must conform to the categorical imperative which tells us whether or not our maxims can be universalized as moral laws. Maxims that are inconsistent or contradictory cannot be so universalized; maxims that can be universalized may be designated as duties.⁴²⁹ It could be argued that since the integrity of the body is necessarily tied to the environment, any maxim that wills a disabling environment would contradict the rational desire to have one's bodily integrity maintained. Only practical laws which support enabling environments would be possible on this model.

The Kantian route seems to get around the naturalistic fallacy, which forbids deriving an "ought" from an "is."⁴³⁰ And thinking about imperatives as grounded in the body relieves us from appealing to a transcendent form of reason. In order to test our maxims, however, we need such a conception of reason. Only a transcendent reason whose laws are a priori and absolute can forbid us from consistently maintaining contradictory principles of action. Absent this, there is nothing categorically wrong with willing, say, environmental conditions which will lead to bodily harm.

⁴²⁹ On the nature of duty, see Kant, *Grounding*, 9, 13, 40. On why contradictory maxims, see 30-31.

⁴³⁰ See G.E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903).

Naturally, a utilitarian option presents itself. This perspective asks us to consider the consequences of our actions on the environment, with special attention paid to how these consequences end up affecting our well-being and our capacities for action. I favor a form of utilitarian ethics that is grounded in our affective and aesthetic life because it requires no appeal to transcendent law. It is naturalistic, and perhaps commits Moore's fallacy, but it does so with appeal to an image of community which is not arbitrary. Before saying more about this I want to indicate how the virtue ethicist might construct an environmental ethics of the type under consideration here.

An ethics interested in sustaining the environment and the bodies that populate it will assuredly make a virtue out of preserving places that promote bodily integrity. And insofar as our body's develop their capacities for action or enhance their well-being through intercourse with a diversity of enabling environments, the proliferation of such environments would be considered virtuous as well. Practical wisdom on this model would entail a set of virtues which promote sustainable living from the point of view of aesthetic experience. This view seems to make a tacit appeal to consequentialist ethics, however. Namely, it says that we should be virtuous because it leads to pleasant consequences and engenders a diversity of pleasurable experiences.⁴³¹

Even if it is not refuted by the utilitarian argument, virtue ethics remains open to the objection that, like deontology, all of our ethical decisions are compelled by our desire for pleasure. A further advantage of the utilitarian position is that it is grounded in our affects and is "sanctioned," in Mill's language, by our cultivated desire for a

⁴³¹ This is a classical utilitarian objection to virtue ethics. See John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, second edition (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001), 16, 36.

generalized well-being.⁴³² Now, we may doubt whether our good will towards others is founded upon a natural sociality, but there is something compelling about the view that once we see that our integrity, and the pleasures it enjoys, is necessarily linked to the integrity of the sensory environment writ large, we will be more inclined to preserve and proliferate the diversity of that environment. Our plasticity entails this possibility, as Malabou insists: “It is precisely because—contrary to what we normally think—the brain is not already made that we must ask what we should do with it, what we should do with this plasticity that makes us, precisely in the sense of a work: sculpture, modeling, architecture.”⁴³³ The inclination toward aesthetic creation will be enhanced when the affects derived from proliferation induce further proliferation. That is, when we become passionate about our passions.

The sensory environment, as noted earlier, is characterized by its volatility. Ethically, this dimension is quite significant, as evoked in Diane Ackerman’s *A Natural History of the Senses*: “It is both our panic and our privilege to be mortal and sense-full. We live on the leash of our senses. Although they enlarge us, they also limit and restrain us, but how beautifully.”⁴³⁴ If aesthetic volatility is the hinge upon which the ethics of embodiment swings, then we require an ethics which cultivates diverse and enabling aesthetic environments. Environments which threaten bodily integrity should be avoided. The objection will arise at this point that nature harbors countless disabling aspects from the perspective of human bodily integrity. Does this mean we should work to eradicate these aspects? No, because these aspects contribute to the diversity of nature’s aesthetics. There are ways to experience dangerous natural places without being disabled by or

⁴³² Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 31-32.

⁴³³ Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, 7.

⁴³⁴ Diane Ackerman, *A Natural History of the Senses* (New York: Vintage, 1990), xviii.

degrading them. In general, we have to consider natural and built places as unique sensory milieus contained within the general system of aesthetics. One of the difficulties of the ethics I am advocating here bears on the criteria for deciding if and how disabling environments can be sacrificed without compromising the integrity of the aesthetic world.

The exigency of disabling aesthetics is greater in the built environment. Presumably, we want to avoid painful engagements and habitations. Above all, we want to avoid predicaments which compromise our integrity by pushing the tolerance of our plasticity beyond its breaking point. This is death. We want to multiply the possibilities of pleasure by increasing our capacity to affect and be affected, that is, by increasing our power. The sentiment is at once Nietzschean and Spinozan, but here again we can turn to the guidance of architects and designers.

Architect Michael Benedikt offers a useful definition of value that resonates with the ethics being sketched here: “‘positive value’ is what we attribute to that which intensifies and/or prolongs life. (Conversely, ‘negative value’ is what we attribute to that which dilutes and/or shortens life.”⁴³⁵ Benedikt acknowledges the anthropocentrism at work in his definition, but nothing prevents us from applying it to life generally. The point is to increase pleasure and extend its possibilities wherever we can, whether we are constructing or building or restoring or conserving. Whose pleasure? Any sentient creature’s. Does this exclude inanimate objects? Not necessarily, for they too belong to the aesthetic economy and participate in the intensification and prolongation of life understood as an integral system. The obvious obstacle here is adjudicating situations where pleasure needs to be sacrificed in the name of some other end.

⁴³⁵ Gong Szeto, “Towards a General Theory of Value: An Interview with Michael Benedikt.” March 6, 2003. *American Institute of Graphic Arts* (March 6, 2003), <http://gain2.aiga.org/content.cfm?Alias=michaelbenedikt&rca=michaelbenedikt1&pff=1>

Perhaps the basic ethical principle guiding us here is the following: avoid and accommodate disability. That is, design built places that conform to and, when possible, enhance the bodies inhabiting them. The principle is drawn from the specialized field of ergonomics, but what we are moving toward here is something like a generalized ergonomics. Ergonomic designers aim to improve human well-being by creating workspaces and devices that minimize or eliminate the stress caused by human-world interaction. It is the science which studies the *interface* between humans and the systems in which they operate, and then attempts to make this interface as accommodating as possible.⁴³⁶ In our language, ergonomics designs aesthetic interfaces which maintain the integrity of tool and user, machine and machinist, space and occupant.

The posture and movement of bodies are susceptible to deformation by prolonged contact with unaccommodating environments.⁴³⁷ Their plastic structure allows them to take on forms that over time decrease their capacities for action, quite apart from the typical effects of ageing. Ergonomics attempts to avoid premature and unnecessary deformation; it takes its cue from the plasticity of bodies. Ergonomics is a great example of something that is both natural and artificial, or something that blurs the distinction between animate and inanimate life. Its ethical framework, if we were to identify it, is basically utilitarian. That is to say: its motivation is to maximize pleasure and minimize pain, and *not just for humans*, but for the totality of bodies.⁴³⁸ But the scope of this ethics must extend beyond any extent form of utilitarianism to encompass all of the bodies that

⁴³⁶ Jan Dul and Bernard Weerdmeester, *Ergonomics for Beginners*, third edition (Boca Raton: CRC Press, 2008), 1.

⁴³⁷ Dul and Weerdmeester, *Ergonomics for Beginners*, chapter 2.

⁴³⁸ Peter Singer has amended classical utilitarianism to include the pleasure and pain of nonhuman animals in the so-called utilitarian calculus, that procedure which commands us to endorse actions that maximize pleasure and minimize pain for all creatures affected by said action. In the interest of promoting an even broader utilitarian environmentalism, we should consider the “pain” and “pleasure” of precious inorganic and vegetal life when calculating the impact of our actions.

participate in the corporeal community without feeling pain or pleasure, namely, inanimate objects and events. These things do not “feel” in the ordinary sense, although it would be wrong to exclude them from the affective community as we have defined it here, following Spinoza.⁴³⁹

It seems to me that the architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright displays an ergonomic motivation. This does not mean that his buildings aim above all to conform themselves to the human form, but rather that his design pays particular attention to the interface of site and building, and tries to preserve the integrity of both while at the same time introducing a new aesthetic dimension. As a result, the building site is intensified, not degraded or diluted. Wright’s essay “Integrity” draws the moral conclusion:

What is needed most in architecture today is the very thing that is most needed in life—Integrity. Just as it is in a human being, so integrity is the deepest quality in a building...If we succeed, we will have done a great service to our moral nature—the psyche—of our democratic society...Stand up for integrity in your building and you stand for integrity not only in the life of those who did the building but socially a reciprocal relationship is inevitable.⁴⁴⁰

If we take Wright’s idea of integrity in the structural sense (not in the moralizing sense connoted in the quotation), the ergonomic ethic comes through and indicates a means by which we can think ergonomics as both a constructive and preservative practice, and not just a tool for optimizing human work. If there is to be an ethics of embodiment which takes its clue from the plasticity of bodies, and whose principle is the intensification of pleasure and the preservation of integrities, then it must focus its energy on the volatile interface between bodies. Or, as Irigaray nicely puts it: “Architects are needed. Architects of beauty who fashion jouissance—a very subtle material. Letting it be and building with

⁴³⁹ For a recent account of the vitality of things, or the power of the inorganic to affect and be affected, see Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

⁴⁴⁰ Frank Lloyd Wright, “Integrity,” in *The Natural House* (New York: Bramhall House, 1954), 129.

it, while respecting the approach, the threshold, the intensity.”⁴⁴¹ What is this beauty but the fragile alliance of composite bodies, working actively together to form a singular joyful body that desires to maintain its ratio of motion and rest, speed and slowness—that is, its integrity.

⁴⁴¹ Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, 214.

WORKS CITED

N.B. All citations of Levinas and Merleau-Ponty in the text include English and French page numbers, with the English appearing first. References to Levinas's "Reality and Its Shadow" and Merleau-Ponty's *Nature* course do not include page numbers in the French. Abbreviations for texts by Levinas and Merleau-Ponty are included here.

TEXTS BY EMMANUEL LEVINAS

Collected Philosophical Papers. Edited by Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987.

"Diachrony and Representation." In *Entre Nous*.

Discovering Existence with Husserl. Translated by Richard A. Cohen and Michael B. Smith. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998. Translation of *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*. Paris: Vrin, 1967.

Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other. Translated by Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998. Translation of *Entre nous: essais sur le penser-à-l'autre*. Paris: Grasset, 1991.

Existence and Existents. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1988. Translation of *De l'existence à l'existant*. Paris: Vrin, 1978. Cited as EE.

"From Consciousness to Wakefulness." In *Discovering Existence with Husserl*.

"Intentionality and Sensation." In *Discovering Existence with Husserl*.

"Is Ontology Fundamental?" In *Entre Nous*.

"No Identity." In *Collected Philosophical Papers*. Translation of "Sans identité." In *Humanisme de l'autre homme*. Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1972.

Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1997. Translation of *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*. La Haye: Nijhoff, 1974. Cited as OB.

"Reality and Its Shadow." In *Collected Philosophical Papers*. Translation of "La réalité et son ombre." *Les Temps Modernes* 38 (1948): 771-789.

"The Ruin of Representation." In *Discovering Existence with Husserl*.

“Sensibility.” In *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty*, eds. Galen A. Johnson and Michael B. Smith. Translation of “De la sensibilité.” In *Hors Sujet*. Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1987.

Time and the Other. Translated by Richard A. Cohen. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987. Translation of *Le temps et l'autre*. Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1979. Cited as TO.

Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, YEAR. Translation of *Totalité et infini: essai sur l'extériorité*. The Hague: Nijhoff, 1961. Cited as TI.

TEXTS BY MAURICE MERLEAU-PONTY

“Cézanne’s Doubt.” In *Sense and Non-Sense*. Translation of “Le doute de Cézanne.” In *Sens et non-sense*. Paris: Les Editions de Nagel, 1948. Cited as CD.

“The Child’s Relations With Others.” In *The Primacy of Perception*. Translation of *Les relations avec autrui chez l'enfant*. Paris: Centre de Documentation Universitaire, 1975. Cited as Child.

“Eye and Mind.” In *The Primacy of Perception*. Translation of *L’oeil et l’esprit*. Paris: Gallimard, 1964. Cited as EM.

“Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence.” In *Signs*. Cited as ILVS.

Nature. Translated by Robert Vallier. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2003. Translation of *La nature, cours du Collège de France*. Paris: Gallimard, 1995. Cited as Nature.

Phenomenology of Perception. Translated by Colin Smith (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962). Translation of *Phénoménologie de la perception*. Paris: Gallimard, 1945.

The Visible and the Invisible. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968. Translation of *Le visible et l’invisible*. Paris: Gallimard, 1964.

“The Philosopher and His Shadow.” In *Signs*. Cited as Shadow.

“The Primacy of Perception and its Philosophical Consequences.” In *The Primacy of Perception*. Translation of *Le Primat de la perception et ses conséquences philosophiques*. Grenoble: Cynara, 1989. Cited as PrP.

The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics. Edited by James M. Edie. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964.

Signs. Translated by Richard C. McCleary. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964. Translation of *Signes*. Paris: Gallimard, 1960.

The Structure of Behavior. Translated by Alden Fisher. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1963. Translation of *Le structure de comportement*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1953. Cited as SB.

OTHER TEXTS

Ackerman, Diane. *A Natural History of the Senses*. New York: Vintage, 1990.

Al-Saji, Alia. “‘A Past Which Has Never Been Present’: Bergsonian Dimensions in Merleau-Ponty’s Theory of the Prepersonal.” *Research in Phenomenology* 38 (2008): 41-71.

------. “Rhythms of the Body: A Study of Sensation, Time and Intercorporeity in the Phenomenology of Edmund Husserl.” PhD diss., Emory University, 2002.

------. “The Site of Affect in Husserl’s Phenomenology: Sensations and the Constitution of the Lived Body.” *Philosophy Today* 44, SPEP Supplement (2000): 51-59.

Althusser, Louis. “Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatus.” In *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. Translated by Ben Brewster. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001.

Andrieu, Bernard. “Brains in the Flesh: Prospects for a Neurophenomenology.” *Janus Head* 9, no. 1 (2006): 135-155.

Barbaras, Renaud. “Affectivity and Movement: The Sense of Sensing in Erwin Straus.” Translated by Elizabeth A. Behnke. *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 3 (2004): 215-228.

------. *The Being of the Phenomenon: Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology*. Translated by Ted Toadvine and Leonard Lawlor. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004.

Benedikt, Michael. *For An Architecture of Reality*. New York: Lumen, 1987.

Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.

- Benso, Silvia. "The Breathing of the Air: Presocratic Echoes in Levinas." In *Levinas and the Ancients*, edited by Brian Schroeder and Silvia Benso. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008.
- . *The Face of Things: A Different Side of Ethics*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2000.
- Bergson, Henri. *The Creative Mind*. Translated by Mabelle L. Andison. New York: Citadel, 1974.
- . *Two Sources of Morality and Religion*. Translated by R. Ashley Audra and Cloudesley Brereton. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977.
- Bernet, Rudolf. "The Encounter with the Stranger: Two Interpretations of the Vulnerability of the Skin." In *The Face of the Other and the Trace of God*, edited by Jeffrey Bloechl. New York: Fordham University Press, 2000.
- Blackburn, Simon. *Ruling Passions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Braver, Lee. *A Thing of This World: A History of Continental Anti-Realism*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007.
- Brennan, Teresa. *The Transmission of Affect*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2002.
- Bruzina, Ronald. "Method and Materiality in the Phenomenology of Intersubjectivity." *Philosophy Today* 41, SPEP Supplement (1997): 127-133.
- Butler, Judith. "Foucault and the Paradox of Bodily Inscriptions." *The Journal of Philosophy* 86, no. 11 (November 1989): 601-607.
- . "Sexual Ideology and Phenomenological Description: A Feminist Critique of Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*." In *The Thinking Muse: Feminism and Modern French Philosophy*, edited by Jeffner Allen and Iris Marion Young. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989.
- Carman, Taylor. "Sensation, Judgment, and the Phenomenal Field." In *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, edited by Taylor Carman and Mark B.N. Hansen. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- Casey, Edward S. *Getting Back into Place*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993.
- . "Habitual Body and Memory in Merleau-Ponty." *Man and World* 17, no. 3/4 (1984): 279-297.
- . *The World At a Glance*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007.

- Chalier, Catherine. *What Ought I to Do? Morality in Kant and Levinas*. Translated by Jane Marie Todd. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002.
- Churchland, Patricia Smith. *Neurophilosophy: Toward a Unified Science of the Mind-Brain*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989.
- Crossley, Nick. "The Circuit Trainer's Habitus: Reflexive Body Techniques and the Sociality of the Workout." *Body & Society* 10, no. 1 (2004): 37-69.
- DeLanda, Manuel. "Immanence and Transcendence in the Genesis of Form." *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 96, no. 3 (Summer 1997): 499-514.
- Deleuze, Gilles. *Empiricism and Subjectivity: An Essay on Hume's Theory of Human Nature*. Translated by Constantin V. Boundas. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991.
- . *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*. Translated by Daniel W. Smith. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004.
- . *Nietzsche and Philosophy*. Translated by Hugh Tomlinson. New York: Columbia University Press, 1983.
- . *Pure Immanence: Essays on a Life*. Translated by Anne Boyman. New York: Zone, 2001.
- . *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*. Translated by Robert Hurley. San Francisco: City Lights, 1988.
- Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus*. Translated by Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987.
- . *Anti-Oedipus*. Translated by Robert Hurley et al. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983.
- Depraz, Natalie. "L'incarnation phénoménologique, un problème non-théologique?" *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie* 55, no. 3 (1993): 496-518.
- Dewey, John. *Art As Experience*. New York: Perigree, 1934.
- . *Democracy and Education*. New York: The Free Press, 1944.
- . *Experience and Nature*. Mineola: Dover, 1958.
- . *Human Nature and Conduct*. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988.

- Descartes, René. *Meditations on First Philosophy*. In *Philosophical Essays and Correspondence*. Edited by Roger Ariew. Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000.
- Diehm, Christian. "Facing Nature: Levinas Beyond the Human." *Philosophy Today* 44, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 51-59.
- Dillon, M.C. "Apriority in Kant and Merleau-Ponty." *Kant-Studien* 78: 403-423.
- . *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, second edition. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988.
- Dodd, James. *Idealism and Corporeity: An Essay on the Problem of the Body in Husserl's Phenomenology*. Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1997.
- Drabinski, John. E. "From Representation to Materiality." *International Studies in Philosophy* 30, no. 4 (1998): 23-37.
- . *Sensibility and Singularity: The Problem of Phenomenology in Levinas*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001.
- Dreyfus, Hubert. "Merleau-Ponty's Critique of Mental Representation: The Relevance of Phenomenology to Scientific Explanation" (1998), <http://www.class.uh.edu/cogsci/dreyfus.html>
- Dul, Jan and Bernard Weerdmeester. *Ergonomics for Beginners*, third edition. Boca Raton: CRC Press, 2008.
- Epicurus. *The Extant Remains*. Translated by Cyril Bailey. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1926.
- Evans, Fred. "'Solar love': Nietzsche, Merleau-Ponty, and the Fortunes of Perception." *Continental Philosophy Review* 31 (1998): 171-193.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Bodies, White Masks*. New York: Grove Press, 1967.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage, 1977.
- . "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History." In *The Foucault Reader*. Edited by Paul Rabinow. New York: Pantheon, 1984.
- . *Remarks on Marx*. Translated by R. James Goldstein and James Cascaito. New York: Semiotext(e), 1991.
- Gallagher, Shaun. *How the Body Shapes the Mind*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

- . "Lived Body and Environment." *Research in Phenomenology* 16 (1986): 139-170.
- Grosz, Elizabeth. *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994.
- Guerrière, Daniel. "Table of Contents of 'Phenomenology of Perception:' Translation and Pagination." *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 10, no. 1 (1979): 65-69.
- Hamlyn, D.W. *Sensation and Perception: A History of the Philosophy of Perception*. New York: Humanities Press, 1961.
- Harman, Graham. "Aesthetics as First Philosophy: Levinas and the Non-Human." *Naked Punch* 9 (Summer/Fall 2007): 21-30.
- . *Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things*. Chicago and La Salle: Open Court, 2005.
- . "Levinas's Threefold Critique of Heidegger." *Philosophy Today* (forthcoming, 2010).
- . *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects*. Chicago and La Salle: Open Court, 2002.
- Hass, Lawrence. *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008.
- Hegel, G.W.F. *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Translated by A.V. Miller. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1962.
- . *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, fifth edition, enlarged. Translated by Richard Taft. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997.
- Heller-Roazen, Daniel. *The Inner Touch: Archaeology of a Sensation*. New York: Zone, 2007.
- Henry, Michel. *The Essence of Manifestation*. Translated by Girard Etzkorn. Dordrecht: Springer, 2008.
- . *Philosophy and Phenomenology of the Body*. Translated by Girard Etzkorn. The Hague: Nijhoff, 1975.

- Hume, David. *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, second edition. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993.
- . *The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*. Translated by David Carr. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970.
- . *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*. Translated by W.R. Boyce Gibson. New York: Collier, 1962. Cited as *Ideas I*.
- . *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, Second Book. Translated by Richard Rojcewicz and Andre Schuwer. Dordrecht, Kluwer, 1989. Cited as *Ideas II*.
- . *Logical Investigations*, Two Volumes. Translated by J.N. Findlay. New York: Humanity, 1970.
- Ihde, Don. *Bodies in Technology*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002.
- Irigaray, Luce. *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*. Translated by Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993.
- James, William. *The Principles of Psychology*, volume 1. New York: Dover, 1918.
- . *The Principles of Psychology*, volume 2. New York: Dover, 1918.
- Jaspers, Karl. *General Psychopathology*. Translated by J. Hoenig and Marian W. Hamilton. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963.
- Jay, Martin. *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.
- Johnson, Galen A., ed. *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993.
- Johnson, Galen A. and Michael B. Smith, eds. *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1990.
- Johnson, Mark. *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.
- Jonas, Hans. *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1966.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Judgment*. Translated by Werner S. Pluhar Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987.

- . *Critique of Pure Reason*. Translated by Werner S. Pluhar. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1996.
- . *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, third edition. Translated by James W. Ellington. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993.
- Keenan, Dennis King. *Death and Responsibility: The "Work" of Levinas*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999.
- Lakoff, George and Mark Johnson. *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought*. New York: Basic Books, 1999.
- Leibniz, G.W. *New Essays on Human Understanding*. Edited by Peter Remnant and Jonathan Bennett. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Levin, David Michael. "The Embodiment of the Categorical Imperative: Kafka, Foucault, Benjamin, Adorno and Levinas." *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 27, no. 4 (2001): 1-20.
- Lewis, Michael. "Individuation in Levinas and Heidegger: The One and the Incompleteness of Beings." *Philosophy Today* 51, no. 2 (Summer 2007): 198-215.
- Lingis, Alphonso. *Body Transformations: Evolutions and Atavisms in Culture*. London: Routledge, 2005.
- . *The First Person Singular*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007.
- . *Foreign Bodies*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- . *The Imperative*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994.
- . *Libido: The French Existential Theories*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985.
- . *Sensation: Intelligibility in Sensibility*. Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1996.
- . "The Sensitive Flesh." In *The Collegium Phaenomenologicum: The First Ten Years*, edited by J.C. Sallis, G. Moneta, and Jacques Taminiaux. Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1989.
- Mach, Ernst. *The Analysis of Sensations*. Translated by C.M. Williams and Sydney Waterlow. New York: Dover, 1959.

- Madison, Gary Brent. *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty: A Search for the Limits of Consciousness*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1981.
- Malabou, Catherine. *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* Translated by Sebastian Rand. New York: Fordham University Press, 2008.
- Malnar, Joy Monice and Frank Vodvarka. *Sensory Design*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004.
- Manning, Robert John Sheffler. *Interpreting Otherwise than Heidegger: Emmanuel Levinas's Ethics as First Philosophy*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1993.
- Massumi, Brian. *A User's Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia: Deviations from Deleuze and Guattari*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992.
- . *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2002.
- Meillassoux, Quentin. *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*. Translated by Ray Brassier. London: Continuum, 2008.
- Mill, John Stuart. *Utilitarianism*, second edition. Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001.
- Mishima, Yukio. *Sun and Steel*. Translated by John Bester. New York: Kodansha, 1970.
- Molnar, George. *Powers: A Study in Metaphysics*. Edited by Stephen Mumford. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Moore, G.E. *Principia Ethica*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903.
- Morris, David. "The Logic of the Body in Bergson's Motor Schemes and Merleau-Ponty's Body Schema." *Philosophy Today* 44, SPEP Supplement (2000): 60-69.
- . *The Sense of Space*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004.
- Mullarkey, John C. "Duplicity in the Flesh: Bergson and Current Philosophy of the Body." *Philosophy Today* 38, no. 4 (Winter 1994): 339-355.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *On the Genealogy of Morality*. Translated by Maudemarie Clark and Alan J. Swensen. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998.
- Nuzzo, Angelica. *Ideal Embodiment: Kant's Theory of Sensibility*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008.

- . "Kant and Herder on Baumgarten's *Aesthetica*." *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 44, no. 4 (October 2006): 577-597.
- Oksala, Johanna. "Female Freedom: Can the Lived Body Be Emancipated?" In *Feminist Interpretations of Maurice Merleau-Ponty*.
- Olivier, Abraham. *Being in Pain*. Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2007.
- Olkowski, Dorothea and Gail Weiss, eds. *Feminist Interpretations of Maurice Merleau-Ponty*. University Park: Penn State University Press, 2006.
- Pallasmaa, Juhani. "An Architecture of the Seven Senses." In Steven Holl et al., *Questions of Perception*. San Francisco: William Stout, 2008.
- . *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses*, second edition. Hoboken: Wiley & Sons, 2005.
- Panagia, Davide. *The Political Life of Sensation*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2009.
- Pietersma, Henry. "La place de Spinoza dans le pensée de Merleau-Ponty: convergence, entre les deux penseurs." *International Studies in Philosophy* 20, no. 3 (1988): 89-93.
- Priest, Stephen. *Merleau-Ponty*. London: Routledge, 1998.
- Ravaisson, Félix. *Of Habit*. Translated by Clare Carlisle and Mark Sinclair. London: Continuum, 2008.
- Rockmore, Tom. *Cognition: An Introduction to Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.
- . *In Kant's Wake: Philosophy in the Twentieth Century*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006.
- Russell, Bertrand. *The Problems of Philosophy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Russon, John. *The Self and Its Body in Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001.
- Sallis, John. "Levinas and the Elemental." *Research in Phenomenology* 28 (1998): 152-159.
- . *Phenomenology and the Return to Beginnings*. New York: Humanities Press, 1973.

- Sandford, Stella. "Levinas in the Realm of the Senses: Transcendence and Intelligibility." *Angelaki* 4, no. 3 (1999): 61-73.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness*. Translated by Hazel E. Barnes. New York: Washington Square Press, 1993.
- Schalow, Frank. *The Incarnality of Being: The Earth, Animals, and the Body in Heidegger's Thought*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2007.
- Scherer, Irmgard. "The Problem of the A Priori in Sensibility: Revisiting Kant's and Hegel's Theories of the Senses." *The Review of Metaphysics*, 52, no. 2 (December 1998): 341-367.
- Singer, Linda. "Merleau-Ponty on the Concept of Style." In *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*.
- Smith, Michael B. "Merleau-Ponty's Aesthetics." In *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*.
- Sparrow, Tom. "Bodies in Transit: The Plastic Subject of Alphonso Lingis." *Janus Head* 10, no. 1 (Summer/Fall 2007): 99-122.
- . "Enabling/Disabling Sensation: Toward an Alimentary Imperative in Carnal Phenomenology." *Philosophy Today* 52, no. 2 (Summer 2008): 99-115.
- Spinoza, Baruch. *Ethics*. Translated by Samuel Shirley. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992.
- Stawarska, Beata. "From the Body Proper to the Flesh: Merleau-Ponty on Intersubjectivity." In *Feminist Interpretations of Maurice Merleau-Ponty*.
- Straus, Erwin. "The Upright Posture." *Psychiatric Quarterly* 26 (1952): 529-561.
- Sullivan, Shannon. *Living Across and Through Skins: Transactional Bodies, Pragmatism, and Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001.
- Szeto, Gong. "Towards a General Theory of Value: An Interview with Michael Benedikt." *American Institute of Graphic Arts* (March 6, 2003), <http://gain2.aiga.org/content.cfm?Alias=michaelbenedikt&rca=michaelbenedikt1&pff=1>
- Taylor, Charles. "The Validity of Transcendental Arguments." In *Philosophical Arguments*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995.
- Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden and Other Writings*. New York: Bantam, 1983.
- Todes, Samuel. *Body and World*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001.

- Wahlsens, Alphonse de. "Merleau-Ponty: Philosopher of Painting." In *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*.
- Waldenfels, Bernhard. "The Paradox of Expression." Translated by Chris Nagel. In *Chiasms: Merleau-Ponty's Notion of Flesh*, edited by Fred Evans and Leonard Lawlor. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000.
- Weiss, Gail. *Refiguring the Ordinary*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008.
- Weissman, David. *Dispositional Properties*. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1965.
- Wiesel, Elie. *Night*. Translated by Marion Wiesel. New York: Hill and Wang, 2006.
- Williams, Bernard. *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985.
- Wood, David. "Some Questions for My Levinasian Friends." In *Addressing Levinas*, edited by Eric Sean Nelson, Antje Kapust, and Kent Still. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2005.
- Wright, Frank Lloyd. "Integrity." In *The Natural House*. New York: Bramhall House, 1954.
- Yancy, George. *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008.
- Young, Iris Marion. *Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990.
- Zahavi, Dan. "Alterity in Self." In *Ipseity and Alterity: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Intersubjectivity*, edited by Shaun Gallagher et al. Rouen: Presses Universitaires de Rouen, 2004.
- Žižek, Slavoj. *Organs Without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences*. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Zumthor, Peter. *Atmospheres*. Basel: Birkhäuser, 2006.