

**FLESHING OUT A RELATIONAL ETHICS: MAURICE MERLEAU-PONTY'S  
CONTRIBUTIONS TO ECOLOGICAL FEMINISM**

**By**

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**For Dave**

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## PREFACE

Recently, I stopped to look at a picture of Earth and was struck by the beauty of this planet we call home as viewed from a far. Thumbing through a collection of news clippings a few days later, I came across an article reporting that air pollution around the Earth is now evident from space.<sup>1</sup> It seems that even this pristine image of our planet from a far distant perspective is now threatened by spreading haze and hazardous gases.

The rate and magnitude of environmental destruction has exceeded the predictions of even the most concerned scientists. A United Nations -sponsored panel of hundreds of scientists concluded that, if greenhouse gas<sup>2</sup> emissions are not curtailed, the Earth's average temperature could increase as much as eleven degrees by the end of this century.<sup>3</sup> The impacts of global warming include a greater frequency of extreme events like floods and droughts; diminished fresh-water supply, increase in sea-level, greater erosion, destruction of habitat, and the loss of animal and plant species. In communities around the world, these impacts are already part of their reality. The water level in Lake Michigan which contains one-fifth of the world's surface fresh water, has been dropping and shorelines have receded leaving puckered, parched land where beavers, muskrats, frogs and cattails used to thrive.<sup>4</sup> In places where people have never questioned their water supply, cities are now arranging to have their water piped in from far away.

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<sup>1</sup> "Smog cuts a Global Swath," *The Los Angeles Times*, May 31, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> While most greenhouse gases, such as carbon dioxide, methane and nitrous oxide, are present in the atmosphere as a result of natural processes, human activity has increased the emissions of these gases into the atmosphere. Other gases, such as halocarbons, do not occur naturally and are purely of human origin. The gases of greatest concern are carbon dioxide, methane, nitrous oxide, and halocarbons. Carbon dioxide, which is produced primarily through burning gasoline, natural gas, coal, and oil, is the largest contributor to the greenhouse effect (82 percent nationwide). Methane, which is over 20 times more potent than carbon dioxide, accounts for just under 10 percent of U.S. emissions and result from decomposing landfill waste, manure and fermentation from livestock and natural gas systems. As these atmospheric gases increase, the earth is further insulated and more heat is trapped in the atmosphere adding to the overall temperature. Molly Hadley Jensen, *Texas Impact's Global Warming Curriculum for Religious Communities* (Austin, Texas: Texas Impact, forthcoming).

<sup>3</sup> United Nations Environmental Program and the World Meteorological Organization, Report of the International Panel on Climate Change (2001), *Climate Change 2001: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability*, ed. James J. McCarthy, Osvaldo F. Canziani et al. (Geneva, Switzerland: United Nations, 2001). The United States Environmental Protection Agency also released a report on the dramatic impacts of global warming. See United States Environmental Protection Agency, *Climate Action Report 2002: Third United States National Communication on Climate Change* (Washington, D.C.: EPA, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> "Near vast bodies of water, land lied parched," *The New York Times*, Sunday, August 12, 2001

As fresh water levels diminish, the thick layer of ice at the North Pole is melting. For the first time in 50 million years, an ice-free patch of ocean about a mile wide has opened at the top of the world. The ice in this location was six to nine feet thick just six years ago. Meanwhile, the ice comes later and melts three weeks earlier off the Hudson Bay. Polar bears are thinner and having fewer cubs as their hunting season is increasingly shortened.<sup>5</sup> A Canadian research biologist who has studied the bears for thirty years warns that Hudson Bay may eventually lose its ice all-together and the bear population eliminated.

The effects of environmental destruction are becoming more visible to people on a global level as dramatic changes in the earth's atmosphere, polar ice caps, and water supply take place. Given the global effects of the earth's warming, every person in every part of the world will be impacted by environmental destruction eventually. Currently, the pattern of environmental damage is that people of color and impoverished people--a majority of whom are women and children-- are affected disproportionately.

The United Church of Christ's Commission for Racial Justice released a report in 1987 outlining the connection between race, class, and toxic waste.<sup>6</sup> Since that time, a substantial collection of findings indicate disparities in environmental threats.<sup>7</sup> Even skeptical researchers have concluded that black and Latino Americans are exposed to higher levels of toxic waste, water pollution, and toxic emissions than are whites in the U.S.<sup>8</sup> Though socio-economic characteristics are not as strong a predictor of environmental threats, those who are economically-disadvantaged face greater threats than those who are not.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> "Canadians 'Gentle Giants' Await Vanishing Winter," *The New York Times*, November 12, 2000.

<sup>6</sup> United Church of Christ (UCC), Commission for Racial Justice, *Toxic Wastes and Race: A National Report on the Racial and Socio-Economic Characteristics of Communities with Hazardous Waste Sites* (New York: United Church of Christ, 1987)

<sup>7</sup> L.M. Burke, "Race and Environmental Equity: A Geographic Analysis in Los Angeles," *Geo Info Systems* (October, 1993); L. Downey, "Race and Income as Predictors in Environmental Justice," *Social Science Quarterly* 79 (1998): 766-778; J.M. Gould, *Quality of Life in American Neighborhoods: Levels of Affluence, Toxic Waste, and Cancer Mortality in Residential Zip Code Areas* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1986); J. Lester et al., *Environmental Justice in the United States: Myths and Realities* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview, 2001); P.H. Polloch and M.E. Vittas, "Who Bears the Burden of Environmental Pollution? Race, Ethnicity, and Environmental Equity in Florida," *Social Science Quarterly* 76 (1995): 294-310; A. Szasz, *Ecopopulism: Toxic Waste and the Movement for Environmental Justice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994)

<sup>8</sup> Lester et al, 103, 129, 152, 154

<sup>9</sup> Lester et al cite more than thirty other reports in addition to their own that find a correlation between class and environmental threats, 151. They also note that economically disadvantaged Latinos face greater risks than do middle and upper-class Latinos., 104.

The disparity in exposure to environmental risks has inspired grassroots movements across the U.S. and throughout the world. One effort within the U.S. is the mobilization of southeast Chicago public housing residents to press for health assessments and surveys and closure of some of the polluting industries and landfills that form the “toxic doughnut” around their neighborhood.<sup>10</sup> Another effort is the work of lower Colorado River Indian tribes to prevent a radioactive waste dump on their sacred land.<sup>11</sup> These efforts have increased citizen involvement in and awareness of specific environmental threats. In some cases, these grassroots movements have been able to increase environmental health in their areas. While grassroots movements are vital to address particular instances of environmental destruction and injustice and can serve as models for non-exploitive patterns of living, the magnitude of the environmental threat also demands ethical formulations that can address patterns of worldwide ecological devastation.

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<sup>10</sup> Hazel Johnson, “Surviving Chicago’s ‘Toxic Doughnut’” in Robert D. Bullard, ed., *People of Color Environmental Groups* (Atlanta: Clark Atlanta University, 2000) 26. See also Robert D. Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie: race, class and environmental quality* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1990) and Robert D. Bullard, ed., *Unequal Protection: environmental justice and communities of color* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1994)

<sup>11</sup> Philip M. Klasky “Native Americans and Environmentalists Derail Ward Valley Nuclear Dump,” Bullard (2000)

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## CHAPTER I

### BEING BODIES

In the face of what he terms an “ecocrisis,” Larry Rasmussen suggests that an “environmental ethic” is inadequate. “Environment” refers to that which surrounds us, he explains. To speak of the “environment” is to refer to a world separate from and outside oneself. He disrupts this separation of self and world with a jarring image:

The true state of affairs, however, is far more interesting and intimate. The world around us is also within. We are an expression of it; it is an expression of us. We are made of it; we eat, drink, and breathe it. And someday, when dying day comes, we will each return the favor and being our role as a long, slow meal for a million little critters.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps it is just such an image, humans reduced to the earthly fodder, that inspires human beings to cling to an identity apart from the rest of nature. At any rate, Rasmussen sees a need for a new understanding of human beings in the world. He claims that responding to ecological devastation requires that we learn to speak “not of human *and* nature, but of humans *in* and *as* nature...Not of culture *and* nature, or history and nature, but of culture and history *in* and *as* nature.”<sup>2</sup> Avoiding “*environmental ethics*” requires that moral theorists begin thinking beyond the human community and similarities therein to consider how humans are similar to and connected with other beings. Rasmussen is calling for a certain kind of ethic, a relational ethic that makes explicit human intimacy and involvement with the rest of nature. At this juncture in history, an overarching theological framework or worldview is not a viable option for formulating an ethic of human relation with the larger world.

Prior to the modern period, the Aristotelian-Christian worldview provides a basis for understanding moral perfection and assessing moral relations. A belief in a law-abiding universe and the governance of a sovereign God, and the eternal, natural, human and divine law inherent therein, grounded all relations within the world. The myriad of competing religious, scientific, philosophical, and psychological accounts of order (or disorder) that emerged in the modern

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<sup>1</sup> Larry L. Rasmussen, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1996) xii. Rasmussen develops an earth ethics for the Christian community.

<sup>2</sup> Rasmussen, 32

period have undermined the synthesis once offered in the cosmic order outlined by Aristotle and rearticulated by Thomas Aquinas. In the midst of the fractured Aristotelian-Thomas system, moral theorists have formulated different accounts of the social or relational moral self, but none of these provide an adequate account of the reciprocal involvement of human with and in nature.

### **Bound by Narratives**

Neo-Aristotelians, such as Alasdair MacIntyre and Stanley Hauerwas, have attempted to keep positive religious convictions at the center of morality.<sup>3</sup> Even in the twilight of a dominant Christian worldview, MacIntyre and Hauerwas resist the displacement of shared religious commitments in moral theory. Hauerwas criticizes Immanuel Kant for making morality the ‘essence’ of religion and thereby relegating positive religious convictions to a secondary status, irrelevant to morality. Neo-Aristotelians insist that any proposal about how to live is a claim about what it means to be faithful to shared values of a group. Hauerwas and the others favor communal or narrative ethics.

In narrative ethics, ethical reflection is specific to a particular time and place and determined by the “particularities of a community’s history and convictions.”<sup>4</sup> Hauerwas argues that ethics always requires an adjective or qualifier that locates it within a certain religious or philosophical community and denotes the social and historical character of all ethics. Instead of living through the fragments of past moralities, narrative ethicists suggest that communities embrace and understand their own moral values, principle and values. Forgo the search for certainty in a universalistic ethic, Hauerwas urges, and live out of the ethics particular to your community.

The narrative approach to ethics evinces some aspects of relational ethics. This approach to ethics understands each self as part of a larger community. The individual is formed by and lives through relation with others and the beliefs that are shared with those others. A community’s story is not external to the members of that community; this story is not merely told by them. The story is embodied by them “in a people’s habits that form and are formed in

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<sup>3</sup> See Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988); Alasdair MacIntyre *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981); Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983)

<sup>4</sup> Hauerwas, 1

worship, governance, and morality.”<sup>5</sup> Individual lives are expressions of the narrative of the community in which they share. Hauerwas explains that individuality is possible “only because we are first of all social beings.” “After all,” he continues, “the “self” names not a thing, but a relation... who I am is a relation with others.”<sup>6</sup> This interpretation of selfhood and individuality as socially constituted indicates the importance of community relations to narrative ethics.

The relational character of the narrative approach is not necessarily a limited or sectarian as a superficial consideration of Hauerwas’ argument might impart. In offering an ethic from within his particular Christian community and delineating the implications of that ethic for a wider social witness, Hauerwas attests to potential relation between specific communities and the wider society. He argues that a Christian ethic is always a social ethic and implies a way for the Christian community to live in the world.<sup>7</sup> The “content of Christian ethics involves claims about a kingdom...the first words about the Christian life are about a life together, not about the individual.”<sup>8</sup> But even though the Christian ethic is “not for everyone” it binds the church to and with the world. Hauerwas suggests that the unity and relation of the church community can help the larger world see beyond divisions--and the violence that results from them-- to recognize the unity of creation. Living as a Christian entails involvement with society as a whole. Hauerwas asserts that “church and world are thus relational concepts--neither is intelligible without the other.”<sup>9</sup> The narrative ethics of **his** particular community is related to those beyond its boundaries : Christians are called to peaceable relations within the church and called into relation with the larger world to witness to the peaceable kingdom that is the “right” (Hauerwas also uses “true”) relation of the world.<sup>10</sup>

While the neo-Aristotelian narrative ethics can be characterized as a relational ethic which roots individuality within the community, this approach is insufficient for the task

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<sup>5</sup> Hauerwas, 98

<sup>6</sup> Hauerwas, 97 Hauerwas cites G. H. Mead’s *Mind, Self, and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934) as the classic statement of this view and refers to Howard Harrod, *The Human Center: Moral Agency in the Social World* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981) as a more recent attempt to describe the social self while also preserving moral agency.

<sup>7</sup> Hauerwas, 96

<sup>8</sup> Hauerwas, 97

<sup>9</sup> Hauerwas, 101

<sup>10</sup> Hauerwas states that “calling for the church to be the church is not a formula for a withdrawal ethic; nor is it a self-righteous attempt to flee from the world’s problems; rather it is a call for the church to be a community which tries to develop the resources to stand within the world witnessing to the peaceable kingdom and thus rightly understanding the world.”

identified by Rasmussen: that of embracing our relation with the whole of nature. Hauerwas focuses on persons who share the same religious beliefs. With shared belief as the basis of relationship and connection, narrative ethics can potentially exclude other humans and the more-than-human world all-together from moral relation and value. Though Hauerwas' particular Christian ethics (of a peaceable kingdom) embraces the world, narrative approaches from other perspectives could easily dismiss the larger society or nature itself as a mere backdrop upon which the story of their community unfolds. At the very least, the narrative approach fails to relate various communities with one another. At its worst, may encourage sectarianism and moral isolation that would pose a significant threat to a relational ethic inclusive of the more-than-human world.

The scope of ecological devastation implores persons of disparate beliefs to forge relationships, understandings, and movements with others of diverse religious and/or philosophical commitments. Hauerwas does not indicate how religious and ethical difference might be negotiated except to imply that, by better understanding the particularity of the belief of one's community, the divisive battle over moral absolutes may be alleviated.

### **Linked by Linguistic Structures**

Another ethical approach that has relational elements and that also provides for moral judgment among disparate groups is the discourse, or communicative, ethics of Jurgen Habermas. Unlike the neo-Aristotelians, discourse ethicists are explicit in their attempts to reconcile sectarianism and recover universal grounding for morality. While Habermas affirms the major aim of Kantian morality--the *a priori* grounding of universal morality-- he chooses a different grounding. Kant grounded morality in the autonomy of reason. Reason as a law unto itself ensures the objective necessity of moral law apart from the contingency of empirical (conditional) causality. Habermas, on the other hand, identifies *a priori* linguistic structures as the source of moral principles. According to Habermas, the linguistic structures of speech offer a mediating system which transcend the particularities of cultural context. He contends that our basic moral intuitions spring from something deeper and more universal than the features of our own tradition: they spring from the experience of reaching understandings through social communication.

Habermas claims that the fundamental ideas of morality can be reduced to the relations of symmetry and reciprocity presupposed in communicative action. In other words, there is a ‘common core’ of morality which can be traced back to reciprocal imputations and shared presuppositions that actors make when they seek understanding. While the boundaries of particular communities (“lifeworlds”) usually circumscribe discourse, Habermas suggests that discourse can transcend boundaries of particular communities when its presuppositions are made explicit and employed as normative structures of moral judgment. The central principle of discourse which he derives from the process of reaching understanding is that “only those norms can claim to be valid that meet (or could meet) with the approval of all affected in their capacity as participants in practical discourse.”<sup>11</sup> Like Kant, the principle for testing for moral acceptability does not determine the content of the maxim or norm. The principle only ensures its universalizability. This principle of discourse can also be stated as a principle of universalizability. Habermas’ formulation of the universalizability principle is similar to Kant’s categorical imperative, but it also addresses the consequences of proposed norms: A norm is valid if all affected can accept the consequences and side effects its general observance can be anticipated to have for the satisfaction of everyone’s interests (and those consequences are preferred to those of known alternative possibilities for regulation). These associated principles govern the form, but not the content of moral judgment. The form of discourse is also informed by the procedural rules which Habermas understands to be part of the linguistic *a priori*. These rules assure the participation of competent participants; equal opportunity to question, express, and introduce assertions; and the freedom from coercion.

The discourse ethics of Habermas is influenced by the linguistic phenomenology of Karl Otto-Apel. Apel, in *Towards a Transformation of Philosophy*, develops the *a priori* of communication as a foundation for ethics.<sup>12</sup> Apel seeks to replace Kant’s philosophy of consciousness with a philosophy of language. He observes that a logic exists in language and communication that makes it possible to ground moral principles. Apel shows that a subject capable of speech and actions necessarily makes substantive normative presuppositions, such as the injunction to avoid performative contradiction, as soon as the subject engages in any

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<sup>11</sup> Jurgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990) 197

<sup>12</sup> Karl Otto-Apel, *Towards a Transformation of Philosophy*, trans. Glyn Adey and David Fisby (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1998)

discourse with the intention of critically examining a hypothetical claims to validity. Even the moral skeptic, one who denies the possibility of grounding moral principles, commits to certain presuppositions by entering into an argument.

Moral relations in discourse ethics are rooted in the shared structures of communication. This form of ethics is potentially more widely relational than a narrative or communal ethic since it is not based on common beliefs or shared religious commitments. But even so, Habermas says that discourse ethics has a limited concept of morality. Moral theory can and should clarify the universal core of moral intuitions and refute value skepticism, but can not make substantive contributions on moral-practical issues: “moral philosophy does not have privileged access to particular moral truths.”<sup>13</sup> Some substantive moral claims are implicit, however, in discourse ethics. The equality of participants is affirmed in Habermasian ethics. Each participant has an equal right to say ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to arguments for normative justification. Also the conditions for a discourse involve the freedom from coercion. This applies specifically to the actual process of moral justification and Habermas admits that discourse itself can not enforce conditions necessary for moral justification; however, he also maintains that participants always refer back to the forms of life and institutions. The conditions for discourse are influenced by social institutions. If institutions or social systems ‘make a mockery’ of the conditions necessary for discourse, moral justification is hindered. Habermas’ insistence that discourse must relate back to the world admits at least a critical capacity of discourse ethics in exposing situations that prevent the participation and freedom from coercion of individuals in the process of moral justification. With its capacity for criticizing coercive and oppressive social systems, its insistence on the equality and freedom of participants to affirm or object to normative claims, and its universalism, discourse ethics offers a mediating structure and some general moral claims that enable ethical judgments to be made.

This approach to ethics identifies communicative relation as a basis for moral agreement among those with diverse beliefs. Yet, despite it’s capacity for mediating among disparate communities, discourse ethics continues the view that the more-than-human world is external to or outside of moral relations. Habermas himself indicates the limitation of discourse ethics for offering a world inclusive relational ethic. He refers to the “basic objection of ecological

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<sup>13</sup> Habermas, 211

ethics.”<sup>14</sup> He presents this objection as a question: “How does discourse ethics, which is limited to subjects capable of speech and (communicative) action, respond to the fact that mute creatures are also vulnerable?” Habermas does seem to grasp the significance of this limitation of his ethics.

Compassion for tortured animals and the pain caused by the destruction of biotopes are surely manifestations of moral intuitions that cannot be fully satisfied by the collective narcissism of what in the final analysis is an anthropocentric way of looking at things.<sup>15</sup>

Even with this recognition, Habermas only reiterates the modest scope of his moral project--to refute value skepticism. It is not, however, merely his modest definition of morality that restricts the reach of discourse ethics; rather his exclusive attention to the structure of language predisposes him to neglect of relation within a wider community of beings. His analysis of communication fails to explore the corporeal structures through which communication emerges. An analysis of bodily relations could extend ethical consideration to the concrete reality of bodied existence and the ecological community in which every human shares as a body. Ironically, a precedent for an expanded analysis of moral relation can be found in the work of one of the foremost influences on Habermas’ ethics, George Herbert Mead.

### **Toward a Recovery of Bodies: Mead, Schutz, and Harrod**

Habermas cites Mead as an originator of the concept of ‘universal discourse’ and ‘ideal role taking’ from which he develops discourse theory. Mead’s social behaviorism does in fact support Habermas’ development of an intersubjective *a priori* to counter Kantian transcendental *a priori*. Mead determined that human cognition and individualization arise through intersubjectivity and he argued that socialization enabled the taking of diverse roles or perspectives on an other. Thus, Mead anticipated the *a priori* intersubjectivity of discourse ethics and also its empirically-grounded universalizability principle.<sup>16</sup> However, as Hans Joas observes, Habermas selectively appropriate Mead’s work on intersubjectivity. Joas claims that Habermas, by focusing exclusively on linguistic intersubjectivity and neglecting perception,

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<sup>14</sup> Habermas, 210-211

<sup>15</sup> Habermas 211

<sup>16</sup> Although Mead’s ‘role taking’ is closer to the original position of John Rawls than to the actual procedure of discourse which Habermas advocated.

severs communication “from active engagement with nature” thereby departing from Mead.<sup>17</sup> This departure is significant, according to Joas. The interaction of self, in the physical world, in space, and with other beings, is fundamental to Mead’s theory of intersubjectivity. Joas explains that throughout all phases of Mead’s work, he attempted to develop intersubjectivity in the context of the natural world; that this effort occupied a great part of his attention in the last ten years of his life and that Mead’s theory of intersubjectivity gained logical consistency only when he was able to show the categories of the natural science (physical world) related to the development of the capacity for communication.<sup>18</sup> In Joas’ estimation, Mead transforms epistemology by referring it to intersubjectivity and the human **body**.

Sandra Rosenthal and Patrick Bourgeois confirm Joas’s observation about the importance of the body in Mead’s development of intersubjectivity. They maintain that, for Mead, language is a type of gesture which is intimately incorporated into the lived body and the lived world and quote his claim that “we have to see how communicative function could have arisen out of that prior sort of (gestural) conduct.”<sup>19</sup> Rosenthal and Bourgeois, like Joas, understand that in Mead’s theory linguistic intersubjectivity can not be separated from corporeal intention, embeddedness and existence. For Mead, language “is intimately interwoven with experience of the world” and it “grows out of gesture and is itself a form of gesture,” they explain.<sup>20</sup>

Mead’s work on intersubjectivity has been highly influential. Sociologist Alfred Schutz’s response to Edmund Husserl exhibits Mead’s influence. Schutz concluded that Husserl’s efforts to solve intersubjectivity at the level of transcendental phenomenology were unsuccessful and resulted in solipsism.<sup>21</sup> In response, Schutz maintained that intersubjectivity was a fundamental category of human existence. This fundamental intersubjectivity of Schutz’s, like Mead’s, engages the bodily, physical world. Schutz explored interactional involvement with others in the lifeworld and reformulated Husserl’s apprehension of the other as that which is given in the

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<sup>17</sup> Hans Joas, *G.H. Mead: A Contemporary Re-examination of his Thought* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985) 166

<sup>18</sup> Joas, 146

<sup>19</sup> Sandra B. Rosenthal and Patrick L. Bourgeois, *Mead and Merleau-Ponty; Toward a Common Vision* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1991) 136

<sup>20</sup> Rosenthal and Bourgeois, 144

<sup>21</sup> Alfred Schutz, *Collected Papers III: Studies in Phenomenological Philosophy*, ed. I. Schutz (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1975) 82. Schutz disagrees fundamentally with Husserl’s approach of transcendental phenomenology. He argues that “It can, however, be said with certainty that only such an ontology of the life-world, not a transcendental constitutional analysis, can clarify that essential relationship of intersubjectivity which is the basis of all social science.”

physical appearance and gestural expressions of the other. For Schutz, the perception of the others' body, movements, and speech--the sensory experience of an other--is endowed with consciousness and feeling.<sup>22</sup>

[T]he other's body and its movements can be and are interpreted as a field of expression of events within his [sic] inner life.<sup>23</sup>

Bodies and their expression are integral to intersubjective relation. They transcend the boundaries of the self and enable a recognition of and empathy toward others.

Bodies participate in transcendence in other ways for Schutz. He recognized various transcendences, or experiences extending beyond the meaning context of the lifeworld. One such transcendence is nature's (the body of the world) transcendence of the time and space of my lifeworld, or everyday life. Schutz explains that "In time, the world of Nature existed before my birth and will continue to exist after my death."<sup>24</sup> Similarly, he says that "In space, the world within my actual reach carries along the open infinite horizons of my world."<sup>25</sup> The natural world transcends the reality of everyday life in the same manner that the preorganized social world predates me and continues after me. With these various transcendences, Schutz affirms not only the intersubjectivity-- communication among persons-- but also a shared bodily world.

The world of my daily life is by no means my private world but is from the outset an intersubjective one, shared with my fellow men, experienced and interpreted by others; in brief, it is a world common to all of us. The unique biographical situation in which at any moment of my existence is only to a very small extent of my own making. I find myself within an historically given world which, as a world of nature as well as a sociocultural world had existed before my birth and which will continue to exist after my death. This means that this world is not only mine but also my fellow men's [sic] environment.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Alfred Schutz, *On Phenomenology and Social Relations: Selected Writings*, ed. Helmut R. Wagner (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970) 31 and 164. Schutz did not restrict the "We-relationship" to intimate face-to-face contacts, but argued that those with whom we do not have direct physical relationships with usually remain in the background and viewed according to general types.

<sup>23</sup> Schutz (1970) 216

<sup>24</sup> Schutz (1970) 245

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Schutz (1970) 163-4. These affirmations of intersubjectivity and a shared world do not depart significantly from Husserl's phenomenological psychology. Schutz's work is a further explication of the sociological implications of this phenomenological psychology and its convergence with William James' psychology, G.H. Mead's concepts, and Gestalt theory. It is Husserl's later work in phenomenological philosophy to which Schutz takes exception.

As a sociologist, Schutz did not speculate on the moral significance of the shared world. He did, however, examine the signs through which persons interpret the meaning, ethical or otherwise, of the transcendences as nature and society. He argued that such realities are interpreted and communicated through symbols (religious, poetic, mathematical...). Through these devices, the ultimately unknowable transcending orders constitute society and individual biography. However, the individual is not entirely determined by cultural symbols. Schutz explains that the symbolically represented orders of nature and society serve as a framework “within which alone” each person has “freedom” of “potentialities.”<sup>27</sup> Cultural symbols “prescribe the scope of possibilities” without utterly determining individual life.<sup>28</sup> In his account of individual freedom, Schutz’s theory of intersubjectivity and bodily or worldly relation suggests that moral agency or freedom is not eliminated in a relational or social conception of the self. This is an issue that Howard Harrod explores more fully.

Like Schutz, Harrod understands a potency of symbols for interpreting transcendence and the meaning therein. Symbols, according to Harrod, mediate horizons of value meaning with which we interact as moral agents. Our freedom as moral agents is experienced as an ability to embrace a value meaning and to act from or according to that particular meaning.<sup>29</sup> Even as he details the power of symbols to influence human action, Harrod suggests symbols (particularly prevalent or “root” symbols) of value meaning reflect (in different ways, perhaps) a fundamental sociality and worldly connectedness of the human person.<sup>30</sup> There is a social *a priori*--an intersubjective transcendence-- which inspires the symbols.<sup>31</sup> Harrod’s elaboration of the process through which symbolic structures emerge and influence persons further emphasizes Schutz’s observations that worldly relations (and the experience of transcendence inherent to these relations) both shape and are shaped by symbols.

The analyses of intersubjectivity articulated by Mead, Schutz and Harrod does not rest entirely on linguistic intersubjectivity as does discourse ethics. These thinkers offer an account of embodiment and worldliness--of worldly involvement which both precedes and is (particularly

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<sup>27</sup> Schutz (1970) 246

<sup>28</sup> *ibid*

<sup>29</sup> Harrod, 61

<sup>30</sup> This suggestion is woven throughout Harrod’s discussion of moral agency, particularly Chapter III in *The Human Center*

<sup>31</sup> While I am discussing primarily the mediating role of symbols, Harrod also describes the operation of typification (typical meaning structure) for transcending present experience.

for Harrod) dialectically involved with the shared structures of language and symbols. The social *a priori* found in Mead, Schutz and Harrod holds more potential for a relational ethics of the wider ecological community. These accounts of the human person, and moral agent's relation with the physical world suggest that human persons and communities are not alien to one another nor are they alien to the more-than-human world. In fact, the linguistic and symbolic bonds that connect communities within shared meanings and beliefs grow out of more direct and physical relations. Bodies then are important, indeed even central in Harrod's estimation. Harrod refers to the body as the center "from which all action and experience proceed."<sup>32</sup> Our bodies are the locus and medium of action and experience and thus undeniably significant to ethics.

A dialectic holds embodiment and consciousness together. Harrod comments that this dialectic avoids biological reduction and the abstraction of idealism. According to his account, subjective consciousness though it transcends the body is never entirely severed from the objective body. Even though moral agency entails "transcending embodied experience in various ways," Harrod rejects claims of the absolute freedom of consciousness.<sup>33</sup>

Among the accomplishments of the intersubjective theories of Mead, Schutz, and Harrod is the elucidation of an ongoing and reciprocal relationship of subject and object, consciousness and body, culture and nature. Even as they maintain these relations, a potential exists within the dialectical system for consciousness to be disembodied and for linguistic structures and cultural symbols to become entrenched, reified, closed, exclusive, and unresponsive to the complexities of a radically relational and bodied existence. Consciousness, though dialectically related to the body, transcends the bodied world--it is not bodied. Cultural symbols though shaped by experiences of the transcendences of society and nature serve as a horizon of value and meaning beyond that of the world. This distinction of the bodied and not-bodied still allows for the abstraction of symbols, structures, and knowledge from the bodied world and other bodied beings--its does not sufficiently undermine the tendency of human beings to "forget" (or flee) their bodies.

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<sup>32</sup> Harrod, 27

<sup>33</sup> Harrod, 30. For greater detail of how the body serves as a limit for action and grounds consciousness in desire, see Harrod, 27

## A relational ethic of the “flesh”

David Abram, in the *Spell of the Sensuous*, describes the bodily forgetfulness, denial and reduction that accompanies the formation of linguistic and symbolic systems.<sup>34</sup> He claims that humans develop an illusory independence from our bodies and other bodies in the world and that language supports this illusion.

In contact with the written word a new, apparently autonomous, sensibility emerges into experience, a new self that can enter into relation with its own verbal traces, can view and ponder its own statements even as it is formulating them, and can thus reflexively interact with itself in isolation from other persons and from the surrounding, animate earth. This new sensibility seems independent of the body--seems, indeed, of another order entirely-- since it is born by the letters and texts whose changeless quality contrasts vividly with the shifting life of the body and the flux of organic nature.<sup>35</sup>

For Abram, language facilitates the progressive retreat (“incarceration”) into the human mind and serves as a perceptual boundary (“veil”) between those who speak the language and the sensuous world they inhabit.

One danger of such bodiliness forgetfulness would be the idealism that Mead, Schutz, and Harrod attempt to avoid, but another expression is that which “Deconstruction” has illuminated. Deconstructionists, such as Jacques Derrida, attempt to demonstrate how texts, beliefs, and societies reduce and reify meaning, how the transcendences initially articulated through them are lost and how these texts and beliefs become dangerously confining. In the words of Derrida, “deconstruction is turned toward opening, exposure, expansion, and complexification, toward releasing unheard-of, undreamt-of possibilities to come.”<sup>36</sup> Affirming the historical, social and linguistic “constructedness” of beliefs and practices, Derrida and other deconstructionists continually illumine the instability of this constructions. In terms of community identity, for example, Derrida resists the notion of community as unity or harmony. Instead, he argues that community implies not only form but also opening, similarity *and* difference. John Caputo explains that what Derrida does not like about the word community is

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<sup>34</sup> David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996)

<sup>35</sup> Abram, 255

<sup>36</sup> John D. Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997) 31

its connotations of “fusion” and “identification.”<sup>37</sup> The closure implied in these connotations of “community” “would be just about the opposite of what deconstruction is, since deconstruction is the preparation for the incoming of the other, ‘open’ and ‘porous’ to the other.”<sup>38</sup> Derrida insists that community or cultural identity (beliefs, practices,...) may indeed be an identity, but that this identity is internally differentiated, is not identical with itself. By destabilizing such social and symbolic constructions, Derrida highlights the constructed quality of these symbols and also creates the possibilities for new meanings and expressions.

Derrida’s method of deconstruction facilitates an openness and complexity within socio-linguistic structures, but he does not treat the openness and complexity that lurks in the bodied structures from which language arises. Since his examination remains on the level of cultural construction, he does not admit the relational *a priori* whose fecundity is represented in constructions of language. Abram indicates that another method of destabilizing reified social constructions is possible that both recognizes complexity of expression and attends to the bodied existence that human beings share with other beings. He explores the bodily or sensual depths of the world and, in doing so, not only yields a complexification of meaning but also the prolific life of the body and its radical relation within the world. Abram’s method is not merely a deconstruction of the symbols to which we cling, but also an affirmation of the living, bodily world that continually defies the confines of social constructions. Abram’s examination of language is an awakening to the sensual world in all its vibrancy and diversity.

This breathing landscape is... a potentized field of intelligence in which our actions participate. As the regime of self-reference begins to break down, as we awaken to the air, and to the multiplicitous Others that are implicated, with us, in its generative depths, the shapes around us seem to awaken, to come alive.<sup>39</sup>

He uses a method developed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, a phenomenology of sense experience, to attend to the complex world of the senses. Merleau-Ponty represents a new direction for relational ethics. His phenomenology suggests the inadequacies of relational theories that attend only to the shared beliefs or linguistic and symbolic structures and ignore the experience of sensual involvement with the rest of nature. Such linguistic approaches neglect the primary relation that enfold human beings. The primary relation is that of bodies, of the senses, and

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<sup>37</sup> Caputo, 107

<sup>38</sup> Caputo, 108

extends to all the world. This method does not refute theories of intersubjectivity developed by theorists like Mead, Schutz and Harrod but places all of these intersubjective structures **within** a worldly body. The dialectic, therefore, is a reciprocal exchange within a body (and that of the world's) between the sensing and sensed. The dialectic movement never transcends the bodied world. In fact, transcendence is a depth of the world into which sensing beings are lured. Merleau-Ponty's account of relation holds tremendous potential for dealing with ecological issues that span diverse human communities and affect non-human beings. His theory of the "flesh" connects human communities with one another and with the myriad of ecological life, grounding a radically relational ethics and offering general norms that inform those ethics.

The chapters that follow will take up the consideration of a radically relational and deeply sensual account of human connection in and with the rest of the earth. Like Abram, I will appeal to the work of Merleau-Ponty and its potential for placing human beings in relation with the more-than-human world. The relational ethics that will be "fleshed" out in these pages is not intended as a dismissal or substitute for all other contemporary accounts of moral relations. In fact, the ethics that I will propose can extend current relational theories to accommodate concern for the whole of the ecological community. To an even greater degree than discourse ethics, the ethics of the flesh can help to facilitate moral reflection across diverse cultural communities while extending moral consideration beyond the confines of discursive structures. In articulating an ethic of relation among all the world's beings, this project promotes the goal of ecological feminism. Ecological feminists have outlined the dangers of the dualistic separation of human from the rest of nature. They argue that this separation is a cultural construction that has been employed against women and other beings. Ecological feminists are working to develop an expansive ethic of relation, which can overcome the dichotomy of human/reason and other/body. Merleau-Ponty's work can enable ecological feminists to develop a relational ethic beyond mind/body and male/female dichotomies.

Chapter one will summarize ecological feminists analysis of the aspersion of the body and women in the history of western ethics. Ecological feminists describe the persistent neglect and denigration of bodies within the theological and philosophical traditions of the West. In chapter two, ecological feminist proposals for overcoming the neglect of the body will be

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<sup>39</sup> Abram, 260

detailed, as well as the obstacle of an enduring dualism which hinders their ethical formulations. Chapter three presents the sense phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty as an account of bodies that can remove the obstacles of gender dualism and linguistic reduction to offer a credible ethics of the body. In Chapter four, the specific contributions that Merleau-Ponty makes to ecological feminist relational ethics will be outlined. The conclusion addresses feminist responses to Merleau-Ponty's work. Since I will argue that Merleau-Ponty's work can allow ecological feminists to formulate a non-dualistic ethics, this treatment of feminist responses is important to the cogency of my final claims. Finally, I will indicate the practical implications of an ethic of the flesh and its capacity for addressing current global ecological issues.

## CHAPTER II

### ECOLOGICAL FEMINIST CRITIQUE OF DUALISM

The arguments of ecological feminism indicate the importance of a radically relational ethics of the body. They offer an extensive critique of the separation of human and body that they identify as a prevailing pattern in western thought. These feminists claim that the philosophical separation of humans from bodies and from the rest of nature has negatively impacted both non-human beings and marginalized human groups. Their critique highlights dangers of the symbolic separation of human from the rest of nature and indicates the need for a resurgence of the bodies in moral systems.

This group of feminists recognize a thread connecting the various forms of environmental destruction. Global warming, deforestation, nuclear waste facility siting, and excessive Northern consumption are not isolated issues. Each of these facets of the environmental crisis reflects the prevalent conceptual and ethical framework of western culture.<sup>1</sup> According to ecological feminists, dualism pervades western thought and yields a moral neglect of certain human and nonhuman beings. In this dualism, bodies and the beings identified with bodies (nonhuman nature, persons of color, women, and the poor) are conceived as an inferior 'others' in contrast to those beings identified with reason and rationality. Ecological feminists argue that dualism, and the symbolic system which attends it, has rendered western ethics impotent in confronting the exploitation of humans and nonhumans. They argue that dualistic ethical conceptions have been complicit in this crisis. Ecological feminists are seeking to advance non-dualistic understandings of the moral self and relations in order to undermine patterns of human and ecological exploitation. Their goal of reinterpreting understandings of the moral self, as a relational and ecological self, entails a reconsideration of the status and role of *bodies* in ethics.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a general critique of western ethics (philosophical and theological). Different ecological feminists specify different moral theories. Among those targets of critique, Plato, Aristotle, Descartes and Kant will be discussed in this essay

## What is Ecological Feminism?

Ecological feminism is a “subcategory” of ecofeminism.<sup>2</sup> While the broader ecofeminist movement<sup>3</sup> considers the many parallels between the domination of women and of nature, ecological feminists focus on conceptual and symbolic patterns of domination.<sup>4</sup> They contend that some of the most important connections between the domination of women and nature lie in their symbolic representation of defilement and otherness. These conceptual similarities are evident in other forms of domination (i.e. racism, classism, heterosexism) as well. The concept of the moral self and the moral relations and overall conceptual framework that has prevailed in western culture are targets of ecological feminist critique.

The concept of moral self in western ethics is embedded in a larger conceptual framework that disavows the importance of bodies, according to ecological feminist analysis. Karen Warren defines a conceptual framework as “a set of basic beliefs, values, attitudes, and assumptions that shape and reflect how one views oneself and others.”<sup>5</sup> It is a lens, she claims, through which we understand the world and the relations therein.<sup>6</sup> Conceptual frameworks are not morally benign--they involve a logical structure as well as a value system. Ecological feminists charge that the dominant conceptual framework of western culture, in its logic and ethics, is oppressive. A conceptual framework is ‘oppressive’ if it “explains, justifies, and maintains relationships of domination and subordination.”<sup>7</sup> The western conceptual system of

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<sup>2</sup> Chris Cuomo uses the term “subcategory” to define ecological feminism’s conceptual focus with the larger movement of ecofeminism. Chris J. Cuomo, *Feminism and Ecological Communities: an ethic of flourishing* (New York: Routledge, 1998)

<sup>3</sup> Ecofeminism is best understood as a variety of movements rather than one unified movement, but I have chosen a vary broad description of ecofeminism which I believe encompasses the various movements.

<sup>4</sup> Some representative writings of ecological feminism that I will draw upon include *Feminism and Ecological Communities* by Chris Cuomo, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* by Val Plumwood, *Gaia and God* by Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Earthcare* by Carolyn Merchant, and *Ecological Feminist Philosophies* by Karen Warren. These writings and thinkers do not necessarily focus exclusively on conceptual patterns of dualism. Karen Warren for instance has worked extensively on categorizing various forms of ecofeminism. Rosemary Radford Ruether also focuses on the retrieval and reconstruction of non-dualistic and non-dominating myths and religious images.

<sup>5</sup> Karen Warren, ed. *Ecological Feminist Philosophies* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1996) xi

<sup>6</sup> As will become evident in our discussion, many poststructuralist feminists describe the ‘constructive’ role of conceptual frameworks. Elizabeth Dodson Gray explains that concepts are social formulations that act as eyeglasses through which we perceive reality. Reality, in this interpretation, does not just exist “out there,” but is socially-constructed through our language and commonly-held assumptions. See Elizabeth Dodson Gray, *Patriarchy as a Conceptual Trap* (Wellesley, Massachusetts: Roundtable Press, 1982). With Merleau-Ponty’s interpretation of the chiasmic relationship of language and bodies, I will suggest that a reciprocal relation exists between language, concepts, and social formulations and the sensible world.

<sup>7</sup> Warren (1996) 20

dualism is oppressive because the ethical systems and values derived from it “relegate what is considered feminine or natural to an inferior status” and “help justify and implement both that relegation and the mistreatment of those groups and entities.”<sup>8</sup> According to ecological feminists, the dualistic conception of the human person and the attending dualistic framework of western philosophy places mind and body in opposition. The mind-body opposition has contributed to a fundamentally oppositional and exploitive culture in which whole groups of persons and beings are excluded from the moral community.

### **Ecological Feminists Identify Dualism as Root of Domination**

A central premise of ecological feminism is that various forms of oppression have logical similarities and that recurrent themes and conceptual or symbolic tools are used to harm different groups. Underlying the physical condition of exploitation lurks “common ethical and ontological bases for maltreatment.”<sup>9</sup> They contend, therefore, that concepts have material and historical implications. In fact, it is the attempt to understand and overcome material and historical inequities and exploitation that helps to inspire the conceptual critiques of ecological feminism and ecofeminists generally. Ecofeminists refer to research that suggests women are disproportionately likely to suffer from ecological illness (illnesses stemming from acute poisoning by toxic chemicals or from chronic, low-level exposures to many harmful substances) as an impetus to consider conceptual links between the domination of women and nature.<sup>10</sup> The impact of ecological devastation on the capacity to bear children has had a similar impact of drawing feminists towards environmental issues.<sup>11</sup>

Especially in the “Third World,” where men flee to urban areas looking for work and women are providers of essential resources, like wood, water, food, fuel, and healthcare, natural resource depletion and toxic contamination impact women directly.<sup>12</sup> Ecological devastation is

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<sup>8</sup> Cuomo, 38

<sup>9</sup> Cuomo, 7

<sup>10</sup> Lin Nelson, “The Place of Women in Polluted Places” in Irene Diamond and Gloria Feman Orenstein, *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1990) 176-7.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid*, 177-8. Nelson cites increasing numbers of birth defect clusters, especially in industrial centers, cases of extensive mercury poisoning resulting in severe disabilities in the children of exposed pregnant mothers, elevated levels of PCBs, PBBs, and dioxin in mothers milk, increasing reports of reproductive problems in the workplace due to such hazards as led, ethylene oxide, DBCP, radiation.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid* 184

linked to the material deprivation and struggles of women. Ivone Gebara, an ecofeminist nun, describes the conditions within her Latin American context that have given rise to ecofeminism:

I sense that ecofeminism is born of daily life, of day-to-day sharing among people, of enduring together garbage in the streets, bad smells, the absence of sewers and safe drinking water, poor nutrition, and inadequate health care. The ecofeminist issue is born of the lack of municipal garbage collection, of multiplication of rats, cockroaches, and mosquitoes, and of the sores on children's skin. This is true because it is usually women who have to deal with daily survival issues: keeping the house clean and feeding and washing children.<sup>13</sup>

Ecofeminist examinations of the material connections which exist between the exploitation of women and nature eventually led ecofeminists to consider the conceptual connections between different forms of exploitation.

This group of 'conceptual' feminists insist that certain cultural forms maintain and strengthen exploitation. One way that cultural forms help to maintain exploitation is by portraying inequities and oppression as the result of 'natural' inferiority.<sup>14</sup> They naturalize oppressive characterizations and moral exclusions of women and other oppressed beings so that they will be taken to be innate.

As a step toward questioning domination and exploitation, ecological feminists analyze conceptual forms of inferiority and seek alternative concepts. Chris Cuomo refers to a "conceptual gridlock" within western culture which fails to undermine oppression and is harmful in that it preserves and reproduces interconnected forms of domination.<sup>15</sup> She calls for conceptual shifts which, she says, are necessary for social change. Karen Warren agrees and explains that mainstay philosophical conceptions that have been part of the western tradition since the Greeks must be reconceived to overcome oppressions.<sup>16</sup> For Ynestra King, the survival of the human species means challenging dominant concepts.<sup>17</sup> She, like other ecological feminists, insists that although dualistic moral frameworks which denigrate women and nature are dominant in western culture, feminists can--and must-- consciously choose to question them.

Questioning conceptual dualism and domination is not easy. Elizabeth Dodson Gray uses the term "conceptual trap" to describe the ideas, beliefs, assumptions, and values that serve to

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<sup>13</sup> Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Water: ecofeminism and liberation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999) 2

<sup>14</sup> Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1993)42

<sup>15</sup> Cuomo, 9

<sup>16</sup> Warren (1996) xvii

reinforce the domination of women and nature. This conceptual trap, she explains, “is to the thought world of the mind what the astronomers’ black holes are to the universe.”<sup>18</sup> As with the black hole, once inside the conceptual trap there seems to be no way of getting out. Even imagining a world outside of these dominant conceptual frameworks has proven difficult for ecological feminists.

### **Definition of Dualism**

Dualism, as used in ecological feminist critiques, involves more than a distinction or differentiation between two aspects or beings. Dualism refers to a structure of inferior and alien otherness. Warren explains that the normative dualisms emerge from an “either-or” thinking in which disjunctive terms or sides are seen as exclusive rather than inclusive, as oppositional rather than complementary.<sup>19</sup> This type of thinking distorts reality because it “conceptually separates as opposites aspects of reality that in fact are inseparable or complementary.”<sup>20</sup>

Chris Cuomo defines dualisms as false dichotomies constructed in order to maintain power structures and used as paradigms for all of reality. “Dualistic thinking emphasizes only extremes and caricatures of a continuum of existing entities or attributes” explains Cuomo.<sup>21</sup> She offers the example of the dichotomy between masculinity and femininity which obscures the actuality that humans exhibit an array of characteristics that could be consider “feminine” or “masculine.”<sup>22</sup> Plumwood defines a dualism as “an intense, established and developed cultural expression” of a hierarchical relationship which “constructs central cultural concepts and identities so as the make equality and mutuality literally unthinkable.”<sup>23</sup> For ecological feminists, dualism is a **disconnection** which promotes domination.

Early in the ecofeminist movement, some western feminists suggested that gender dualism is the primary dualism.<sup>24</sup> Ynestra King referred to women as the “original other”<sup>25</sup> and

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<sup>17</sup> Ynestra King, “The Ecology of Feminism and the Feminism of Ecology” in Judith Plant, ed., *Healing the Wounds: The Promise of Ecofeminism* (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1989) 20

<sup>18</sup> Gray 17

<sup>19</sup> Warren (1987) 6

<sup>20</sup> Warren (1987) 6-7

<sup>21</sup> Cuomo, 136

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Plumwood, 47

<sup>24</sup> Charlene Spretnak “Ecofeminism: our roots and flowering,” in Irene Diamond and Gloria Feman Orenstein (eds) *Reweaving the World* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1990 )3-14.

Rosemary Radford Ruether argued that the “repressive view of the alien female was also the model for inferiorization of other subjugated groups.”<sup>26</sup> The idea of a ‘primary’ dualism has since become more nuanced as white, western feminists have acknowledged their participation in systems of racial, ethnic, and economic polarization and exploitation.<sup>27</sup> Ruether warns that women are not a homogenous group and that privileged Northern feminists must take responsibility “for their actual social context as heirs and beneficiaries of their conquest as first world affluent people.”<sup>28</sup> Val Plumwood, aware of her complex identity as a woman and a member of the colonizing European community in Australia, suggests that association with and denigration of embodiment has been more harmful to groups other than white women. Slaves, “primitive people,” and manual laborers have been even more closely associated with embodiment than Northern European women, she argues. Ecological feminists are not insistent that all forms of domination are derivatives of female domination, but they remain convinced that oppositions and exploitations mutually determine and support one another.

Instead of reducing forms of dualism to a primary expression, ecological feminists describe an interdependence among dualisms. Ecological feminists understand the alienation of body from mind, human from the rest of nature, self from other, male from female, as part of a conceptual structure of dualism that also divides various human groups from one another. Human groups consigned to the sphere of otherness include women and nature, as well as: non-westerners, people of color, native peoples, gays and lesbians, among other ‘others.’ Ecological feminists argue that the sphere of otherness is devalued and demarcated as alien, empty, passive, inert, and evil.<sup>29</sup>

One way ecological feminists emphasize the influence of dualism on western thought is by presenting lists of the oppositional pairs which, they contend, shape western culture. In addition to the gender dualism, ecological feminists identify many other dualisms in western thought. Warren lists the oppositions of human to non-human; mind to body; self to other; and

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<sup>25</sup> King in Plant 21

<sup>26</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *New Woman, New Earth* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975) 4

<sup>27</sup> Plumwood explains that many ecofeminists, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Maria Mies, Karen Warren, Ynestra King, Vandana Shiva, and Donna Haraway among them, have joined black feminists like bell hooks in seeing women’s oppression as one among a number of forms of oppression. See Plumwood 197 note 1.

<sup>28</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1992) 5

reason to emotion.<sup>30</sup> Plumwood provides an extensive list which, in addition to those mentioned by Warren, includes: culture to nature; master to slave; rationality to animality; freedom to necessity; universal to particular; public to private; subject to object.<sup>31</sup> Feminist theologians are quick to add the dualism of transcendence and immanence and spirit and body to the list of dualisms.<sup>32</sup> The various dualisms form an interlocking structure and help to reinforce one another. For instance, the bifurcation of mind and body helps to maintain the separation of the human from the rest of nature. The rupture between transcendence and immanence fortifies the freedom and necessity disjunction. Also, one may look only as far as recent popular literature (which assigns men to one planet and women to another) to see that the dualism of reason and emotion is invoked to affirm the dichotomy between male and female.

The list of dualisms offered by ecological feminists are not complete. Indeed, Plumwood says that such lists will never be complete since any distinction can be treated as a dualism. The dualisms that ecological feminists identify are those which correspond with the existing forms of oppression (gender, class, race, nature) in western culture. These forms of oppression are those which ecological feminists want to address with their critiques of dualism.

Plumwood suggests that a dualism is a hierarchical relationship with fixed identities--one superior and the other inferior. She contends that dualisms are even more resistant to change than other hierarchies because they become inscribed in culture and influence individual and group identity. "In dualistic construction, as in hierarchy, the qualities (actual or supposed), the culture, the values and the areas of life associated with the dualized other are systematically and pervasively constructed and depicted as inferior," claims Plumwood.<sup>33</sup> Her definition suggests that dualism is always characterized by domination. Warren says that the dualisms themselves may not be oppressive, but that when they are combined with a logic of domination they justify subordination. However, she observes that, in contemporary Western society with its rigid categories of gender, race, class, age..., hierarchical dualisms may always function oppressively. Whether domination is inherent to dualism or not, ecological feminists all agree that the dualistic

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<sup>29</sup> See Susan Griffin's account of the subjugation of women and nature through associations emptiness and evil in Susan Griffin, *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978).

<sup>30</sup> Warren (1987) 6-7

<sup>31</sup> Plumwood, 43

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, Ruether (1992) and Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992)

<sup>33</sup> Plumwood, 47

conceptual structures of western thought which subordinate one member of a dualism to the other are detrimental to the well-being of many alienated groups.

How does dualistic separation become a license for domination? Ecological feminists argue that the bifurcation of persons and beings in dualism promotes domination by relegating or reducing the ‘inferior’ party to the status of object. Ruether explains that, in gender dualism, woman is the “object-tool” of male power.<sup>34</sup> The images of body, property, and chattel are applied to women to reinforce object status. Likewise, Ruether observes that “lower classes” and “conquered races” are reduced to the level of objects. The objectification of the ‘inferior’ other of a dualism obfuscates the other’s moral significance. Plumwood observes that first the lower side of the dualism is conceived as an instrument of the master side. They then become ‘harnessed’ to the purposes and needs of the ‘superior’ side. In this process of instrumentalization, the lower side is stripped of its own ends and defined solely in terms of the dominating group’s ends.

The dualizing master self does not empathically recognize others as moral kin, and does not recognize them as a center of desires or needs on their own account. Hence on both counts he is free to impose his own ends.<sup>35</sup>

The inferior side of the dualism is a ‘resource’ for others with no independent value; the beings assigned to this lower side, therefore, are not morally considerable. Virtue with reference to the lower side is determined by their usefulness to those who are in the position of master. Plumwood offers the examples of a good wife or a good worker.<sup>36</sup> They are considered as instruments for those who inhabit the sphere of moral worth--the ‘superior’ side.

The harm that dualisms impose endure. Past dualisms do not disappear, but are ‘redeployed’ over time.<sup>37</sup> Plumwood observes that old oppressions and the dualistic concepts behind them “break the path” for new ones.<sup>38</sup> In other words, dichotomous categories become entrenched as a model for interpretation. One way that ecological feminists try to challenge dualism is by identifying the historical development of this pattern of understanding the world.

## **History of Dualism**

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<sup>34</sup> Ruether (1975) 26

<sup>35</sup> Plumwood, 53

<sup>36</sup> Plumwood, 53

<sup>37</sup> Plumwood, 43

Carolyn Merchant, Val Plumwood, and Rosemary Radford Ruether have all offered historical analyses of dualism in western thought. In their work, they demonstrate that women have been aligned with bodies and nature to their detriment. These ecological feminists also describe how human rationality and spirituality have been conceptually severed from the body and the physical world.

Carolyn Merchant's study of the emergence of mechanistic philosophy during the mid-seventeenth century suggests that the association between women and nature has supported the exploitation of both. She explains that the Francis Bacon (1561-1626) transformed tendencies within society to view women as reproductive resources into a license to dominate nature. According to Merchant, Bacon employed the power of language to portray nature as female and to reduce it to a resource for economic production.<sup>39</sup> Merchant explains that the inquisition of witches permeated Bacon's descriptions of nature and his metaphorical style, helping to transform earth as a nurturing mother and womb of life into a source of secrets to be extracted for economic advance.<sup>40</sup> Bacon's imagery "treats nature as a female to be tortured through mechanical inventions" and "strongly suggests the interrogations of the witch trials and the mechanical devices used to torture witches."<sup>41</sup> Implicit in Bacon's use of female imagery for nature is an understanding of the feminine as wicked and deceptive. He implies that nature and women need to be tamed and subdued, rendered passive. Bacon's thought is replete with language of rape and subjugation: nature is a female to be coerced, penetrated, conquered, and forced to yield.<sup>42</sup> Merchant traces this model of the female as passive inert matter back to Aristotle.

Aristotle articulated an ideology of objectivity in which "the female, as female, is passive and the male, as male, is active, and the principle movement comes from him."<sup>43</sup> A basic dichotomy of subject and object (male and female), which Merchant calls "the basic

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<sup>38</sup> Plumwood, 43

<sup>39</sup> Carolyn Merchant, *Earthcare: Women and Environment* (New York: Routledge, 1996) 80

<sup>40</sup> Merchant (1996) 80

<sup>41</sup> Merchant (1996) 81

<sup>42</sup> Ruether (1992) 195. Ruether also notes that Bacon ties the scientific revolution to the Christian myth of fall and redemption. "Through the sin of Eve, 'nature' fell out of man's control, but through scientific knowledge this fall will be reversed and nature restored to man's dominion," Ruether summarizes.

<sup>43</sup> Merchant (1996) 60 quoted from Aristotle, *De Generatione Animalium*, trans. Arthur Platt (Oxford, England.: Clarendon Press, 1910), Bk. 1 Ch. 19, lines 279b13.

philosophical framework of Western culture,”<sup>44</sup> was appropriated during the Scientific Revolution to legitimate the scientist’s control over whatever is assigned to or associated with the passive ‘feminine’ or inert material world. According to Merchant’s analysis, the license for domination has deep historical roots in a pattern of dualism that privileges one side (male) and inferiorizes the other (female).

Ruether identifies Aristotle as one who systematically develops the gender dualism that emerged in the first millennium B.C. in Greek and Hebrew cultures. Aristotle correlated the social hierarchy of being with slavery. “Women, ‘barbarians,’ and animals are seen as beings without rational capacity and hence fitted only to be slave or servile instruments of Greek masculine sovereignty,” says Ruether of Aristotle’s legacy.<sup>45</sup> He espoused the view that women are naturally servile in contrast to free Greek males. Free Greek males represent the ruling ‘reason,’ which must subjugate the ‘body people.’<sup>46</sup> Women are treated as not only passive incubators of the formative male seed, but they are defined as biologically and morally ‘defective.’ Aristotle contends that the male seed should normatively produce another male. “Females result only through an aberration in which the lower material principle subverts the male formative principle,” Ruether summarizes.<sup>47</sup>

Plumwood provides an even more probing analysis of the deep roots of domination. She, too, traces oppressive dualistic frameworks back to Greek culture. However, she extends even further back to Plato. She notes that some have championed Plato’s ideas as enlightened with respect to women and nature. According to Plumwood, feminist champions of Plato, fail to take seriously Plato’s devaluation of women and of the feminine as a major element of his philosophical system. Plato’s debasement of women runs much deeper than a personal distaste for them as a sex, she explains. He equates the feminine with a lack of control and with the lower order of nature which he contrasts with reason.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Merchant (1996) 61

<sup>45</sup> Ruether (1992) 183-4

<sup>46</sup> Ruether (1975) 14

<sup>47</sup> Ruether (1975) 15

<sup>48</sup> Plumwood provides multiple citations from Plato’s writings which illustrate his debasement of women. Women are associated with “formless, undisciplined matter or primeval chaos (Timeaus 50); with disorder and ungoverned emotion (Republic 605 D-E), with idle gossip and opinion (doxa) (Republic 304 C, 111, 395), with moral evil (Timeaus 91), incompetence (Republic 455D), animale nature and distance from logos (Timeaus, 76), with lower, slavish nature unsuited to the public sphere (Republic 455D), and with baser self and bodily appetites (Timeaus

The lower order of nature, according to Plato, includes virtually all of nature: nature as non-human world, as the animal world, the earth itself, the world of biological life, the visible and sensory world around us. He, too, denies that the lower order, associated with female and most other beings, has a creative or generative role. The only “nature” which he celebrates for its structuring or ordering capacity is the abstract cosmos-- the rational principal or universal law subjugating material necessity. Plumwood characterizes Plato’s vision of the world-soul as a colonization model which supports the imposition of a ‘rational’ design, mastering *logos*, upon nature as slave.

The timeless, abstract realm of the Forms is separate and maximally distanced from the inferior ‘world of changes,’ of coming into being and passing away, and its representatives are everywhere treated as the superiors and masters of the representatives of the lower order.<sup>49</sup>

Plato’s Theory of Ideas, Plumwood explains, involves the radical separation of the world of biological life-- the world that we can see, touch, hear, and smell, and the sphere of ideas and reason. Similarly, the human self is conceived dualistically, with opposing orders of dominating reason and inferior nature.

In Plumwood’s critique, she observes that Plato’s understanding of the self and the two orders undergoes some changes. In his early theory of the self in the *Phaedo*, he describes a contrast between the “true self” (reason) and “the forces of body, of animality, emotionality and nature,” which are located outside the soul.<sup>50</sup> Plato’s later work depicts the self as a site of warring tendencies--higher and lower orders--which are present and struggling *within* the self or soul.<sup>51</sup> In this “more sophisticated theory” of the divided self (in the *Republic* and the *Phaedrus*), the dualism continues to be that of inferior bodily appetite and ruling *logos*, reason, but now lies within the self. The self becomes the site of struggle. Plato’s revised dualism places “the human self in inevitable and fundamentally irresolvable conflict with the basic conditions of its physical existence on the earth” and “produces conflict between the self and

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70).” She also observes that “a denial of the whole sphere of the feminine is implicit in the analogy of the Cave.” See Plumwood 77.

<sup>49</sup> Plumwood, 81

<sup>50</sup> Plumwood, 90

<sup>51</sup> Plumwood, 90

those desires or needs which serve to maintain the body and to maintain the self's relations of affectional and material dependency on the others and on the earth."<sup>52</sup>

Plato's conflict of the self is intellectual **and** spiritual. Ruether's analysis of Plato acknowledges that the flight from or conflict with the body involves a quest for transcendent spirituality.<sup>53</sup> She claims that he adds to the mandate for social domination<sup>54</sup> the additional cultural attitude of the alienation from the body and the earth. The body becomes a prison of the soul and the earth a prison of life from which one must flee to secure immortal life.<sup>55</sup> Plato's logos is a spiritual reason or wisdom removed from the body.

In addition to its fundamental conflict, the self is characterized by hierarchy and domination in Plato's later account. The exterior domination that Plato's theory supports, is mapped onto the interior realm of the self, Plumwood contends. Human identity, in this conception, is comprised of a more authoritative, more truly or properly human element--logos (reason)-- and the lower biological elements ("appetites"). The logos or soul of the human person is identified with the divine and enduring aspect of the human. A just or ethical life involves a harmony within the self. Plumwood comments that such harmony can only be achieved temporarily, through denial and repression, because of the irresolvable conflict of the self.

Plato's articulation of virtue, which Plumwood refers to as "a key western tradition of human virtue in relation to nature," is one of rigid control and discipline and of maximum distance between body and reason.<sup>56</sup> The metaphor of escape from the cave illustrates the inferior status of the physical world in Plato's understanding of the virtuous life. In emerging from the cave towards the eternal and unchanging forms, one transcends "the whole lower order of physicality and changeability."<sup>57</sup> The earth and the physical aspects of human identity are corrupt in comparison to the incorruptible Forms:

For our earth, and the stones, and the entire region which surrounds us, are spoilt and corroded, as in the sea all things are corroded by the brine, neither is there any

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<sup>52</sup> Plumwood 91

<sup>53</sup> Ruether (1992) 14

<sup>54</sup> This mandate for social domination, according to Ruether, is present in Plato's creation story in the *Timaeus*. In the *Timaeus*, male domination, class hierarchy, and inferiorization of animals are all part of the accepted social order, "manifesting the primal division of reality into consciousness over body." Ruether (1992) 25

<sup>55</sup> Ruether, 25-6

<sup>56</sup> Plumwood, 93

<sup>57</sup> Plumwood 93

perfect or noble growth, but caverns only, and sand and an endless slough of mud.<sup>58</sup>

The good life is one that emerges from the corruption of the physical world to the purity of eternal forms. Maximum distancing between the higher soul and the lower material nature becomes a normative principle in Plato's later dialogues, contends Plumwood.<sup>59</sup> Virtue entails an "existential homelessness" and disconnection from the physical world.

The dualism of western thought is further developed by Descartes, according to ecological feminist analysis. Descartes severs the relationship between reason and body, human and animal, even more completely than do Aristotle and Plato. For Aristotle, although the intellectual nature is exclusive to the human, nature has a corresponding rational order. Nature, according to Aristotle, was a fusion of matter and form and the rational component of form shaped matter.<sup>60</sup> This account of the rationality of nature though it was based on a hierarchical and instrumental organization of nature allowed for some continuity between rational human and the rest of nature. Plumwood notes that Aristotle, even as he denied that animals had access to an intellectual nature, recognized that non-human animals share features such as sensation and emotion with human beings. Plants also have some common features with humans.<sup>61</sup> Descartes' account of rationality allows no such continuum.

Descartes restricts rationality to human beings in theory of the mind. He defines the mind as consciousness and divides sensations into two modes: sensations as a mode of thought and sensations as a mode of matter or body. As Plumwood explains, "Sensation is said to consist of two parts, the impression made by an external object on the organ of sense and the mind's awareness or contemplation of this impression."<sup>62</sup> The second type of sensation is considered the proper or true sensation as part of the apprehension of the understanding. Sensations proper, in this formulation, are aspects of thought (reason) and are distinct from bodily operations of seeing, hearing, smelling of which animals are capable.<sup>63</sup> With this account of proper sensation as a mental operation, Descartes attempts to enforce a strict division between mental and bodily and

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<sup>58</sup> Plumwood, 96 quoted from Plato, *Phaedo* 267-9

<sup>59</sup> Plumwood, 91

<sup>60</sup> Plumwood, 105

<sup>61</sup> Plumwood, 108. She cites *De Anima* 413 a-b.

<sup>62</sup> Plumwood, 114

<sup>63</sup> Plumwood, 115

between human and animal: Mind becomes pure thought and body becomes pure matter. These substances are “utterly different in kind and mutually exclusive.”<sup>64</sup>

This distinction between modes of thought enables Descartes to sever any continuity between human and non-human. All non-human nature is bereft of any features of the human, who alone are capable of thought. In circular reasoning, Descartes concludes that the difference between animals and human beings (a difference which emerges from his definition and the assumption that animals are not capable of thought) proves the independence of the mind and soul from the body: “On thus coming to know how different the animals are from us, we comprehend so much better the reasons which prove the soul to be of a nature entirely independent of the body.”<sup>65</sup>

Descartes thus shores up Plato’s earlier distinctions between the mind and body, but he also takes this distinction a step further. In the progression towards utter separation of these two realms, Plumwood identifies three steps. Plato accomplishes the first two: the construction of the normative human identity as mind or reason, excluding or inferiorizing other features, and the construction of mind or reason as oppositional to nature. Descartes achieves the third: the construction of nature as mindless, alien, and entirely separate from human.

In contrast to Plato, Descartes does not have a virtue-based account of the exclusion of nature. The human task, for Plato is to move beyond nature and to ascend to the higher realms of ideal Forms and the contemplation of the Good. Plumwood observes that Descartes dispenses with the subtleties of the divided self, of the higher and lower parts of the soul. In Descartes account, the non-rational areas are not parts of the soul, they pertain only to the body. The separation then is no longer maintained with an account of virtue.

Instead, Descartes appeals to mechanism to sustain dualism. Plato’s concern was with reason’s primacy and control over internal nature--with disciplining the body; Descartes, on the other hand, emphasizes the control of external nature. Descartes uses mechanistic imagery to further suggest the passivity and complete mindlessness of nature. Implicit in this imagery is the possibility of controlling and molding nature. Human reason is the foremost tool of control. Nature becomes an object which serves the human master. Descartes thus offers a purely

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<sup>64</sup> Plumwood, 115

<sup>65</sup> Plumwood quotes *Discourse*, part V

instrumental view of nature: “The machine image confirms the new confidence in control as well as the narrow and instrumental view of nature associated with a technological outlook.”<sup>66</sup>

Plumwood explains the consequence of restricting perception to the mind and eliminating sense perception as a bridge between mind and body in thought.

[t]he intentional, psychological level of description is thus stripped from the body and strictly isolated in a separate mechanism of the mind. The body, deprived of such a level of description and hence of any capacity for agency, becomes an empty mechanism which has no agency or intentionality within itself, but is driven from outside by the mind.<sup>67</sup>

Similarly, “nature is taken to have no originaive power within itself, and to be devoid of teleology...Cosmos and organism emerge as a meaningless assemblage of parts because their organizing principles are lost in the destruction of intentional description.”<sup>68</sup> The body, nature, and all that is associated with them is rendered passive in Descartes’ mechanism.

Ruether calls Descartes philosophy a “radical” version of the dualism between mind and matter.<sup>69</sup> Matter is mindless and soul-less and animals are reduced to ‘automata’ which are fundamentally lifeless and operated by a type of mechanical power. In severing the continuum between organic body, life, sensibility and thought, Descartes permitted the split between fact and value. Dead inert matter, mere objects, became the “value-free” realm of science, and questions of ethics and values were segregated in the realm of the soul.

### **Dualistic Self and Ethics**

Ecological feminists recognize an unmistakable alienation of the human person from the rest of nature in Descartes’ writing. Consciousness or thought, as defined by Descartes, becomes the line of division between human and non-human beings, between the mind and the body. This line of division also separates human persons from one another. Women and other human groups which have been associated with the body are understood to be different from, inferior to, less than human. The conceptual divisions of dualism, which separate human groups from one another, have corresponding material boundaries as Susan Griffin articulates in *Women and Nature*:

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<sup>66</sup> Plumwood, 109

<sup>67</sup> Plumwood, 115.

<sup>68</sup> Plumwood, 115

<sup>69</sup> Reuther (1992) 196

Separation. The clean from the unclean. The decaying, the putrid, the polluted, the fetid, the eroded, waste, defecation, from the unchanging...Death from the city. Wilderness from the city. Wildness from the city...The errant from the city. The ghetto. The ghetto of Jews. The ghetto of Moors. The quarter of prostitutes. The ghetto of blacks. The neighborhood of lesbians. The prison...Anger from her body. Intellect from her body. Separation.<sup>70</sup>

Conceptual separation of mind and body promotes the physical isolation of certain groups and maintains conditions of neglect and disenfranchisement among those associated with the body.

The power of dualistic concepts and symbols, especially as developed in Cartesian philosophy, to effect ethical exclusion, material isolation and exploitation of certain beings is not exhausted by current oppressions. The Cartesian formulation of the human mind severs not only the human from nature, human from animal, and human groups from one another, but it severs the self from relation with any ‘other.’

In Descartes’ philosophy, the human mind is certain only of its own existence (thought). All sensations of the body are suspect and thus, the basis for confirming the existence of others is obscured. The heightened dualism which Descartes adds to the history of western thought brings about the isolation of the human self and formulations of the autonomous moral agent. A primary effort of feminist ethicists has been to explore alternative conceptions of the moral agent and the relation of self with other. Ecological feminists support these efforts in the area of ethics. They insist that a different understanding of the human person is necessary not only to end oppression against human groups, but also to preserve the viability of the non-human community and to end cycles of exploitation.

Karen Warren sees the work of ecological feminism as an extension of previous feminist efforts. She understands ecofeminism as a “transformative feminism” which attempts to ‘rethink’ the conception of human.<sup>71</sup> For her, such rethinking involves a restructuring of attitudes and beliefs about human persons and the nonhuman world and a questioning of the notion of the self as an abstract individual who is isolated from the ecological community. Like Warren, Plumwood and Cuomo seek to revise the concept of the alienated human self that dualism promotes.

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<sup>70</sup> Susan Griffin 95-96.

<sup>71</sup> Karen J. Warren, “The Power and Promise of Ecofeminism” in *Environmental Ethics* (9)2, 1987, 19

Plumwood details the problematic nature of the alienated self in ethics. She refers to the self of western ethics as “hyperseparated”--maximally distanced--from the feminine and from others. This self lacks essential relations to others and thus “its ends have no non-eliminable reference to or overlap with the welfare of others.”<sup>72</sup> This “rational egoist self” sees others only as means to its own self-contained ends.<sup>73</sup> For Plumwood this account of the disembodied self is a fiction:

The influential but impoverishing master fiction of the self as self-contained rational maximiser denies the social and connected nature of the self, which could function in the way the fiction implies for only very limited areas of life. The instrumental, disembodied account of the relation of self to others and associated accounts of the individual as atomistic and abstract has been very extensively criticised in the area of political theory from a variety of quarters--feminist theory, in the critique of liberalism, and environmental philosophy.<sup>74</sup>

According to Plumwood, a more accurate account of the self would be that which acknowledges social life and the interdependent interests and needs of beings. Such an account entails essential and “not merely accidental or contingent” relations with others.<sup>75</sup>

The atomistic self of western dualism is incapable of acknowledging the value of a being who is different and conceived as ‘other.’ Plumwood explains that classical western logic is dualistic and follows a premise of negation in which what is other than self is external to and negated by the self.<sup>76</sup> The identity of each one is defined by the absence or negation of an other. Plumwood comments that “there is no room here for the complexities of the dance of interaction between the one and an independent other.”<sup>77</sup> Instead of interaction, classical logic facilitates the exclusion of the alien other. In ethical terms, this is the exclusion of the alien other’s needs, concerns, and hopes.

Ivone Gebara finds evidence of the process of negation and exclusion which are based in western logic and dualistic concepts in the mass media. She observes that mass media ignores the life of the outcast and excluded and is indifferent both to their point of view and to their sense

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<sup>72</sup> Plumwood, 144

<sup>73</sup> Plumwood, 144

<sup>74</sup> Plumwood, 152

<sup>75</sup> Plumwood, 153

<sup>76</sup> Plumwood explains that “The account of otherness in classical logic of western culture has the features of dualistic others... In classical logic, negation ( $\sim p$ ) is interpreted as the universe without  $p$ , everything in the universe other than what  $p$  covers...what is important for the issue we are here considering here is that  $\sim p$  can then not be independently or positively identified, but is entirely dependent on  $p$  for its specification.” Plumwood 56

<sup>77</sup> Plumwood, 57

of life: “they regard them as ‘nobodies.’” Gebara draws upon the words of Eduardo Galeano to elucidate this denial of “others” and “otherness”:

The nobodies: nobody’s children, owners of nothing. The nobodies: the no ones,  
the nobodied, running like rabbits, dying through life, screwed every which way.  
Who are not, but could be.  
Who don’t speak languages, but dialects.  
Who don’t have religions, but superstitions.  
Who don’t create art, but handicrafts.  
Who don’t have culture, but folklore.  
Who are not human beings, but human resources.  
Who do not have faces, but arms.  
Who do not have names, but numbers.  
Who do not appear in the history of the world, but in the police blotter of the local  
paper.  
The nobodies, who are not worth the bullet that kills them.<sup>78</sup>

Galeano provides a lucid portrait of the tactics of negation and moral exclusion that ecological feminists denounce in western culture. He also captures the cyclical and systemic nature of this negation. Parents are denied recognition and this heritage is passed on to their children. Those deemed other are denied economic opportunity and property and this economic exclusion further restricts their participation or involvement in society. All aspects of different cultures are denied and demeaned and ultimately even the faces, names, histories, and life of “others” are negated. The western model of the self, which Plumwood refers to as the “egoist-instrumentalist model,” underlies this moral exclusion. The dualistic self “erases the other as part of the ethical domain” and is in no way “constrained empathically or morally by the others needs.”<sup>79</sup>

Plumwood explains that the other exists only as an obstacle to or as a resource for the self’s own needs and desires. In this model, the other is defined exclusively by its relation to the ends of the self.

Thus such a self does not recognise the other as another self, a distinct center of agency and resistance, whose needs, goals and intrinsic value place ethical limits on the self and must be considered and respected. It ‘experiences the other solely in terms of its own needs for gratification and its own desires’, in Nancy Chodorow’s words.<sup>80</sup>

Chodorow and Marilyn Frye have helped to characterize the egoist-instrumental self. Plumwood, along with Warren and other ecological feminists, draws on Frye’s image of the arrogant eye

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<sup>78</sup> Gebara, 26

<sup>79</sup> Plumwood, 144 and 145

which sees ‘everything that is as a resource for man’s exploitation and organizes everything with reference to his own interest.’<sup>81</sup> The interests of the dualized self are private and do not involve those of others. Plumwood describes this self as a closed self because, with only instrumental relations to others, the self takes no risks and is not genuinely open to interaction or awareness of the other’s interest. There is no possibility of responsiveness or sympathy from self toward the other.

Given their extensive critique of the dualism of western ethics and its understanding of moral agent, ecological feminists are faced with the challenge of offering non-dualistic and relational alternatives. One of their biggest tasks is healing the separation of mind and body and asserting the significance of a historically-maligned physical or material reality. Even in moral theories which explicitly reject the instrumentalization of other beings, the disregard of value of bodies has supported the moral exclusion of whole groups of beings. Kant for instance defined moral subjects as those with rational capacity. His maxim that a moral subject should never be treated as merely a means to an end fails to address the moral status of nonhuman beings and many human beings whom western culture has deemed irrational, primitive, and animalistic. By maintaining the split of reason and body, Kant perpetuates the moral exclusions of western culture.

Kant’s ethics demonstrates a disregard of bodies in another way, as well. Kant’s imperative states that one ought never act in such a way that one can not also will that the maxim of one’s actions be universal law. The rule of morality therefore relates to oneself as a universalized subject. Feminist have argued that Kant’s moral (noumenal) self is disembodied, disembodied, and removed from all particularities of history, identity, needs, desires. Kant’s legacy is what Seyla Benhabib has called an ‘empty mask’<sup>82</sup> and what ecological feminists might call an absent body. With an emphasis on the disembodied subject, Kant’s ethics can not account for the particularities of different others and situations and he thereby continues a disregard of what is other than, or not like, **me**.

The alternative formulation of the moral self that ecological feminists have offered is the relational self. Karen Warren insists that “relationships are not something extrinsic to who we

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<sup>80</sup> Plumwood, 145

<sup>81</sup> Plumwood 145. See also Warren (1996) 28-29

are, not an ‘add on’ feature of human nature; they play an essential role in shaping what it is to be human.”<sup>83</sup> Relationships, for Warren and other ecological feminists, are “constitutive of what it is to be human.”<sup>84</sup> This type of feminism urges the rejection of abstract individualism and the dualism of western ethics and see ourselves as “co-members of an ecological community.”<sup>85</sup> Ecological feminists are hopeful that a focus on relationships will help resolve the human and ecological exploitation, but what they intend by the relational self remains unclear. The implication, based on their critique of western dualism, is that their relational ethic will suggest a reciprocity of mind and body, of human and the ecological world and will emphasize the worldly interdependence in which humans live.

### **A New Relational Ethic**

In their analysis of western philosophy and ethics, ecological feminists have made a persuasive argument for the power of concepts (of dualism, autonomous self,...) for influencing culture, promoting exploitation, and affecting bodies; but these feminists have explored to a much lesser degree the capacity of bodies to influence, shape and even transform concepts. If conceptual structures and bodies are connected as their critique of dualism implies (if physical suffering, exploitation and isolation are effected by conceptual separation and exclusion), then bodies can in turn affect and disrupt certain conceptual formulations. And, if as ecological feminists argue relationships are intrinsic and constitutive of what it means to be human, the relational basis of being can not be fully concealed or erased by conceptual systems.<sup>86</sup> One way of attending to the lingering traces of bodily connection and relation in ethical concepts and theories is to refrain from a sweeping dismissal of western philosophy. A close examination of figures such as Aristotle and Plato may reveal some recognition of the importance and worth of

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<sup>82</sup> Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1992)

<sup>83</sup> Warren in *Environmental Ethics* (1990)141

<sup>84</sup> Warren (1990) 141

<sup>85</sup> Warren (1987) 19

<sup>86</sup> Ecological feminist attention to the destructive and harmful effects of dualistic concepts attests to their acknowledgement that relationships can not be utterly denied. The effect of such a denial (what Warren calls the “fiction” of dualism and moral exclusion) is the destruction of humans themselves. The destruction may intially affect the most vulnerable, but eventually by destroying the ecological world that sustains human life, humans destroy themselves.

bodies. Martha Nussbaum's extensive consideration of Greek philosophy refutes some of the caricature of ecological feminist assessment.

Nussbaum's examines issues of sex and gender in Greek philosophy. Her exploration involves an analysis of the status of bodies. She takes exception to claims that Aristotle and/or Plato are sources or originators of sexist and anti-body ideology. She emphasizes that Aristotle, in his work on women for instance, is "echoing and supporting the pervasive ideology of his culture."<sup>87</sup> Nussbaum does not in any sense excuse Aristotle and, in fact, asserts that "his study makes clear... that there were other conflicting, 'appearances' around, both from medicine and from social commentary that might have been fruitfully explored" and that, especially where physiology is concerned, evidence to correct his erroneous views about women were "well within reach."<sup>88</sup> She does, however, refer to the worldview and cosmology that influenced the philosophy of Aristotle and Plato and thereby casts their work as, in part, a reflection of their cultural perspective. Within the cosmology and cultural perspective and ancient Greece, an emphasis and preference was placed upon stable (immutable, non-relational) and highly abstract objects. These conceptions are evident in Plato's conception of the life of reason, but Nussbaum claims that Plato continues the aspiration to rational self-sufficiency (and a 'trapping' or 'binding' of unreliable features of the world) that "is repeatedly dramatized in **pre-Platonic** texts."<sup>89</sup> By placing these philosophies in their larger context, Nussbaum is able to discern ways in which the ethics of Plato and Aristotle may actually begin to challenge, or at least wrestle with the ambiguity of, a mind-body dualism.

Nussbaum describes Plato's imagery as "thoroughly rooted in its cultural tradition."<sup>90</sup> Some features of this cultural tradition include: the concept of the moral agent as a male, hunter, trapper; the moral agent as purely active, control as the aim of moral agent, impenetrability of the soul, purity of the intellect, trust only in immutability and stability, and the solitary good life.<sup>91</sup> These concepts are those which ecological feminists identify as dualistic. Plato, according to Nussbaum, is compelled by a more relational account of the moral life, but that in the end he is

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<sup>87</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and ethics in Greek tragedy and philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986) 499 n. 51

<sup>88</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> Nussbaum (1986) 19

<sup>90</sup> Nussbaum (1986) 20

<sup>91</sup> *ibid*

concerned to protect the “purity” of virtue from worldly flux and uncertainty. Even so, Nussbaum explains that Plato criticizes the concept of purity as lacking in significant human values and recognizes a richness in worldly community.<sup>92</sup>

Aristotle departs even more definitively from the prevalent concepts of his day, in Nussbaum’s analysis. He reinterprets the good life as one shared with friends, loved ones, and community and as living well within a world in which the external has power. According to Nussbaum, Aristotle picked up on a more relational strain in the Greek tradition--a strain that though not dominant in his imagery also influenced Plato-- that speaks of ethical value as “something growing, flowing, and mutable, existing within the human community.”<sup>93</sup> This second strain coexisted, potentially in tension, with that of the solitary good life and the controlling moral agent.

Nussbaum concludes that Plato and Aristotle, to varying degrees, gave expression to this secondary strain of relational morality. Nussbaum’s extensive study of these philosophers does not necessarily negate ecological feminist criticism of dominant conceptual patterns. She does, however, reveal the caricature of western philosophy in the ecological feminist analysis. This revelation need not sabotage their ethics. In fact, she indicates a potential for uncovering a more relational and bodily awareness in seemingly entrenched western dualism. She also alludes to the challenges of such projects. The ambiguities and vulnerabilities of bodies and relation proved challenging to moral formulations of Plato and Aristotle and these complexities have yet to be reconciled. Nussbaum’s work can inform and inspire ecological feminists convictions that relationships are central to our existence and ethics and that the importance of bodies should be examined more thoroughly.

With a persuasive argument about dualistic concepts and their power for effecting moral exclusion and disregard of bodies and with Nussbaum’s insight that the dualism may not be as intractable as would appear, ecological feminists is well-poised to articulate a relational ethics for challenging dualism. But, currently ecological feminists seem to be struggling in their efforts to offer a relational ethic worthy of their critique of dualism. Though they offer a extensive

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<sup>92</sup> *ibid* 21

<sup>93</sup> *ibid* 402

account of ways that concepts shape culture and promote exploitation, ecological feminists have been reluctant to address the moral efficacy of bodies for resisting or changing a culture and its concepts. Ecological feminist aversion toward gender essentialism and biological reductionism seems to have resulted in an aversion to the body itself and has hampered their ability to express an alternative ethic of bodily embeddedness and relation.

## CHAPTER III

### ECOLOGICAL FEMINIST ETHICS: THE BODY PROBLEM PERSISTS

Ecological feminists claim that the separation of mind from body and association of beings with one or the other of the sides of this dualism supports exploitation. Though the thrust of the ecological feminism is a critical examination of dualism, this group also seeks to articulate a relational ethics. Presumably, based on their critique of western ethics, such an ethics would detail the connection and interdependence of mind and body; however, ecological feminists have neither addressed the mind and body relation nor the moral significance of the body.

An affirmation of interdependence and relation does not fall outside the scope of the ecological feminist movement. Chris Cuomo, a self-identified ecological feminist, claims that, though a key aspect of this movement and one of its primary contributions to ethical theory and practice is a thorough analysis of forms oppression and moral agency, “an analysis of oppression is logically dependent on an affirmation of some alternative.”

The fact that several ecological feminists, Merchant, Warren, and Plumwood among them, have formulated versions of a relational ethic attests to the positive ethical aim of this group.

Merchant’s partnership ethics, Warren’s ethics of friendship, and Plumwood’s ethics of mutuality all attempt to amend dualistic ethics that they claim dominates western culture; but these ethics draw almost exclusively on relationships within the human community and thereby continue a pattern of disconnection with body and nature and of human-centeredness.

#### **Ecological Feminist Ethics**

The ethical alternatives to dualism that ecological feminists have outlined appeal to certain human relationships as a model for understanding and relating to nature. Merchant, Warren, and Plumwood assert that, in our relations with nature, we should try to emulate the mutuality of human partnerships, friendships, and the mother-child relations.

In stating her ethical goals, Merchant claims to offer an ethics “grounded” in relation. She maintains that the relations are those between human **and** nonhuman and include the whole biotic community. Yet, even given her claim that the human community is connected to the rest

of the biotic community, Merchant grounds her partnership ethics in human partnerships. In her ethical formulation, humans should extend patterns of our intimate human partnerships to nature. She explains that “constructing nature as a partner allows for the possibility of a personal or intimate relationship with nature and for feelings of compassion for nonhumans.”<sup>94</sup> By appealing to human relations as a basis for relations with nature and insisting that we “construct” nature in an alternative way, Merchant implies that humans are not fundamentally and primarily involved within nature, that these relations must be derived from or mediated through associations with human bonds and conceptual constructions based on them. The partnership model expresses for Merchant a mutuality which is important to relation, but elements of human-nature dualism lurk in her contention that we must ‘construct’ nature as a human partner.

The notion of ‘constructing’ nature according to a particular human pattern is reminiscent of Merchant’s account of the mechanistic worldview. In *Radical Ecology*, Merchant critiques this worldview for its assumption that the material world is a collection of inert objects which can be manipulated and controlled by human beings.<sup>95</sup> She bemoans the loss of the organic worldview in which the earth was understood to be a creator, a force of life and motion. The transition from the organic to the mechanistic worldview is described as the “death of nature” by Merchant. Ironically, her call to *construct* nature as our partner, seems to deny that human beings and their conceptual constructions emerge from, are shaped by and remain deeply embedded within a life-giving pattern of relation that already includes other beings. Her partnership ethics continues mechanistic assumptions of an inert malleable matter upon which human projections are imposed. The projection that she offers will qualify certain abuses of the rest of nature, but does not challenge the notion that humans and their constructions can be independent from the more-than-human world and that humans can construct nature according to any image they choose. An intimate human partnership is forged from mutual consent and can be dissolved or displaced by another. A human partner can choose to end such a relationship and be independent of the other. Humans, however, can not choose to be independent of the rest of nature.

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<sup>94</sup> Merchant (1996) 8

<sup>95</sup> Merchant describes mechanistic science as dualistic and explains that, according to this worldview, “[n]ature, the human body, and animals could all be described, repaired, and controlled, as could the parts of a machine, by a separate human mind acting according to rational laws.” Carolyn Merchant, *Radical Ecology: The Search for a Livable World* (New York: Routledge, 1992) 69

Merchant's partnership ethic also preserves the idea that the human community is the primary moral realm and that relations with 'nature' are external to this realm. The moral worth of nature depends on reference to the worth of a human partner and partnerships: "as human partners give each other space, time, and care...so humans must give nonhuman nature space, time, an care."<sup>96</sup> Merchant gives tacit acknowledgment of the primary worth of the human community. She glibly remarks that she wants to avoid suggesting that "[h]umans are only one of many equal parts of the ecological web and therefore morally equal to a bacterium or mosquito."<sup>97</sup> To avoid an ecocentric view, that she equates with reducing humans to nonhuman nature, Merchant opts for a human-centered ethical model for responding to the nonhuman world.

The danger of grounding human-nature relationships in intimate human relationships is further illustrated in Warren's ethic of friendship. Warren recounts her experience of rock-climbing to detail what she means by an attitude of friendship with nature. She explains that she "began to talk to the rock in an almost inaudible, child-like way, as if the rock were my friend."<sup>98</sup> In describing her relationship with the rock, she says that "[i]t felt as if the rock and I were silent conversation partners in a longstanding friendship."<sup>99</sup> Her narrative is intended to express what she says is a frequently disregarded attitude of care and appreciation towards nature. She contrasts the attitude of care or friendship with a "conqueror relationship" with nature. According to Warren, the friendship attitude involves a "loving eye" which honors the independence of the other rather than trying to consume, assimilate or reduce objects of perception.<sup>100</sup>

While the notion of appreciation and care of nature may be an element in ecological healing, Warren's model of friendship seems ill-suited for understanding the relation of humans and non-human beings, especially rocks. Roger J.H. King sees a potential for exploitation within ethical models patterned after human relations. He explains that "the rock is personified as partner and friend, yet it merely submits silently to being climbed upon, giving unilaterally what

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<sup>96</sup> Merchant (1996) 8

<sup>97</sup> Merchant (1996) 8

<sup>98</sup> Warren in Warren (1996) 26

<sup>99</sup> *ibid*

<sup>100</sup> *ibid* 28

the climber wants.”<sup>101</sup> As King observes, the metaphors of conversation and friendship when applied to non-human nature may well serve as a license for the further imposition of unchecked human use of nature. Warren, for example, does not limit or alter her activity; she continues to climb. One could deduce from her account, that an ethic of friendship involves only a new sentiment toward non-human nature which may assuage human feelings of guilt but leave patterns of use and abuse undisturbed.

Plumwood, like Warren, uses human friendship as a model for relations within the wider ecological community. She claims that these special relationships of human caring must form the basis for much of moral life and concern.<sup>102</sup> Through a process of “empathetic generalization,” we can expand outward from personal attachments to concern for non-intimate, and presumably non-human, others. Plumwood argues that this empathetic generalization is especially important in the “traditional western” account of human identity that radically excludes “the contrast class of nature.”<sup>103</sup> The mutuality of friendship and other loving human relations, such as that of a mother and child, recommends them as models for non-exploitive relations with nature.

Mutuality is normative in Plumwood’s ethics. She defines mutuality as interdependent flourishing. According to Plumwood, relations of domination distort the bond of love and threaten either kinship or difference.<sup>104</sup> Kinship and difference of partners enables reciprocity or the “dance of interaction” between them and “sets a boundary of limit to the self and its desires.”<sup>105</sup> In a reciprocal relation, the interaction involves the mutual transformation of self and other. Reciprocity and mutual transformation is impossible if one partner controls or dominates the other.

If I completely control the other, then the other ceases to exist, and if the other completely controls me then I cease to exist. A condition of our own independent existence is recognizing the other. True independence means sustaining essential tensions of these contradictory impulses; that is, both asserting the self and

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<sup>101</sup> King in Warren (1996) 92

<sup>102</sup> Plumwood (1993) 187

<sup>103</sup> Plumwood (1993) 185

<sup>104</sup> In her discussion of domination as a distortion of the bond of love and as mutuality as a dance of interaction, Plumwood cites Jessica Benjamin’s study entitled *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism and the Problem of Domination* (London: Virago, 1988)

<sup>105</sup> Plumwood (1993) 156

recognizing the other. Domination is the consequence of refusing this condition.<sup>106</sup>

Based on Plumwood's analysis, western domination of non-human nature results primarily from the extreme emphasis on the difference of nature and a disregard for human dependence on and embeddedness within nature. Relations between friends and mother and child illustrate non-dominating alternatives to relations of domination.

Friendship is a popular ethical model for ecological feminists. Plumwood characterizes her ethics of mutuality as "a variant on Aristotle's account of friendship" in which one wishes for the other's good for the sake of the other.<sup>107</sup> She claims that relations of friendship have clear implications for human relations with nature "where such dependency and relatedness have been most strongly denied in the instrumental model."<sup>108</sup> In her approach, the "general virtues of friendship" can be generalized for a stronger concern for nonhumans and humans historically-associated with nature. The virtues of friendship, identified by Plumwood, include: an openness to the other, generosity, leaving space for the other, the ability to put oneself in the place of the other and to respond to the other's needs.<sup>109</sup> Friendship is a model of mutuality with a sense of difference of the other and a concern for the other's good.

The mother-child relation also illustrates mutuality. Unlike descriptions of the mother-child relation which emphasize the mother's selfless giving to her child, Plumwood describes a mutuality between mother and child. She explains that mutuality is a non-instrumental relation with an other. In the mother-child bond, the mother's interest can not be isolated from those of her child. The child's flourishing "is internal to her desires, not merely an external, interchangeable means to some other end," says Plumwood.<sup>110</sup> Jessica Benjamin, upon whom Plumwood draws to detail mutual flourishing, further elaborates on the interdependent flourishing of mother and child. Benjamin observes that in the mother-child relation, the child's flourishing involves the flourishing of the mother. The recognition and nurturing that a child seeks from his or her mother is something that the mother is able to give only by virtue of her distinct, and presumably thriving, identity. A "mother cannot (and should not) be a mirror; she

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<sup>106</sup> Plumwood (1993) 157 quoted from Benjamin 53

<sup>107</sup> Plumwood (1993) 55

<sup>108</sup> Plumwood (1993) 154

<sup>109</sup> Plumwood (1993) 185-6

<sup>110</sup> Plumwood (1993) 154

must not merely reflect back what the child asserts...she must embody something of the not-me,” Benjamin expounds.<sup>111</sup> Plumwood agrees with Benjamin that the mother-child relation entails mutual recognition and flourishing.

In addition to the relations of friendship and mother and child, Plumwood alludes to other relations of care that might guide human-nonhuman relations. She asserts that the “ruling drama” in western culture has subordinated and ignored women’s stories of care.<sup>112</sup> These stories of care, which have been suppressed, should be retrieved from women and used to disrupt the “master” story of instrumental relations with others and non-human nature. The specific relations to which Plumwood refers are not clear; however her comment that she agrees with Carol Gilligan’s assessment that women are the custodians of stories of care provides some basis for concluding that Plumwood is referring to a variety of nurturing human relationships.

Gilligan’s studies of gender and moral development led her to conclude that the dominant western moral theory based on rights neglected women’s experiences of caring. According to Gilligan, the girls and women involved in her psychological studies expressed values of nurturing, care-taking and maintaining relationships. Based on her surveys of girls and women, she distinguished an alternative moral theory focused on values of care. Her moral theory has been identified as a relational moral theory or an ethics of care.<sup>113</sup> The relationships to which Gilligan refers in her study and moral theory are human relationships. In fact, her work and theory focus almost exclusively on the intimate human relationships such as those of friendship and family. She does not explore the relationship of human and nonhuman beings.

With a reliance on formative and intimate human relationships, the ethics proposed by ecological feminists follows the pattern of feminist care ethics. The ethics of Merchant, Warren, and Plumwood, if evaluated as a care ethic, furthers the moral theory of Gilligan. Critics of Gilligan, feminists and ecofeminists among them, have charged that the care-taking understanding of moral selfhood can and has compromised the importance of women caring for themselves. Chris Cuomo argues that “caring can be damaging to the carer if she neglects other

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<sup>111</sup> Benjamin (1988)

<sup>112</sup> Plumwood (1993) 196

<sup>113</sup> Gilligan’s study and conclusions are the topic of much debate. Some critics contend that she asserts a “justice or rights approach” as the morality of men and an ethic of care or responsibility as the morality of women. Gilligan’s insights are further developed by Nel Noddings in *Caring: A Feminist Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984)

responsibilities, including those she has to herself, by caring for another.”<sup>114</sup> The mutuality and distinctiveness of self and other that ecological feminists emphasize in their discussion of partnerships, friendships, and mother-child relations addresses the issues of self-neglect that have been raised in critiques of Gilligan’s work.

Another way in which ecological feminist ethics furthers a feminist relational ethic is with the suggestion that relational values of empathy, cooperation, nurture, and care are not necessarily gender specific. Objections to Gilligan’s work include claims that the values of maintaining relationships are accepted as distinctively female and that her moral theory therefore continues patriarchal conceptions and roles of women. The prominence of friendship and human partnership in ecological feminist ethics indicates that relational moral selfhood is not restricted to women and not derived exclusively from oppressive gender roles and responsibilities. Even in Plumwood’s discussion of a traditional female role, that of mother, she implies that the mother is not subsumed by this role and is the recipient as well as the giver of care.

The resistance to a gender-restrictive relational ethic is an outgrowth of ecological feminists’ rejection of gender dualism and their resolve to relieve women of the unfair burden of ecological healing. Merchant explains that her partnership ethic “means that both women and men can enter into mutual relationships with each other and the planet independently of gender and does not hold women alone responsible for ‘cleaning up the mess’ made by male-dominated science, technology, and capitalism.”<sup>115</sup> By rejecting gender dualism with a relational ethic that appeals to a broader range of human relations, Plumwood claims that the divisions and power imbalances among women will become more evident.

Plumwood says that myths of woman as the “angel of the house” or “angel of the ecosystem” fail to recognize the dynamic of power in western culture. She suggests that “[w]omen do not necessarily treat other women as sisters or the earth as a mother; women are capable of conflict, of domination and even, in the right circumstances, of violence.”<sup>116</sup> Since the relational ethics of ecological feminists appeal to human relationships of mutuality and reciprocity rather than gender identity and roles, their ethics has the potential of critiquing and healing destructive relations and patterns among women, as well as men.

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<sup>114</sup> Cuomo, 132

<sup>115</sup> Merchant (1996) 216-7

<sup>116</sup> Plumwood 9

The relational ethics of ecological feminists builds and expands upon feminists' ethics of care. Highly attuned to gender dualism and its support of gender exploitation, Merchant, Warren, and Plumwood offer a more inclusive vision of relational moral selfhood. They suggest that personal and intimate human relations form a basis through which *both* men and women can understand ethical responsibility and mutuality and that women need not, nor can they, carry the burden of transforming destructive patterns of relating on their own.

Even given the important ways that ecological feminists have extended relational morality, their appeal to human mutuality may not adequately address their concerns about human-nature dualism. Ecological feminists are explicit about the dangers and destructiveness of mind-body, human-nature split. They fault the separation of the mental and spiritual from the physical as the root of exploitation and pledge to help resolve this separation. Merchant calls for a new myth of cooperation between human and nonhuman.<sup>117</sup> Plumwood says that humans must understand the “mind as more bodily and the body as more mindlike” and that humans must “reconceive themselves as more animal and embodied.”<sup>118</sup> She claims that only when we understand the cooperation between mind and body and human and nature will humans recognize nonhuman beings “not as things, but as creative, self-directed, originaive others.”<sup>119</sup> And yet, ecological feminists offer no account of the mind's relation with the body, nor do they detail the interconnection of human and the rest of nature or the contributions of bodies and bodily experience to a different pattern of relations.

Ecological feminists, a group who has incisively criticized the inferiorization and neglect of bodies and the non-human world, demonstrates a distinct aversion to bodies, or at least to the articulation of bodily relations and connections. Plumwood, the only ecological feminist to refer to the relation of mother and child (a relation that is especially suggestive of bodily connections and interdependence), makes no mention of pregnancy, birthing, nursing, or any other explicitly physical aspect of this relation. Why does a group so dedicated to the mending of the mind-body split have such an aversion to bodies and bodily connection? Why do their ethics center wholly on intimate, emotional attachments of human to human? How might an articulation of mind-

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<sup>117</sup>Carolyn Merchant, *Earthcare* (New York: Routledge, 1995) 56

<sup>118</sup> Plumwood 124

<sup>119</sup> *ibid.*

body relations and the connections between human and nonhuman nature make a contribution to the non-dualistic morality that seek to formulate?

### **Concerns about Gender Essentialism and Biological Reduction**

The aversion to the body among ecological feminists is a result of their aversion to gender essentialism. As they outline in their critique of dualism, women's association with the body has been used to reduce them to 'mere matter' and objects to be exploited. Some feminists have attempted to reinterpret the association with nature as a source of power and as cause for celebration. Ecological feminists have consistently rejected any claim of women's unique connection with nature, identifying such a claim as a continuation of dualism.

One ecofeminist who is frequently labeled 'essentialist' is Ariel Kay Salleh. She suggests that "woman's monthly fertility cycle, the tiring symbioses of pregnancy, the wrench of childbirth, and pleasure of suckling an infant" all ground "women's consciousness in the knowledge of being coterminous with nature."<sup>120</sup> The distinctly female experience, Salleh implies, contributes to their unique connection with and responsiveness toward nature. Starhawk, another ecofeminist who appeals to women's bodily connection with the earth, suggests that birth should become the underlying metaphor for the cosmos.<sup>121</sup> She shares in a tradition of Goddess worship and recommends feminist rituals that celebrate the interconnection of women and nature. Yet another ecofeminist who embraces the feminine-nature connections is Paula Gunn Allen. She is a Native American ecofeminist who views the earth as distinctly feminine, "Grandmother Earth."<sup>122</sup> Some feminists have objected so strongly to these claims that women are closer to nature and/or nature is feminine that they have abandoned ecofeminism all-together.

Janet Biehl dismisses the whole ecofeminist movement as an effort to glorify the 'natural woman' and to uphold femininity as a superior mode of being. She repudiates ecofeminism as "a force for irrationalism" and "incoherence" which celebrates the identification of woman with nature and proclaims "that women have an exclusive role in developing a sensibility of 'caring'

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<sup>120</sup> quoted by Roger J.H. King in Warren (1986) 89

<sup>121</sup> Starhawk, "Feminist Earth-based Spirituality and Ecofeminism" in Plant 175

<sup>122</sup> Paula Gunn Allen, "The woman I love is a planet; the planet I love is a tree" in Diamond and Orenstein 52

and ‘nurturing.’<sup>123</sup> As evidence that all ecofeminists do not intend to glorify the ‘natural woman,’ ecological feminists criticize such celebrations of a unique women-earth connection.

Those who insist on women’s unique connection with nature are referred to as “Trapped Romantics” and “Earth Mothers” by Val Plumwood. She says that they have been led down the wrong path toward a “cavern of reversal” which does not confront dualism, but rather replicates it.”<sup>124</sup> Chris Cuomo warns that “femininity and other features (embodiment, mystery, and resistance to reason) supposedly shared by subjugated beings and classes are problems to be scrutinized, not qualities to be uncritically celebrated.”<sup>125</sup>

Ecological feminists generally object to assigning fixed traits or roles to all women and idealizing or romanticizing women based on fixed identities, particularly when these fixed identities are defined in opposition to the fixed identities of masculinity. Such an approach fails to appreciate the diversity among women and the distinctiveness of particular beings. Also, the celebration of ‘the natural woman’ fails to recognize the role of race and class in shaping experiences and identities of women and does not admit the complicity of some women in exploitation. And finally, ecological feminists have taken exception to the unfair burden placed on ‘the natural women’ for addressing ecological devastation.

In addition to rejecting the “Earth Mothers” appeal to a woman-nature bond, ecological feminists resist Deep Ecologists efforts to unify humans and nature. Arne Naess, a Norwegian philosopher who first used the term “deep ecology,” argued that the environmental movement needed to embrace a more holistic approach in which humans are not isolated and separate from everything else in the world. This holistic approach may sound similar to the project of ecological feminists; but holism is quite different from the relational ethics that ecological feminists seek to formulate.

Jim Cheney, who aligns himself with ecofeminism, has observed that deep ecology of the sort espoused by Naess remains within the dominant moral tradition of individual rights theory. He notes that the ethical norms of deep ecology are based on rights. Naess insists that all forms of life have equal rights to “live and blossom.”<sup>126</sup> The appeal to rights suggests that value resides exclusively in individuals rather than relations. The stress on rights also indicates a basic

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<sup>123</sup> Janet Biehl, *Rethinking Ecofeminist Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1991) 2

<sup>124</sup> Plumwood 3

<sup>125</sup> Cuomo 23

individualism which Roger J.H. King claims is further confirmed by the unifying thrust of deep ecology. He claims that they “moral extensionism of deep ecology emphasizes identity and sameness rather than uniqueness and difference.”<sup>127</sup> Ecological feminists strongly resist the drive toward unification and collapse of difference in deep ecology.

Dualism as explicated by Plumwood is a false dichotomy of self and other (or human and nature). In such a dichotomy the other is either same as the self, assimilated and identified with the self, or the other is a stranger from whom the self is alienated and toward whom the self has no moral responsibility. Ecological feminists maintain that the self-other, human-nature dichotomy is embraced in deep ecology since it assimilates all selves and denies the integrity of any ‘other.’ Deep ecologist Warwick Fox asserts that, in the deep ecology worldview, selves are so closely connected that there can be no real others. Carolyn Merchant call this type of ethics which exalts the whole at the expense of the individual and subsumes all others as “holistic facism.”<sup>128</sup>

Cheney and King detail the difference between the ecological feminist project and that of deep ecologists. Cheney says that the norm of atomism in Deep Ecology is pathological and does not permit reciprocity and mutuality. On the other hand, as Roger J.H. King explains, the moral theory of ecological feminism is motivated by a dissatisfaction with approaches “that either impose abstract lines of demarcation or submerge them in a quest for unity.”<sup>129</sup>

Another account of the body that ecological feminists reject is a ‘materialist position.’ In this understanding of the body, the “mental side of the dualism” is reduced to the bodily.<sup>130</sup> Val Plumwood argues that such views reduce human beings to machines “perhaps not as clocks” but as “survival machines-robot vehicles blindly programmed to preserve the selfish molecules now as genes.”<sup>131</sup> She identifies E.O. Wilson’s full neuronal explanation of the human as one such unsatisfactory account of the human/nature, mind/body continuity. Nature in Wilson’s account, Plumwood argues, is a “mere endless movement of matter” which is void of meaning and human beings are reconceived in similar terms. Plumwood insists that a resolution of the mind/body

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<sup>126</sup> Jim Cheney “Ecofeminism and Deep Ecology” in *Environmental Ethics* 9(2) 130

<sup>127</sup> Roger J.H. King in Warren (1996) 84

<sup>128</sup> Merchant (1996) 216

<sup>129</sup> J.H. King 86

<sup>130</sup> J.H. King 86

<sup>131</sup> *ibid*

dualism must involve a non-reductionist basis for recognizing continuity and an extension of agency and creativity to those who have been denied them under dualism.<sup>132</sup>

### **Continuity and Difference**

Ecological feminists find the accounts of the body by gender essentialists, deep ecologists and materialists inadequate because they do not resolve the central problem of dualism. The only way to adequately resolve dualism, they imply, is to detail the continuity *and* difference of mind and body (human and nature, self and other). What is at stake is the possibility of relation and reciprocity of mind and body, human and nature. If one of these “sides” are bifurcated, relation is foreclosed; if all is reduced to one side of these pairs, relation is also impossible. Also, difference suggests the enduring capacity of the body to influence the mind, to disrupt, alter or transform conceptual patterns that may deny or dismiss bodies. As important as an account of mind-body relation is to ecological feminists and their ethics, they as yet have not provided one.

Based on their critiques of the various bodily reductions and their aversion to detailing bodily experience and mind-body relation, ecological feminists view the body as an enduring problem or obstacle in their attempts to formulate a relational ethic. This ambivalence or resistance to bodily connection prevents ecological feminists from adequately countering dualism. As they argue themselves a non-dualistic ethic requires a new understanding of the interdependence of the mind and body, of human and non-human and an embrace of bodily activity and creativity.

### **The Body Problem: Social Construction of the Body**

Ecological feminists are not alone in their aversion to the body and to an account of bodily experience. In an age strongly influenced by deconstruction and poststructuralist thought, feminist theory has steered clear of appeals to women’s experience, including bodily experience. Deconstruction and poststructuralism are concerned with the constitutive character of language for ‘experience.’<sup>133</sup> These movements question experience as a site of ideology. Experience,

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<sup>132</sup> Plumwood 121-2

<sup>133</sup> Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Changing the Subject: Women’s Discourses and Feminist Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994) 62-65. Fulkerson explains the relation of poststructuralism, postmodernism, and deconstruction. Poststructuralism “refers to a theory of language, of which the most well-known example is the practice of deconstruction.” Postmodernism “is typically associated with aesthetics” but sometimes includes some form of poststructuralism. She identifies Jean-Francois Lyotard and Fredric Jameson as postmodern theorists and Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, and Michel Foucault as poststructuralist theorists. Jacques Derrida defines

deconstructionists argue, is constituted in and through oppressive culture. Bodies and bodily experience (and subjectivity) are products of oppressive culture. In this view, bodies are not simply ‘natural,’ they are expressive of culture and are sites of political contestation. This awareness of the political character of bodies is not new to feminism; it is in fact central to ecological feminist analysis.

Long before Michel Foucault began to examine the social construction of the body, feminists recognized the body as a site of political contestation.<sup>134</sup> Foucault understood the body as a direct locus of social control. He theorized that political power is a non-authoritarian, non-centralized force that “produce[s] and normalize[s] bodies to serve prevailing relations of domination and subordination.”<sup>135</sup> As early as two hundred years before Foucault, feminists expressed awareness of the social construction of bodies. Mary Wollstonecraft in 1792 studied social constructions of femininity as fragility and domesticity and how these constructions were used to subjugate women. Ecological feminist analyses of women’s association with animality and materiality as a basis for exploitation is a continuation of the long history of feminist theory of social construction of bodies. In light of the currency of poststructuralist thought, the long history of feminist theory of social construction, and the ecological feminist emphasis on constructions of women’s bodily identities, an ecological feminist account of bodies and bodily experience must include a sophisticated awareness of the social and political aspect of bodies. A grappling with social and political bodily identities, however, does not necessitate a neglect of the transformative possibilities of bodies. Although some feminists argue that a feminist account of bodily experience must be restricted to the oppressive cultural identities imposed on women’s bodies, Judith Butler allows that non-oppressive bodily expressions are not entirely foreclosed, that bodies can challenge the constructions through which society interprets them and they interpret themselves.

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the mission of deconstruction as demonstrating that the meanings and boundaries of texts, institutions, traditions, societies, beliefs, and practices are unstable constructions. See John D. Caputo, ed., *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida* (New York: Fordham, 1997) 31-ff. Another helpful text is Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, eds. *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1983)

<sup>134</sup> Susan Bordo makes this argument that early feminist theory exhibited an understanding of social construction of the body. See Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: feminism, western culture and the body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) 36-39

<sup>135</sup>Bordo 36

Susan Bordo insists that the socially and historically-shaped quality of bodily experience should be foremost in feminist thought. She refers to the many forms of physical bondage, violation and colonization that have shaped women's experience. Practices of foot-binding, corseting, rape, domestic battering, forced sterilization, unwanted pregnancy and explicit commodification are some of the varied means through which the female body has been controlled. More subtle forms of social control have also contributed to the construction of the female body. Bordo's genealogy of the female body exposes some of these subtle practices.

The cultural ideal of femininity as the slender body involves a host of practices of control. Through exercise, dieting, surgery and other slendering efforts, including eating disorders of anorexia and bulimia, the cultural form of femininity is inscribed on and enacted by the body. Activities that are often interpreted as assertions of individual will (e.g. appetite suppression) and women's power (e.g. muscle-building) are, in Bordo's analysis, practices of gender discipline, normalization, and oppression. With her study of the slender body, Bordo details the thoroughness with which oppressive structures can shape women and their bodies. She decries assertions of the creative agency of individuals and the "fluid, ironic, and heterogeneous" identities that some feminists promote.<sup>136</sup> According to Bordo, the material and historical locatedness of (female) bodies involve the bodily identities and practices of violation and colonization. Any attempt to attribute freedom or creativity (not to mention moral transformation) to female bodies compromises the material and historical locatedness. She commends to women an "embodied postmodernism" which exhibits a "constant acknowledgment of both the limitations of the self and the weight of collective history."<sup>137</sup> Embodiment, for Bordo, is the nexus of cultural identities: a black female from the two-thirds world or an affluent Northern European man. She suggests that bodies are no more than a set of cultural categories. This suggestion is never more clear than in her critique of Judith Butler.

In her critique of Judith Butler, we can see that Bordo allows no fissures in the cultural construction of the body. The implication of her critique is that oppressive cultural identities are all-encompassing prisons outside of which bodies have no potential or possible expression. She dismisses Butler's performative subversion of gender identity as a replication of the Cartesian fantasy of the disembodied idea. According to Bordo, this Cartesian replication involves the

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<sup>136</sup> Bordo, 37

fantasy of escape from historical locatedness, the assumption that the body can be thoroughly deconstructed and transcended. Any attempt to disrupt gender identities and the accompanying cultural forms, Bordo views as an abandonment of the body for the body is precisely these forms. Even the most fundamental bodily needs and activities, such as eating and exercise, are molded from cultural forms. Bordo's bodies, circumscribed by forces of social control, offer no hope of new identities, liberating agency, or ethical possibility.

Both Butler and Bordo detail a similar process in the cultural norms of embodiment. The normative images of femininity and sexuality are powerful and pervasive and seem to exclude other possibilities of living our bodies. For Butler, however, other possibilities of gender, sexuality, and living a body are not entirely eliminated. She seeks out the instability of oppressive cultural forms, particularly gender identity, to suggest that they can be subverted and perhaps usher in new possibilities.<sup>138</sup> Though Butler offers an approach for subverting gender categories, she does not deny the power and danger of culturally-inscribed gender identity. In fact, she is keenly aware of the violence of oppressive gender categories.

One of the most harmful aspects of gender norms, and related norms of sexuality, is their exclusionary force. In the preface to her 1999 edition of *Gender Trouble*, Butler speaks of an uncle who was institutionalized for his "anatomically anomalous body," of gay cousins who were rejected from their families because of their sexuality, and of her own "coming out." The experiences of Butler and her family leave her convinced of both the violence of gender identities and of the possibility of crossing boundaries of these bodily identities: her own family attests to the exclusionary power and **also** to the instability of gender forms. Butler's efforts to reveal the instability of gender categories and to expand the realm of gender possibility is not an abandonment of bodies, but rather an insistence upon the legitimacy of bodies that have been excluded from social life, that have been regarded as false, unreal, or unintelligible. Her project is a project of bodily recovery and recognition aimed at bodies which are obscured and denied by normative sexuality. Butler tries to make room for bodies in all their diversity and fluidity by manipulating the performativity of gender.

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<sup>137</sup> Bordo, 39

<sup>138</sup> See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990) (reprinted in 1999 with a new preface) and Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

Butler's gender performativity is significant to the challenge of formulating an ecological feminist ethics for a number of reasons. Butler works to subvert the fixed gender identities that have justified the exploitation of women and nature and she also resists the essentialized natural woman identity. She admits a new understanding of the body, one informed by social constructionist arguments, but not circumscribed by them. Butler recommends a dynamic body, the body as a horizon for different expressions and continual possibility. Also, Butler applies the ideas of Merleau-Ponty to feminist theorizing on the body and, by doing so, hints at the yet unrealized potential his work on the body offers for a feminist, especially an ecological feminist, ethics. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty, Butler acknowledges that bodies are inscribed by culture, but she implies that bodies might also effect those very identities and cultural constructions. Ironically, Butler's work, which Bordo condemns as an abandonment of embodiment, is currently the most promising direction for a feminist embrace of the body and its transformative potential.

### **Bodily Performativity and Possibilities**

Fixed gender and sexual identities, in Butler's analysis, correspond with an understanding of materiality as a fixed and passive substance. It is this understanding of materiality that Butler works to undermine. She claims that the interpretation of the body as static and passive is a feature of traditional philosophy that Foucault and Nietzsche preserve. Butler distinguishes her work by describing the body as a corporeal enactment and constituted social temporality. She uses the phrases "style of being" and "styles of flesh" to evoke the fluid quality of bodily expression. By rejecting fixed materiality, she preserves the irreducibility of bodies.

Traditional materiality, the "fantasy of heterosexual intercourse and male autogenesis" reduces bodies to binary gender categories," Butler explains.<sup>139</sup> This reduction fails to account for the performative possibilities of bodies. Butler argues that binary categories of gender and sexuality are not aspects of a fixed substance, but the products of normative reiterative and citational practice of normative discourse upon the **surface** of bodies.<sup>140</sup> "Regulatory norms of sex work in a performative fashion to constitute the materiality of bodies and, more specifically, to materialize the body's sex, to materialize sexual difference in the service of the consolidation

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<sup>139</sup> Butler

of the heterosexual imperative,” she claims.<sup>141</sup> Normative heterosexuality is not the only “regulatory regime” operative on bodies.

Other norms also produce the contours and limits of bodily intelligibility. Butler specifically mentions race and explains that the social regulation of race is not another fully separate domain of power from sexual difference or sexuality.<sup>142</sup> In fact, the social regulation of race helps to subvert the “monolithic workings of the heterosexual imperative.”<sup>143</sup> But even without considering the ways in which norms of race reveal inconsistencies in binary gender identities, Butler finds gaps and fissures in the constitution of normative sexuality.

Butler explains that construction, the cultural construction of gendered bodies, takes place *over* time as norms are reiterated or continually performed by the body: gender identities are the sedimented effect of reiterative or performative practice. There is a temporal process through which gender identity is produced and through which it acquires a naturalized effect. It is precisely this process of reiteration, that which stabilizes gender, that Butler identifies as an opening for subversion, as its *instability*. “This instability is the deconstituting possibility in the very process of repetition, the power that undoes the very effects by which ‘sex’ is stabilized, the possibility to put the consolidation of the norms of ‘sex’ into a potentially productive crisis,” Butler argues.<sup>144</sup> Butler hopes to take advantage of the instability of gender performativity through a technique of ‘masquerade.’ She implies that bodies can elude the “normative fiction of heterosexual coherence” through inconsistent performance. Feminists should produce a whole new array of new, noncoherent genders and use the parodic mode to avoid stagnation and attest to the fluidity and gender identity.

Drag, cross-dressing and the “sexual stylization of butch/femme identities” are examples of gender parody that Butler upholds as a performative subversion of gender. She theorizes that the political and discursive origins of gender are displaced onto a supposed internal core or substance. This displacement precludes an analysis of the political constitution of gender. It is the illusion of this interior and organizing gender core that parody debunks. Gender parody plays upon the dissonance between what the gender of the performer and the gender of the

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<sup>140</sup> Butler (1993) 2

<sup>141</sup> *ibid*

<sup>142</sup> Butler (1993)17-18

<sup>143</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>144</sup> Butler (1993) 10

performance. Butler claims that parody reveals the imitative structure, and contingency, of gender by imitating gender and thereby dispels the fantasy of the interiority of gender. Parodies, such as drag, “fully subvert” the notion of true gender identity.<sup>145</sup>

Butler’s subversion is intended to de-naturalize gender and to expose gender as a function of public and social discourse; but her study of parody adds something else of significance to studies of the body. Her work implies that discursive categories do not encapsulate all gestures, that language does not circumscribe all expressive possibilities. In fact, she indicates that that which is excluded from the cultural articulation is necessary to social construction. Those expressions that are included in the categories of gender, for instance, operate “through *exclusionary* means, such that the human is not only produced over and against the inhuman, but through a set of foreclosures, radical erasures, that are, strictly speaking, refused the possibility of cultural articulation.”<sup>146</sup> Cultural construction then involves both a domain of subjects and a domain of outsiders, those who are “not yet” subjects, those beings who inhabit “‘unlivable’ and ‘uninhabitable’ zones of social life.”<sup>147</sup> These supposed ‘uninhabitable’ zones of social life, Butler contends, are “densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject.”<sup>148</sup> The domain of the *outsiders*, ironically, is that which circumscribes and constitutes the domain of the subjects who are culturally recognized and normative. We might even say that in Butler’s theory of gender and cultural construction, the unutterable, the inarticulated provides the possibility for, it is the ‘through which,’ cultural articulation occurs.<sup>149</sup>

Butler’s performative subversion offers an approach for subverting the fixed gender identities and strict sexual dualities, both those denigrating identities that ecological feminists name as a legitimization of exploitation (of women and nature) and those positive essentialized identities that have been used to counter the negative identities. Since gender is a performative enactment, neither the negative nor the celebratory reductions of the gendered body are viable. Bodies are not fixed and static and therefore can not be reduced to the fixed identities, sexual or otherwise, which culture imposes upon them. The body, and all of materiality, in its fluidity and dynamism, elude cultural inscription. Performativity is Butler’s particular approach to disrupting

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<sup>145</sup> Butler (1993)

<sup>146</sup> Butler (1993) 8

<sup>147</sup> Butler (1993) 3

<sup>148</sup> *ibid*

<sup>149</sup> The significance of such an assertion will become evident later in the discussion of Merleau-Ponty

gender identities; but **activity**, she argues, is implicit in **all** materiality. Bodies are not merely passive objects to be utterly constructed and controlled by culture. The fluidity, the activity, the process, the dynamic quality of materialization counters the fixed categories of gender and all other cultural boundaries of intelligibility. Butler fully recognizes the power and danger of cultural construction, but she maintains that new possibilities are evident in and through the horizon of bodies and their activity.

Butler's project is an effort to expand recognition of bodies beyond the bounds of cultural norms. The theory of performativity involves an understanding of the body as an opening through which new expressions and identities are revealed. One of the ways in which the performative body serves as an opening, for new expressive possibilities, is by disclosing abjected bodies. Butler explains that the "limits of constructivism are exposed at those boundaries of bodily life where abjected and illegitimate bodies fail to count as 'bodies.'"<sup>150</sup>

The performative subversion that bodies effect exposes these boundaries and disrupts social hegemony and calls attention to bodily expressions that cultural norms attempt to exclude. Butler holds some hope that the "excluded and abjected realm," revealed by bodily performativity, might lead to a more expansive recognition of bodies. She asks, "[w]hat challenge does that excluded and abjected realm produce to a symbolic hegemony that might force a radical rearticulation of what qualifies as bodies that matter, ways of living that count as 'life,' lives worth protecting, lives worth saving, lives worth grieving?"<sup>151</sup> Butler has as a normative goal the radical rearticulation of bodies, which will create the kind of community in which "surviving with AIDS becomes more possible" and "in which queer lives become legible, valuable, worthy of support."<sup>152</sup> While Butler is motivated to affirm particular bodies, she does not suggest that we merely replace one normative identity another. Her radical rearticulation, by disrupting hegemony, introduces an openness and an imaginative possibility in bodily expression.

The normative construction of sexuality and other bodily identities involves the *imaginary* Butler argues. She uses the example of the "imaginary valorization" of the phallus, in which a body part is privileged. Hypochondria provides a means for her account of how the

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<sup>150</sup> Butler (1993) 15

<sup>151</sup> *ibid*

<sup>152</sup> Butler (1993) 21

imaginary helps constitute the body. Hypochondria is a theatrical delineation or production of the body that gives imaginary contours to the “ego” itself and is projected onto what Butler calls the “body-surface.”<sup>153</sup> The imaginary is not wholly identifiable with materiality, however. Butler explains that normative sexuality is a vacillation, rather than an identification or resolution, between materiality and the imaginary.

Through reiteration, which is a repeated enactment of the relation of materiality and the imaginary, the imaginary achieves stability and gains status as the privileged signifier of bodies. The stability of the imaginary relies on its repeated association with bodies. But, as we have said above, the very force of repetition carries with it the possibility of deprivileging the signifier, and of reimagining sexuality and bodies. We can, and Butler does, suggest the possibility of imaginary identifications of bodies and sexual desire that counter heterosexual identifications; however, Butler insists that an alternative imaginary can not be measured against a “real one.”<sup>154</sup> All identifications involve the imaginary and by promoting an alternative imaginary, such as lesbianism, she helps to expose the imaginary at work in “exclusionary heterosexual morphology.”<sup>155</sup> At the same time, Butler insists that new possibilities are continually open for the imaginatively-constituted body.<sup>156</sup>

The body is a horizon for Butler that cultural identities and new imaginaries, even feminist or liberationist imaginaries, never foreclose. Her view of the body and materiality invites new understandings and also qualifies any and all constitutions. Butler’s theory of linguistic categories indicates the persistent possibility, opening, and irreducibility that bodies pose. Linguistic categories, she theorizes, never fully resolve, contain, or capture the referent (materiality or bodies in this case) which they seek to denote.<sup>157</sup> The body then persists only as “a kind of absence or loss” which “impels language repeatedly to attempt that capture.”<sup>158</sup> This

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<sup>153</sup> Butler (1993) 63

<sup>154</sup> Butler (1993) 91

<sup>155</sup> Butler (1993) 91

<sup>156</sup> Moira Gatens explores the imaginary possibilities of bodies in her *Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Power and Corporeality* (New York: Routledge, 1996). Like Butler, Gatens departs from Irigaray who posits “one monolithic social imaginary from which women’s bodies are excluded or read only in terms of their relationship to men.” Gatens claims that a diversity and dynamism of social imaginaries exists which can serve as points of resistance and change. See Amy Hollywood, “Transcending Bodies” in *Religious Studies Review*, 25: 1, January 1999, 13-18.

<sup>157</sup> Butler (1993) 67

<sup>158</sup> *ibid.*

loss attests to a materiality that, “while *in* language, is never fully *of* language.”<sup>159</sup> Materiality is not entirely outside language or ontologically distinct from language; nor are materiality and language are identical to one another. Instead materiality, bodies, and the world as the referent for language is “‘that which’ makes its demand in and to language.”<sup>160</sup> By making demands on language bodies both exceed the bounds of language and lure language beyond current boundaries.

Contrary to a criticism made by Bordo, Butler does not dissolve the body into language. If all of materiality were language, bodies could not serve as a horizon exceeding and luring linguistic categories and cultural identities. Butler’s reinterpretation of materiality as the process of materialization defies any dissolution of the body or cultural circumscription of bodies.<sup>161</sup> Bodies and materiality endure, although not as fixed or static entities. Butler rebukes understandings of materiality as a passive mute facticity.<sup>162</sup> And she declines to stake her effort to recognize excluded bodies on “yet another conceptual order of lifelessness and rigid exclusion.”<sup>163</sup> Materiality is dynamic and engaged with those who seek to bring it to linguistic expression. Bodies continually negotiate with cultural identities and lure these identities toward new expression. At a time when many poststructuralist feminists and even modernist feminists like Bordo, are surrendering the body to exclusionary and oppressive cultural identities and abandoning bodies as a site of resistance and new expressions, Butler asserts both the vitality and ethical potency of bodies.

The ethical component of Butler’s discussion of the body is evident in her stated aim of her project. She wants to “expand the very meaning of what counts as a valued and valuable

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<sup>159</sup> Butler also argues that language exceeds the materiality that it signifies. Language exceeds the materiality it signifies by relying on a larger set of linguistic relations (e.g. relations of differentiation). Butler explains that the linguistic signifier is more than materiality, both more than its own materiality as a system of signs which are sensed, and more than the materiality of that which it signifies. She describes the signifier as “impure, contaminated by the ideality of differentiating relations, the tacit structurings of a linguistic context that is illimitable in principle.” Butler (1993) 68

<sup>160</sup> Butler (1993) 69

<sup>161</sup> Amy Hollywood offers an excellent assessment of Bordo’s analysis of the body. She argues that Bordo, even as she critiques the persistent dualisms of Western culture, operates within traditional philosophical conceptions of the relationship (or lack thereof) between mind and body. “Bordo’s often enlightening analyses of contemporary cultural representations and bodily practices are in constant danger of capitulating to a dualism in which the body is shaped by prevailing discourses and practices, and real resistance occurs only when we come to be conscious of those systemic processes—an idealism oddly similar to that for which she blames postmodern feminists like Butler.” Hollywood 14

<sup>162</sup> Butler (1990) 164

<sup>163</sup> Butler (1993) 21

body” and create the kinds of community in which bodies with AIDS and “queer lives” are “valuable” and “worthy of support.”<sup>164</sup> Butler implies that, if bodies are sites of exclusion, they must also become sites of resistance to exclusion. And, bodies need not be untouched by discourse in order to be sites of resistance to exclusionary discourse. In fact, it is the body’s interaction with and negotiation of discourse that enables its contestation of dominant discourse. Butler indicates that resistance to domination and an ethical regard for the oppressed takes place **through** bodies. Her work can be a model for ecological feminists in their articulation of an ethically powerful but post-essentialist understanding of bodies and of the natural world.

Butler’s analysis of the body and linguistic structures and their interaction and irreducibility draws on the work of Merleau-Ponty. In the midst of her discussion of the reciprocity of language and materiality, Butler says that her understanding can be usefully compared with Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the flesh of the world. She continues by explaining that, as with Merleau-Ponty’s flesh, the referent cannot be said to exist apart from the signified nor can it be reduced to it. Merleau-Ponty’s words echo in Butler’s description of the interweaving of language and materiality.

Language and materiality are fully embedded in each other, *chiasmic* in their interdependency, yet never fully collapsed into one another, i.e., reduced to one another, and yet neither fully ever exceeds the other. Always already implicated in each other, always already exceeding one another, language and materiality are never fully identical nor fully different.<sup>165</sup>

“Chiasm,” which is a title of Merleau-Ponty’s pivotal essay in his final and posthumously published work, is a term that he uses to refer to openings of gaps within the sensible body and between the sensible and language. Butler not only adopts this terminology from Merleau-Ponty but also the reciprocal understanding of body and language. It is the reciprocity of body/nature and mind/culture that charts a middle course between essentialism or biological reductionism and the constructivist dissolution of body into linguistic and cultural structures.

Butler’s indebtedness to Merleau-Ponty is widely-recognized by other feminist theorists and openly acknowledged by her.<sup>166</sup> She has addressed the International Merleau-Ponty Circle,

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<sup>164</sup> Butler (1993) 21

<sup>165</sup> Butler (1993) 69

<sup>166</sup> Carol Bigwood notes that Butler uses terminology from Merleau-Ponty as she explains how gender identity is culturally constructed. See Carol Bigwood, *Earth Muse: Feminism, Nature and Art* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993). Gail Weiss claims that a similar paradox is at work in the work of Merleau-Ponty and Butler. Ponty attempts to interrogate the reversibility which makes perception, thought and language possible, while

engaged other feminists criticisms of Merleau-Ponty, and is currently involved in further reflections on his work.<sup>167</sup> Although Butler draws on Lacan, Nietzsche, Freud, and Foucault to analyze the process of cultural inscription, she turns to Merleau-Ponty to formulate her understanding of bodies--bodies that matter. She criticizes Foucault for a reliance on the body as a material given and says that he appears to assume a materiality as separate from signification and form.<sup>168</sup> Merleau-Ponty radically departs from assertions of “pure” or strictly objective materiality. As we will see in his discussion of the flesh, the world is known to us only as an irreducible interaction of the perceived and the perceiving. In the flesh, body and consciousness are bound together and a continual exchange occurs between them. It is this understanding of the body that Butler appropriates when she describes the subject as a materialization formed in through repetitive and reflexive interaction of signifier and signified. It is this understanding of the body, as a dynamic, relational site of exchange, that serves as a possibility for a valuing subject bodies. By appropriating Merleau-Ponty’s chiasmic flesh, Butler points feminist and ecological feminist thought in an important direction.

In the wake of poststructuralists’ denial of fixed meaning for language and identity, a humorous observation has circulated in feminist academic discussions: “Just when the subjectivity of women was beginning to gain recognition, the subject disappears.” This statement suggests the value of Butler’s work and that of Merleau-Ponty’s, but only partially. For women and other oppressed beings who have been culturally identified as objects to be used and exploited, the poststructuralist destabilization of the subject carries many dangers. Without voices and sites of resistance, the dominant symbols, identities and structures can not be

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Butler attempts to provide an account of the process of becoming a subject. In these efforts, both Ponty and Butler are interrogating from a given position which is anticipated and repeated in the interrogation. See Gail Weiss in Fred Evans and Leonard Lawlor, eds., *Chiasms: Merleau-Ponty’s Notion of the Flesh* (Albany: State University of New York, 2000), 205. Nancy Holland suggests that Ponty’s thought can be (and perhaps has been) used by Butler and others to correct failings that they identify in Foucault’s work, namely that materiality is prior to signification and form or a “reliance on the body as a material given” (Holland disputes whether in fact Butler’s criticism is an accurate interpretation of Foucault). Nancy Holland, “In a Different Ch[i]asm: A Feminist Rereading of Merleau-Ponty on Sexuality” in Lawrence Haas and Dorothea Olkowski, eds. *Rereading Merleau-Ponty: Essays Beyond the Continental-Analytic Divide* (Amherst, New York: Humanity Books, 2000), 330-331.

<sup>167</sup> Butler delivered the opening address at the 1999 meeting of the Merleau-Ponty Circle in Washington, D.C. and is editing her comments for publication. She has also offered a rereading of Luce Irigaray’s critical reading of Merleau-Ponty’s flesh for lectures at the 1994 National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Institute on *Embodiment: The Intersection between Nature and Culture* at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

<sup>168</sup> Butler (1990) 127-ff

subverted or challenged and ethics of resistance, transformation, and healed relation are eliminated by the totalization of oppressive cultural constructs.

Butler clearly sees the dangers of poststructuralist thought, especially for the beings and bodies who have long endured exploitation. Her objection to the treatment of the body as a passive mute facticity is not merely a philosophical quibble, but an appeal to the ethical and liberatory potency of bodies.<sup>169</sup> Problematic dualisms still reign, she implies, when the body is viewed as the inert object of culture. Ecological feminists have outlined all-too-well the effects of the interpretation of the body as passive and inert and yet they still struggle with how to address this tendency in their own work.

Ecofeminist Charlene Spretnak decries deconstruction as a “repression of the real.” According to Spretnak, there is no “real” in the deconstructionist analysis, only “social construction” of language and concepts that structure all aspects of human experience.<sup>170</sup> Spretnak’s response is to appeal to a “larger” reality of ecosocial or cosmic-social construction, “the dynamic processes of the larger reality without which there would be no body, nature, or place, let alone “social construction.”<sup>171</sup> She argues that nonmodern cultures have never lost sight of the fact that all human endeavors are part of a larger creation. Postmodernism, she claims, is a continuation of the modernist human-centeredness and neglect of the more-than-human world and is therefore a form of hypermodernism<sup>172</sup>. Spretnak astutely details the myopia of deconstruction, or hypermodernism, and how it might further human alienation from the “healing relationship with the living world;” but she offers only a utopian vision and a plea for a communion with body, nature, and place.

Spretnak’s utopian vision, where nonviolent campaigns bring peace to countries throughout the world, cars are replaced by bicycles in every city, farming is organic, economies are local, and education is holistic, is indeed compelling; but her insistence on her vision as the resurgence of the ‘**real**’ is too strong a claim for her perspective or any other. She ignores the

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<sup>169</sup> See Butler’s critique of Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir in Butler (1990) 165

<sup>170</sup> Charlene Spretnak, *The Resurgence of the Real: Body, Nature and Place in a Hypermodern World* (New York: Routledge, 1999) 5. Spretnak claims that deconstruction, also called “constructivism,” “constructionism,” and “poststructuralism” seeks to demonstrate “that all knowledge is determined (“socially constructed”) in service to various power relations and that there is nothing but social construction in human experience.” See Spretnak 222

<sup>171</sup> Spretnak 184

great insight of poststructuralism that any and all assertions of absolute reality or Truth carry with them the dangers of domination. If, as Spretnak hopes, transformative possibilities can emerge through our communion with bodies, these possibilities must be diverse and open. Butler's insight that we must not merely replace one set of normative identities with another emphasizes the notion that the transformative potential of the body lurks in the openings through which cultural identity and bodies relate.

Merleau-Ponty's work enables Butler to reconceptualize the relation of body and cultural categories. The potency of the body that she recognizes through Merleau-Ponty is not a freedom or autonomy from language and culture; rather the ethical power of the body is its embeddedness and interdependence with culture. The body "bears on language all the time," explains Butler.<sup>173</sup> Language and materiality, as interdependent and "fully embedded in one another," shape **one another**.<sup>174</sup> She adds to poststructuralism by theorizing that though language might shape materiality; the process through which the shaping occurs is reciprocal and reflexive.

The profound implications of Merleau-Ponty's thought in Butler's work hint at its importance for the wider feminist discussion. Since the status of the body and the conceptual patterns of dualism--the very issues that concerned Butler-- are paramount for ecological feminist ethics, Merleau-Ponty's contributions are of special significance to this group. Merleau-Ponty describes the relation of body with mind and body with language that, while it is not totalizing,

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<sup>172</sup> Spretnak provides a list of characteristics of modernism that she argues are present in postmodernism ("hypermodernism") as well. These features include: anthropocentrism, materialism, industrialism, objectivism, rationalism, mechanism, scientism, efficiency, compartmentalized and hypermasculine (patriarchal).

<sup>173</sup> The body bears on language in a number of ways. First of all, Butler argues that "there can be no reference to pure materiality except via materiality." Every linguistic reference to materiality requires a signifying process that, "in its phenomenality, is always already material." So the body, materiality, bears on language in the sense that language is material. Secondly, Butler indicates that signifying power of language depends on the reiteration and extension of a material set of relations. Even as language helps to constitute bodily life, materiality constitutes language. See Butler (1993) 68-69

<sup>174</sup> Butler (1993) 69

overcomes the separation of human from body and presents new possibilities for relation, community, and commitment among the world's beings.

## CHAPTER IV

### MERLEAU-PONTY AND THE 'FLESH'

The phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, which has been a rich resource for some feminist thinkers already, can enable ecological feminist to change the contours of human relation with one another and with other beings in the world. Merleau-Ponty, a French phenomenologist and contemporary of Jean-Paul Sartre, may appear to be an unlikely ally of ecofeminists. To claim that he was a self-identified ecofeminist would, of course, be a mistake. Merleau-Ponty died suddenly in 1961, more than a decade before Fracoise d'Eaubonne, coined the term “ecofeminism.” And yet, in his philosophy of sense perception, Merleau-Ponty details the common flesh which connects mind and body and all worldly beings. The one flesh which is characterized by mutuality supports multiple and diverse expressions of being.

Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of the body outlines the interdependence and reciprocity among beings while also honoring the irreducible character of bodies and beings. In his final work *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty provides a most detailed account of the mind-body relation.<sup>1</sup> This manuscript was incomplete at the time of his death. A published edition of this material, consisting of early chapters and the working notes from which he was constructing the manuscript, offers a new understanding of the mind-body and human-nature issues that have figured so prominently in ecological feminism.

#### **Knowing through Bodies**

While many of his ideas come to fruition in the last manuscript, Merleau-Ponty's interest in describing the body and its influence on the mind is evident throughout his career. He identifies his project in his early work *Phenomenology of Perception* as a “rediscovery” of the body.<sup>2</sup> This project as he develops it is a refutation of the views on the relationship (or lack thereof) between the body and consciousness held by philosophers such as Kant, Husserl, and Sartre. In another of his earliest writings, *Structure of Behavior*, Merleau-Ponty sets as his goal

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<sup>1</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans., Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern, 1968)

an understanding of the relations of consciousness and nature.<sup>3</sup> According to Merleau-Ponty's assessment, modern philosophy ignores the role of the body in providing the possibility for perception and for knowledge. He uses the phrase "lived body" to emphasize the body's active involvement in "bringing" a being into the world. Instead of juxtaposing the physical body with a pure consciousness, Merleau-Ponty describes the lived body as the basis for thought and consciousness. These themes of the primacy of the body and the interdependence of mind and body, which will be carried through to the end of his life, are clearly elaborated in this early writing.

To initiate his "rediscovery" of bodies, Merleau-Ponty comments that we have not only thoughts about the body, but also experiences of our bodies. He claims that experiences of bodies and its senses are inconsistent with the notion of a "pure consciousness" detached from the sensible world. Our bodies are the only means of knowing about the world and there is no way to 'get around' the body. Merleau-Ponty insists that "we have no other way of knowing what the world is" than **through** bodies. He employs several metaphors to depict the role of the body in taking us into the world and creating the possibility for consciousness. The body is "the fabric into which all objects are woven" and an "instrument of my 'comprehension.'"<sup>4</sup> For each of us, the body is like the heart in an organism that "breathes life into it and sustains it inwardly."<sup>5</sup> Merleau-Ponty leaves little doubt of his conviction that the roots of consciousness lie in the body and its embeddedness in the world. As he understands the body, its senses welcome encounters with the world and other beings and these encounters enliven consciousness.

M.C. Dillon refers to Merleau-Ponty's effort as one of "incarnating consciousness" and bringing thought "back to the world."<sup>6</sup> His attempt to trace consciousness to the body resists a trend which Maxine Sheets-Johnstone notices in modern philosophy. Sheets-Johnstone observes that present-day philosophers almost uniformly start with the mental and neglect to offer a concomitant philosophy of the body. The result of this emphasis on the mental is that "the

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<sup>2</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (New York: Routledge, 1962) 198-9. hereafter PhP.

<sup>3</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior*, trans., Alden L. Fischer (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963) hereafter SB

<sup>4</sup> PhP, 235

<sup>5</sup> PhP, 203

<sup>6</sup> M.C. Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, 2nd edition (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern, 1988)

physical seems predictably foredoomed and...the living body has become superfluous pulp.”<sup>7</sup> If the result of philosophical neglect of the body is its status as an unimportant appendage to the mind, the prominence of the body in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy signifies a move toward an appreciation of the body. The prominence of the body, in his philosophy, is not reserved for one’s own body. Merleau-Ponty attends to bodies-in-general and the body of the world and thereby promotes an appreciation for the value of other bodies and all the physical world.

### **Bodies as a Link to Others**

Bodies take us into encounter with others. Through our bodies, we engage other bodies and they invigorate our senses and form our conscious life. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty distinguishes between consciousness as pure-being-for itself, or as solipsistic rational ego, and perceptual consciousness as “being-in-the-world.”<sup>8</sup> The perceptual consciousness of a being-in-the-world is the type of consciousness that he maintains is most consistent with our sense experience. As beings-in-the-world, each of us is fundamentally a worldly being, a bodied being capable of sensing and being sensed by others. And, it is the capacity of sensing and being sensed from which all consciousness, consciousness of the world and others and also self-consciousness, emerges.

Subjectivity is the awareness of oneself as a subject, as an active and distinct entity. In the Cartesian model, subjectivity is most basically reflection on oneself as the “I” who is the subject of thought. This model of the rational ego creates a divide between the self and other. The other is excluded from my private field of perception and reflection as I am excluded from hers. Merleau-Ponty arrives at a different account of subjectivity from his examination of sense phenomenology. He finds that subjectivity is “bound up with that of the body and that of the world.”<sup>9</sup> What has been understood to be the subjective aspect of the being, he concludes, is inseparable from the body and the world. In fact, in a later essay, “The Child’s Relations with Others,” Merleau-Ponty describes how self-consciousness and self-reflection originate in the presence of and relations to others.

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<sup>7</sup> Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, *The Roots of Thinking* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990) 302

<sup>8</sup> PhP 351

<sup>9</sup> PhP 408

Merleau-Ponty cites Henri Wallon's descriptions of infant and child development.<sup>10</sup> From these descriptions, Merleau-Ponty (a cognitive psychologist by training) offers a new interpretation of the origins of conscious life. He argues that conscious life begins not as a sphere of oneness or self-centeredness, but as communion with others. The communion to which Merleau-Ponty refers is a perceptual communion in which an infant is unable to distinguish her body from that of another. Initially, in the first months of life, a child shares in a collective life that Merleau-Ponty calls "syncretic sociability." The initial community or coexistence with other bodies is the primordial structure of what comes to be called 'consciousness,' 'intelligence,' and 'knowledge.' From this stage of indistinction from others, the child gradually develops the awareness of herself and others as distinct beings.

According to Merleau-Ponty, the recognition of oneself as a distinct being from all others (as an "I") develops from and through bodily relations with others. He notes that after the age of six months, a child engages others through smiles, steady gazes, and early forms of language. In interactions with others, the child becomes aware of distinct perspectives. A particularly significant stage of awareness is the child's realization that different perspectives can be taken on her. The awareness that the child can be an "other," an object of perception, for others initiates the emergence of self-recognition. A child must learn to see herself 'from the outside' as a body like the other bodies that she sees if she is to see herself as a separate being.<sup>11</sup> Merleau-Ponty explains that the "I arises when the child understands that every you that is addressed to him is for him an I."<sup>12</sup> This level of self-recognition is a product of a reciprocity of points of view and entails the recognition of the other's body as a distinct self. The bodies of others are therefore integral to the process of self-consciousness. I perceive my body as **my** body only by perceiving it in relation to other bodies and other things that are not me .<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Henri Wallon, *Les origines du caractère chez l'enfant*, 2nd edition (Paris, 1949). See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The Child's Relations with Others," trans. William Cobb in *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. James M. Edie (Evanston, Illinois: 1964) (hereafter CRO) 121-ff

<sup>11</sup> Dillon, 123

<sup>12</sup> CRO 150

<sup>13</sup> Dillon, 123

## **Bodies as the Origin of Selfhood**

For Merleau-Ponty, the presence and awareness of other bodies is a building-block for the awareness of self. Not only do we come to recognize ourselves as a distinct being by other's recognition of us, but we transfer our recognition of other bodies onto our own. He observes that a baby can discern between a parent's image in the mirror and the parent's body before she can discern between her own image and her body.<sup>14</sup> The ability to consider an external perspective or view of oneself, to trace an image of oneself back to a self, then relies on and develops out of the ability to trace the image of another back to his or her body. Merleau-Ponty finds that one challenge for the child is to identify parts of her body as her own and to integrate the parts of her body that she sees into a recognition of one unified body that is seen by others. The bodies of others facilitate this recognition. He notes that after six months of age, children are seen scrutinizing the parts of the other's body and "systematically relating" to herself "the different things (s)he has learned about the other's body from looking."<sup>15</sup> Like the process of identifying parts of her body, the process of integrating these bodily parts depends on the bodies of others. When a child observes that the body of an other forms a distinct whole, she is able to understand how the parts of her body do the same. With these accounts of infant development and the emergence of consciousness, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the involvement of other bodies in the process of becoming a self.

The period of bodily communion, or the initial identification with others, only gradually develops into a self-reflexivity of distinct beings. Until the age of three, the child is constantly "calling into play" the relation of 'me' and 'other' to better understand these distinct identities.<sup>16</sup> Merleau-Ponty cites physical encounters which clarify the boundaries of distinct beings and examples of confusion between the child and an 'other' in the period before she has a firm sense of herself as an "I." These experiences of early childhood further demonstrate that self-reflexivity (the self-recognition that in modern philosophy has been designated 'ego') develops from the child's gradual recognition of bodily boundaries between others and herself. Merleau-Ponty says that, at three years of age, a child usually "stops lending body and thoughts to

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<sup>14</sup> CRO 128-9

<sup>15</sup> CRO 125

<sup>16</sup> CRO 153

others.”<sup>17</sup> The child claims her body and thoughts as her own from the ‘anonymous’ or pre-personal bodily communion with others.

Even as the child emerges as a self from the primordial communion, which Merleau-Ponty describes as the initial structure of the world and as the stimulus for the unfolding of consciousness, the initial identification with others is never completely abandoned. He contends that the process of distinguishing between self and other is “never completely finished.”<sup>18</sup> Our connection with others endures and the relation of reciprocity continues; however, the reciprocity subsequent to the infant stage involves differentiation. The nature of the communion with others changes as a result of personal differentiation. Dillon explains that although our corporeal connection endures, “communion is now [after the development of self-consciousness] a communion across a distance rather than syncretic participation in undifferentiated oneness.”<sup>19</sup> The development of distinctiveness and the emergence of difference are not contrary to communion or connection. In fact, distinctiveness promotes the possibility for new forms of relation, among different others. The study of the child’s relation with others then brings about an insight for Merleau-Ponty. Difference and bodily communion are not antithetical; rather they are reciprocal and they promote one another. This insight is one that is expanded in his notion of “the flesh.”

### **The Unity and Diversity of Bodies**

“Flesh” is a unique contribution in Merleau-Ponty’s thought that is articulated in *The Visible and the Invisible*. With “the flesh,” Merleau-Ponty finally reconciles mind and body and self and other. His comment that there is no name for what he calls the “flesh” in any philosophy hints at the originality of his later work.<sup>20</sup> Merleau-Ponty uses “flesh” to refer to the corporeal element that unites *and* distinguishes all worldly beings. All beings share in the one flesh. It is a generality, or a general principle of being, a “pregnancy of all possibles,” from which each being is formed.<sup>21</sup> Merleau-Ponty says that flesh “is not matter, is not mind, is not substance.”<sup>22</sup> He

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<sup>17</sup> CRO 151-2

<sup>18</sup> CRO 119

<sup>19</sup> Dillon, 127

<sup>20</sup> VI 147

<sup>21</sup> VI 250

<sup>22</sup> VI 139

wants to move beyond traditional understandings of being to introduce what ontologies predicated on a mind-matter split have not allowed: that mind and matter are expressions of one general element, that they have a common source and ground, and that beings are not bifurcated and inherently oppositional.

Merleau-Ponty's earlier writings on the primacy of sense perception and the significance of relations with other bodies, are integral steps in the developing his notion of the flesh. If the development of self-awareness emerges through our bodily contact with and awareness of other bodies then the dichotomy between mind and body collapses. Merleau-Ponty's examination of child development suggests not only that my body exists in a type of communion with other bodies, but also that the mind emerges through this communion and is therefore bound up with the body and other bodies in the world. The intermingling of body and mind, then is more profound than other western philosophers have elaborated. If consciousness itself comes from bodily encounters then the body and those others which it encounters have significance far greater than heretofore acknowledged.

The separation of mind and body is an issue that Merleau-Ponty addresses directly in "The Chiasm" chapter of what became his final work. He comments that, if we return to "prejudged and prereflective experience," we realize that these experiences must involve a reciprocity and commingling with other bodies. Our sensuous involvement underlies all reflections and is prior to all objectifications of the 'things' of the world. This primary participation is a foundation or source for thought and language: "we must see and feel in some way to think."<sup>23</sup> Even though we conceptualize or symbolize the world we know through sense experience and even if we tend to forget our sensuous involvement, we are, as sensible beings, fundamentally embedded in the world. It is this primary participation, in which subject and object intermingle, that Merleau-Ponty considers as he seeks to "deepen" his description of sense phenomenology and the sensible world.

The experience that Merleau-Ponty uses most frequently as a model for the intermingling of what has been known as the subject and object in sense encounters is that of touch. Specifically, he refers to the experience of two hands touching. When one of my hands touches the other, I can see plainly that I am both a being touched and a touching being. The body is both

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<sup>23</sup> VI 146

sensed and sensing, it is a being of two leaves or sides. We see from the example of hands touching that the two leaves of the body are implicated simultaneously in sense encounters. We can not touch without also being touched. If we take sense experience seriously, Merleau-Ponty insists that we must admit that (from one side) our body is a thing among things and also (from another side) that which sees and touches things.<sup>24</sup> The body therefore unites two properties within itself and has a “double-belongingness.” The different sides of being are inseparable and each side “calls for the other.”<sup>25</sup> This two-sided relational character of the body/self defies the assumption that the body is a mere object or that the subject can absent itself from the sensible world. In fact, the dualistic structure of subject and object is replaced with the image of exchange and reciprocity.

The mind and body, according to Merleau-Ponty, should no longer be characterized as separate entities (subject and object). In a working note for *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty describes the mind as a necessary “other side” of the body. He says that we have no idea of a mind that would not also be doubled with, grounded in, a body. David Abram summarizes this observation of Merleau-Ponty’s by commenting that we “implicate our own sense, and indeed our own sentience” in every perception.<sup>26</sup> Hence, the body is also the “other side” of the mind and “is not describable in objective terms.”<sup>27</sup> These sides of being are bound together in a body-self and it is not clear where one ends and the other begins. Mind and body intermingle and flow into one another. Merleau-Ponty says that the mind overflows into the body, “encroaches upon it, is hidden in it--at the same time needs it, terminates in it, is anchored in it.”<sup>28</sup> A fluidity or reciprocity exists between mind and body to the extent that these sides of being are mutually and inseparably intertwined in sense experience

Merleau-Ponty’s description of perception is an account of the self diverging or splitting open to invite sense encounters. Percipience is a “coiling over” of the self in which one flesh creates an “other side to its own.”<sup>29</sup> As the differentiation of the infant occurs from a sensed communion with the bodies of others, the union of the fleshly self yields a self-differentiated,

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<sup>24</sup> VI 137

<sup>25</sup> VI 137

<sup>26</sup> Abram 66

<sup>27</sup> VI 259

<sup>28</sup> VI 259

<sup>29</sup> Sue Cataldi, *Emotion, Depth and Flesh: A Study of Sensitive Space: Reflections on Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Embodiment* (Albany, New York: State University of New York, 1993) 61

two-sided self--a sensing self and a sensed self--capable of perception. Merleau-Ponty claims that the fission of flesh is fundamental to perception: “[T]he fundamental fission or segregation of the sentient and the sensible ...makes the organs of my body communicate.”<sup>30</sup> Through the self-distancing, my flesh hollows out a clearing or field through which the sentient and sensible sides of my self can exchange. This exchange of the two sides, the side that senses and the side which is sensed, is perception. According to Merleau-Ponty’s description of sense perception, both the sensing and the sensed are involved in perception. Sue Cataldi explains that, in Merleau-Ponty’s “flesh,” “no sense can be made of disembodied percipience.” Percipience is animated by the transitivity of the sensed and sensing flesh.<sup>31</sup> With his account of perception, drawing specifically on the phenomenon of touch, Merleau-Ponty abandons language which suggests that the self is comprised of two beings: a mental being and a bodily being. Being is one being of the flesh and what has been conceived as mind and body is the commingling of sensing and sensed sides of one flesh.

Engaged in a mutual exchange between the two sides of flesh, each self has a fullness and an openness. Merleau-Ponty admits that the language of sides is inadequate for capturing the fullness through which the two sides interweave. He says that “to speak of leaves or layers is still to flatten and juxtapose” the sides of being. A more adequate metaphor for the two-sided flesh, he suggests, might be two segments of a sole circular course. He explains that within this one sole movement in its two phases “there is a reciprocal insertion and intertwining of the one in the other.”<sup>32</sup> The two segments of being can encounter and enfold one another. Important in this metaphor, says Cataldi, is that the two sides of being are not flattened into a back and front like “a buttered [and unbuttered] side of bread.”<sup>33</sup> She mentions the metaphor of two caves which connect at their entrances. Perhaps, two windows provides an even more evocative metaphor for the intermingling within fleshly being. A fresh breeze flows in through a west window dances around the house enlivening the calm air within it, and is taken through an east window. As the breeze which invigorates the air within my home depends on the distance between the two windows, the animation of a fleshly being relies on the self-distancing of the two sides of the one flesh. The self-distancing of the two sides of my flesh facilitates my self-

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<sup>30</sup> VI 143

<sup>31</sup> Cataldi, 61

<sup>32</sup> See VI 137-8

consciousness as one who senses and is sensed. Through the openness between the two sides of being, a reversibility between the sensed and sensing takes place: the two sides continually encounter and interact with one another.

A being of the flesh is diversely constituted. With the continual exchange of the sensed and sensing, such a being is a complex array of sense relations. Merleau-Ponty explains that sense experience reveals that we are constituted not only by the relation of sensed and sensing sides, but also by the synergy among diverse senses. In the splitting open or bursting forth of the sensing and sensed body, that Cataldi likens to the opening of a seed capsule, the general element of the flesh “begins to touch, see, hear, smell and taste itself and eventually begins to understand itself or become aware of itself” as a particular self.<sup>34</sup> The occurrence of a particular expression of selfhood is actually a synergy of various senses collected across the contours of a sensing body. Merleau-Ponty contends that sense experience refutes the understanding of self-unity as a sole consciousness. If we have two hands which open upon one sole world, he argues, we can not argue that these two are given to one sole consciousness. He suggests that we must not only renounce the bifurcation of ‘consciousness of’ and the object and embrace the understanding of a two-sided being; but, we must also acknowledge the multiple and synergic quality of the body’s consciousness to explain how two hands are unified.

Sense perception demonstrates the “fundamental polymorphism” of the sensing body. Merleau-Ponty expressed an early recognition of the synergy of the senses in *Phenomenology of Perception*. He observes that “any object presented to one sense calls upon itself the concordant operation of all the others.”<sup>35</sup> And unlike “flowers in a bouquet,” senses intermingle with one another. The cooperation and interweaving of the various senses is evident in the extension of sense experience: each contact with a part of our body-self is “a contact with the whole of the present or possible” being.<sup>36</sup> The synergy of multiple senses that we experience in sense perception influences Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of consciousness. He states that the “unity and identity of tactile phenomenon do not come through any synthesis of recognition in the concept, they are founded upon the unity and identity of the body as a synergic totality.”<sup>37</sup> This

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<sup>33</sup> Cataldi 61

<sup>34</sup> Cataldi 61

<sup>35</sup> PhP 318

<sup>36</sup> PhP 317

<sup>37</sup> PhP 317

interpretation of consciousness is further explicated in *The Visible and the Invisible*. Merleau-Ponty explains that the “synergic body...assembles into a cluster the ‘consciousnesses’ adherent to its hands, to its eyes” so that “each touching is bound to every other sense--bound up in such a way as to make up with them the experience of one sole world and one sole body.”<sup>38</sup> The diversity, multiplicity, and complexity of senses do not compromise the unity of the consciousness; rather the transitivity and cooperation of the various senses attest to the unity of the body and its role in bridging the senses.

Though Merleau-Ponty began to articulate the diversity of the sensing body early in his career, he extends this synergy of the senses even further in *The Visible and the Invisible*: he extends it to other beings.<sup>39</sup> The separation of and openness between the two sides of a being admits the exchange of the sensing and the sensed and the cooperation of diverse senses, but this openness also admits the exchange with different beings in the world. Merleau-Ponty explains the “fundamental fission” which makes the organs of my body communicate also “founds transitivity from one body to another.”<sup>40</sup> The bond which unites the diversely-constituted self also unites one flesh with other beings. If, Merleau-Ponty reasons, a synergy is possible within each of us, then why would it not be possible among different organisms. These other bodies which share the world with me are like me. They have bodies which can be sensed like mine. And, if I can perceive myself as sensed flesh, then these other bodies must also be accessible to my perception.

The exchange or reciprocity with other fleshly beings is not incidental in Merleau-Ponty’s account of sense perception. The relations with diverse others, which is possible through our own sensual diversification, is an entangling of our senses with others. Merleau-Ponty lyrically expresses encounters between fleshly beings as sensual involvement or intimacy: “[t]heir landscapes interweave, their actions and passions fit together exactly.”<sup>41</sup> This intimate interweaving with others that occurs in perceptual experiences constitutes who we are. For Merleau-Ponty intercorporeality is fundamental to our selfhood. We, as sensing/sensed beings, are relational beings who need others.

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<sup>38</sup> VI 141-2

<sup>39</sup> His consideration of child development expressed in “The Child’s Relations with Others” certainly helped to effect this ‘extension’ of a previous insight into the formulation of the “flesh.”

<sup>40</sup> VI, 143

<sup>41</sup> VI 141-2

In his examination of sense experience, Merleau-Ponty finds that others are integral to perception and to self-coherence. David Abram refers to sense encounters with others as an “interpenetration” and a “magical participation that permits me, at times, to feel what others feel.”<sup>42</sup> But he also indicates that, for Merleau-Ponty, encounters with others is integral to experience. He notes that in Merleau-Ponty’s sense phenomenology, the experiencing self is “not a self-enclosed object, but an open, incomplete entity...an open circuit.”<sup>43</sup> Cataldi agrees with this assessment. She says that “Merleau-Ponty does not regard perceptual experiences as interior, worldless activity.”<sup>44</sup> Instead, the sensing self “completes itself only in things, and in the world.”<sup>45</sup> Only through relations with the sensible world and its diverse beings, is my sensing self realized.

Each sensible being is fundamentally relational and bound to others. Abram says that, in Merleau-Ponty’s account of the flesh, we “are destined for relationship” and that “[i]t is primarily through my engagement with what is not me that I effect the integration of my senses, and thereby experience my own coherence.”<sup>46</sup> The body/self is completed and unified only through its relationships with the world. Thus, the boundary of self and other, me and you, must be permeable rather than rigid. We each as bodies in a shared sensible world nurture one another through sense encounters.

The account of bodies and the mind-body relation that Merleau-Ponty develops over the course of his career are relevant to ecological feminist concern for bodies and the ecological world. According to his sense phenomenology, bodies--our own and others-- and the perceptual world create self-coherence and a bond with others. He redeems the importance of bodies from dualism and offers a new direction for ecological ethics. The ethical significance of his work rests both upon the account he provides of the relational, bodily nature of the self *and* in the ambiguity, openness, creativity, and transcendence he preserves in his account of mind-body relations.

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<sup>42</sup> Abram, 125

<sup>43</sup> Abram 125

<sup>44</sup> Cataldi 71

<sup>45</sup> Abram 125

<sup>46</sup> Abram 125

## **Kinship through Bodies**

The sensual reciprocity that Merleau-Ponty discerns in perception reveals a “different type of being” to him. He claims that since we experience a mutual openness and transitivity between ourselves and other sensed beings, then a kinship must exist among beings in the world. In our sense experience, we do not have a private world over and against the world of others. The unity of our body/self is one expression of a more general unity that we experience in perception, Merleau-Ponty contends. He explains that “the little private world of each is not juxtaposed to the world of all others, but surrounded by it, levied off from it, and all together are a sentient in general before a sensible in general.”<sup>47</sup> Each sentient sensible is then continuous with, consistent with the world and the beings within it. A statement from *Phenomenology of Perception* suggests that early in his study of sense perception, Merleau-Ponty became aware of a common element in which all beings are primordially enfolded. He says that perception represents “a communication with the world more ancient than thought.”<sup>48</sup> He concludes that perception is based on a communication among beings in the world and this communication, in turn, is rooted in a kinship of beings. Perception, a sensible transitivity, continually attests to the connection of all sensible beings.

The connection among sensible beings is what Merleau-Ponty refers to as the “generality” of the flesh.<sup>49</sup> We have discussed the sensible/sentient self as a particular expression of flesh, or a fleshly being. The term “flesh” refers to both the particular being and the more general “element” in which all beings and the world share. Merleau-Ponty says that flesh is a “sort of incarnate principle” from which a style of being arises.<sup>50</sup> Flesh is an element in the same way that water, air, earth, and fire are, or have been understood to be, elemental. All beings share in the common element of the flesh. The word “flesh” is an apt term for expressing both the sensible and bodily commonality of beings and also the generative capacity of this element. As commonly understood, “flesh” refers to the soft tissue of animals. The term evokes the sense of touching the soft and supple folds of a body. The French word that Merleau-Ponty used in his writing connotes the flesh color of a person’s skin. Both in terms of touch and vision, the word ‘flesh’ communicates the sensible experience of a body or bodies in the world.

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<sup>47</sup> VI 142

<sup>48</sup> PhP 254

<sup>49</sup> VI 220

Merleau-Ponty incorporates all of the sensible world in the general element of the “flesh” and he has chosen a term that captures the sensible character of being. But, with the word “flesh” he also incorporates even more than the particular beings of the world or sensible world in general. “Flesh” also sustains and nourishes life. For Merleau-Ponty, the sensible world of the “flesh” is the ground for experience, reflection, thought, language, and abstraction. The common definition of the term “flesh” includes such vital organs as the heart, liver and intestines.<sup>51</sup> These organs sustain the lives of animals. Without these organs of the “flesh,” the life of a being would not continue. Similarly, Merleau-Ponty contends that the sensible world, what he calls “flesh” in general, is the necessary source for experience and understanding of particular fleshing beings.

Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the coherence of particular fleshly beings and the general “flesh” of the sensible world. He claims that his body is made of the same flesh as the world and that the two overlap with one another. Body and world are inscribed in one another. In Douglas Low’s description of the relation of the individual “flesh” and that of the world’s, he says that the “world is an extension of the body’s flesh, as the body is an extension of the world.”<sup>52</sup> “Flesh” is a medium of all beings. Sue Cataldi describes “flesh” as “the fundamental unity permeating all interrelated, interwoven things.”<sup>53</sup> With the notion of “flesh,” Merleau-Ponty expresses the kinship and bond that beings share which allows their communication. They share their bodies with one another in acts of perception. All sensible bodies exist in a common field-- a shared sensible world-- through which perception occurs.

In his study of child development, Merleau-Ponty refers to the primordial communion with others. The primordial communion is developed further in his discussion of the generality of the “flesh.” He explains that fleshly body is an exemplar of a more general flesh in which all being participates. “Flesh” is the common source and primordial participation for all beings. There is no expression of being in the sensible world except in and through the flesh. As participants or expressions of a general element of being, each worldly being is enfolded in a common fabric. The correspondence or kinship is not a superficial or casual association. Beings in the sensible world are inseparably bound to one another. Merleau-Ponty says that we can not

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<sup>50</sup> VI 139

<sup>51</sup> Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary (1983)

<sup>52</sup> Douglas Low, *Merleau-Ponty’s Last Vision: A Proposal for the Completion of The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern, 2000) 53

<sup>53</sup> Cataldi 60

tear one sole sensible (being) from worldly flesh. He likens the participation in the flesh to a family by explaining that a body touches and sees others “only because, being of their family, itself visible and tangible, it uses its own being as a means to participate in theirs.”<sup>54</sup> Each of us is born of the same sensible world and are therefore interrelated and available for sense encounters with others. Every body shares in the same family of the flesh, of the world. Each self “belongs” to a universal community as brothers and sisters belong to one another. In addition to the language of familial bonds, participation in the flesh is communicated with language of pregnancy and birth. Merleau-Ponty says that “flesh is the “pregnancy of all possibles” from which beings emerge.<sup>55</sup> As a child is formed within the womb of its mother, reflective sensible beings and sense relations with others arise in and from the body of the world. And, as children from the same womb, the sensible world, we each have “a participation in and kinship with” one another.<sup>56</sup>

Merleau-Ponty makes many references to the precessive union of body/self and world. He portrays perception as a moment of the world’s self-revelation in which the flesh of the world coils over and touches itself. Merleau-Ponty suggests the communion of fleshly being with general flesh by describing self-consciousness as a fold of the world’s flesh. The fold is a place where a sensing self folds over on a sensible self. Even as the two sides of a self are in contact with one another, they are both part of a larger fabric and by virtue of this fabric come to form a relation--an exchange-- between them. This coiling over of the flesh upon itself is an instance of the world’s flesh becoming self-regarding or “less self-occlusive” in the words of Cataldi.<sup>57</sup>

As with his discussion of “The Child’s Relations with Others,” the emergence of self-consciousness and a particular instance of the world’s flesh becoming “less self-occlusive” does not destroy the communion with others. He says in that earlier essay, that the primordial communion of self and others continues through adulthood. So too, in his discussion of the flesh, self-consciousness does not entail self-isolation. By characterizing the self-reflection as a fold in the world’s flesh, Merleau-Ponty expresses his understanding of self-distinction in the midst of continuity with the world and others. I may “fold” over on my body and relate to this part of myself as uniquely “mine”; yet, I remain a part of a shared sensible world. His image of

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<sup>54</sup> VI 137

<sup>55</sup> VI, 139

<sup>56</sup> VI, 138

the folding or coiling over of the sensible world also conveys the possibility of diversity among fleshly beings.

### **Openness of Bodies**

Though all beings share in the general element of the flesh--they all share the same sensible world and have transitivity with one another through this shared world, Merleau-Ponty recognizes the diversity among different beings. M.C. Dillon comments that, for Merleau-Ponty, “there is one manner or style of being which all things share, but this is compatible with the existence of many things”<sup>58</sup> In his discussion of the two sides of the self and multiple sense consciousness, Merleau-Ponty indicates a recognition of radical diversity in the sensible world. The body is a site of difference. Each body as a sentient and sensed being has two sides which never collapse into one another. Through the opening between the sentient and sensed sides of being, the multiple senses intermingle. Perception, as the relation of the two sides of the flesh, depends on the distance within the flesh.

The metaphor of a fabric provides an evocative image for the opening or clearing between the sides of the flesh. Merleau-Ponty depicts the relation of the two sides of the flesh as a fold. In which the flesh, like fabric, doubles over on itself creating a distance or clearing within itself. The fold of my flesh does not dissolve the sentient and sensed sides of the flesh into one another. Through these folds, the separate layers are in contact with one another, but remain distinct. Perception arises out of this diversity of the flesh-- a differentiation of the two sides which Merleau-Ponty refers to as the fundamental fission or segregation of the flesh. He returns to his example of two hands touching to explain the enduring differentiation of the flesh: “[m]y left hand is always on the verge of touching my right hand touching things, but I never reach coincidence.”<sup>59</sup> So even when I touch my own body, I experience difference. The touching and touched encounter and exchange with one another, but they do not coincide in sense experience. An “incessant escaping” occurs which limits the reversibility or exchange between the two sides of the flesh.<sup>60</sup> The sensing side of the flesh is always more than the sensed side of flesh can

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<sup>57</sup> Cataldi 60

<sup>58</sup> See Dillon chapter 9

<sup>59</sup> VI 148

<sup>60</sup> *ibid*

comprehend and the sensed side is never fully comprehended by the sensing side. Cataldi characterizes the reversibility and exchange as “incomplete.”

Reversibility is always incomplete, ‘always imminent and never realized in fact.’ For although reversibility is a coupling or translation of sides of flesh, it also involves an ‘incessant escaping.’ Something is lost in the translation. The two sides of reversible relation never completely ‘become’ each other in the sense of a strict identity or in the sense of perfectly coinciding. There is always some experienced interruption, some hiatus, in reversible relations between the two sides.<sup>61</sup>

The hiatus, or openness, between the sensing and sensed sides of my flesh preserves the different sides of the flesh. But, this openness is not an insurmountable void that isolates the sensing side of being from sensed being. The gap is also a bridge that connects the sensing and sensed sides of myself. In perception, an exchange occurs through the opening of the two sides.

Merleau-Ponty designates the opening within perceiving beings as a “chiasm.” “Chiasm” is a Greek word meaning “criss-cross” and is commonly used today only to refer to the optic chiasm in which the vision of a being’s two eyes interweave with one another.”<sup>62</sup> The optic chiasm is the region between the right and left hemispheres of the brain where the neuronal fibers of the eyes cross and interweave.<sup>63</sup> The optic chiasm is a gap or opening in perception. As Cataldi explains the optic chiasm is the area where the optic nerves leave the eyes. Since these nerves are not photosensitive, they “create hidden blind spots in the periphery of our field of vision before the chiasm reversibly rejoins the two sides of the visual field in one unified visibility.”<sup>64</sup> Ironically, these “blind spots” where perception gives out is the region which makes perception possible. The optic chiasm enables the different perspectives of the eyes to “continually conjoin into a single vision.”<sup>65</sup> According to Merleau-Ponty, the differentiation and distance of the two sides of the flesh enables the interweaving of multiple sense modalities and the exchange between the flesh of a particular being and the flesh of the world.

The chiasm is a mediating link between the sides of the self. A lacuna of exchange, the chiasm connects the sensed body and sensing body. Merleau-Ponty likens perception to a wave that arises within me. If perception is a wave, which flows from one side of flesh to the other

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<sup>61</sup> Cataldi 72

<sup>62</sup> Abram 128

<sup>63</sup> Abram 127-8

<sup>64</sup> Cataldi, 73

like an ocean swell moves from coast to coast, then it is located neither in the sensed or sensing flesh. Perception is the relation and exchange of the two sides. It is the movement, the crossing over, from sensed to sensing self. The openness, the stop-gap, between the sides of my flesh is an opening for encountering and intertwining with others in the sensible world.

The wave which flows within the sensing/sensed being is inaugurated by contact with others in the world. Sense encounters with the world are insertions of the world between my two leaves, between the two sides of myself, and the insertion of my sensed body “between two leaves” of others in the world.<sup>66</sup> The chiasm which mediates between the sides of me also serves as a bridge to others who are not me. As Cataldi says, ‘chiasm’ is not a barrier, but a bond: a bond not only between perceiving and perceived sides of my flesh, but also a medium of exchange between self and others.<sup>67</sup> The chiasm is the possibility of intercorporeality, of intertwining with others in the sensible world. Merleau-Ponty refers to a chiasm of oneself, between the inside and outside or sensed and sensing self, and he also claims that a chiasm exists between myself and others and myself and the world. Since we connect with or encounter one another in the opening or lacuna of the chiasmic self, we are always at-a-distance from that which we encounter. The intertwining of self and world protects the identity of the self--the self is not dissolved into a worldly monism. This interweaving involves a differentiation and space both within beings and between different beings. The chiasm, in Merleau-Ponty’s account of sense perception, expresses the continuity **and** differentiation among beings in the sensible world.<sup>68</sup> As both a bond and an opening, the chiasm suggests the unity and diversity of the flesh.

Merleau-Ponty explains:

The chiasm forms its unity across impossibilities such as that of my world and the world of an other...By reason of this, mediation through reversal is not simply a For-Oneself, For-the-Other antithesis...Chiasm means that there is a co-functioning not a rivalry of the me-other...we function as one unique body...the chiasm is an exchange between me, other, and world.<sup>69</sup>

With his description of the chiasm of sense experience, Merleau-Ponty offers an explanation of how beings of the elemental flesh-- beings who share and are formed of a common sensible

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<sup>65</sup> Abram, 128

<sup>66</sup> VI 264

<sup>67</sup> Cataldi 69

<sup>68</sup> VI 21. See Dillon 163 for a contrast to Hegel’s *Geist*

<sup>69</sup> VI 214

world-- are both the same and different. Fleshly beings are similar in that there is a correspondence among them. They are in the world, as sensed beings, and have access to one another through their senses. And yet they are not fully circumscribed by the sensible world or the perception of others. The sensed self has another side and a distance within or between itself. Even for the self, the difference is never collapsed. Difference is fundamental to being; difference makes possible relation and (as perception is a relation between the two sides of being) makes perception possible. So the chiasm is the enduring difference of beings. The chiasm preserves the possibility of relation by protecting the distinctiveness of the sides of being and of each two-sided being.

In addition to the chiasmic nature of all flesh, Merleau-Ponty explicates a difference within unity in other ways. The sensible world is a shared world. Each of us opens onto and is rooted in the same world. Merleau-Ponty observes that each being would be sensibly inaccessible to one another unless they shared one sensible world. Within the shared world, each being is situated differently. Access to the world is gained through our senses, but our senses are not able to penetrate into every corner of the world. We have limits. We do not encompass the world with our look or touch. We do not even comprehend the entirety and complexity of the other's body when we touch. The body spreads out beyond me. I may see the face of my beloved as we meet, but I do not see the curls along the back of his head. Not only are we a non-exhaustive expression of being, we are limited by our particular situation and perspective. The world and others continually elude our senses. David Abram comments that "we inevitably envisage from a particular perspective."<sup>70</sup> We can not experience the world universally, but only in particular encounters. No other being has my particular perspective. And even though we might touch another, we do not sense an other in the way that we sense ourselves-- as both sensing and sensed. The other, like all others in the world, has a depth which we can not penetrate.

Merleau-Ponty insists that there is always a part of the other that "I will never touch."<sup>71</sup> And yet this untouchability, like the distance between the sensing and sensed sides of self is not a barrier, it is not a void. The chiasm, which preserves the distinctiveness of each self and places beings at a distance, is also an opening. This gap, opens each of us onto a being which is more

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<sup>70</sup> Abram 66

than each of us; it opens us to an intercorporeal Being.<sup>72</sup> Through this opening, we engage others. These limits of our senses are an opening onto the depth of the world and others and is therefore, a testament to the illusion of solipsism and to the emergent quality of the world that is more than me. For Merleau-Ponty, the enduring untouchability and limitation of our senses is the source of our own becoming and that of all the sensible world. He indicates that the intercorporeal relations of the sensible world is a domain that “extends further than the things I touch and see at present.”<sup>73</sup> Within the relations and exchange with others, in the opening or gap that resists collapse, is a latency, a possibility for yet more sense encounters and experience. The corporeal consanguinity of the sides of the self and the self and worldly other is not a superficial layer of “flesh.” Merleau-Ponty conveys the potent and emergent character of the flesh by insisting upon its *depth*.

### **Depth of Bodies**

Edward Casey elaborates on the depth inherent to Merleau-Ponty’s matrix. Casey says that “[u]nlike epidermal skin, flesh goes deeper into the corporeal self...it is more than skin deep and mediates between the inner self and the surrounding world.”<sup>74</sup> The world of the flesh is not a thin skin or a flimsy container. Instead of “an envelope or quale, a pellicle of being,” the flesh is between the qualia, connecting the exterior and interior sides of being.<sup>75</sup> Flesh has a depth that extends beyond perception and makes perception possible. In other words, the sensible is not exhaustive of the flesh. What we see and touch is but one expression of an “inexhaustible depth” of flesh, of being. Merleau-Ponty implies that the untouchability of being, the yet-to-be-disclosed-to-us expressions of the flesh, are not contrary to what we sense and encounter in the world. In fact, the depth of the flesh that recedes from the grasp of our senses, sustains, supports, and nourishes the world of the senses.

The chiasm between myself and other sensible beings is expressive of the depth of the flesh and the hiddenness of the flesh. As we discussed, there is always an incompleteness

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<sup>71</sup> VI 254

<sup>72</sup> VI 143

<sup>73</sup> VI 143

<sup>74</sup> Edward S. Casey, *Getting Back Into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1993) 210

<sup>75</sup> VI 131

between distinct beings. This incompleteness, this ‘blind spot’ or ‘stop gap’ is an openness where perception cannot itself penetrate because this is the region “where it unfolds.”<sup>76</sup> This gap suggests the pregnant depth of the flesh that is only gradually and incompletely revealed in our perception. We find the depth and the partial or gradual unfolding of the deep flesh as we relate through our senses with others. Through the chiasm of our sense encounters, we can peer into the horizon of the flesh which is the horizon of our own experience, our own knowledge, and our own becoming.

That the depth of the flesh is recognized in the hiddenness of the flesh may seem implausible. But it is in this space that I glimpse a stable, inexhaustible profound power that is beyond my own. To appreciate the power of worldly becoming, I must first acknowledge the limits of my own perception, perspective, and power. The limits of the self are most poignantly evident in the futile attempts to possess or comprehend others in the world. Others ultimately surpass our comprehension. Edward Casey observes that “to move near to something is to move into its depth.”<sup>77</sup> The closer we move towards an other, the more distant the vanishing point, the horizon of the other. This closeness, this proximity of distance assures us that others and the sensible world itself are more than being-perceived. Each encounter is then an expression of a deep and pregnant flesh. In Merleau-Ponty’s estimation, we never penetrate the full depths of an other or even of ourselves. We never bridge the chiasm of the flesh through our own power. We rely on a power, a being greater than our own to mediate the openness within and between being.<sup>78</sup> This mediating power or being remains shrouded in the hiddenness of the flesh.

The stop-gap within being is thought of as “the source or condition of all percipience...the unifying element” of Merleau-Ponty’s sense ontology.<sup>79</sup> He concludes that, if we can have sense encounters with other beings who remain distinct and at a distance, there is a shared element or being which is always already there connecting worldly beings. This element or Being, which is the flesh, sustains encounters in the world and unifies the two sides of my own flesh. Flesh is both the betweenness and also the expressions which arise through the betweenness of beings. Merleau-Ponty refers to the mediating and emergent flesh which holds the two sides of myself together, but is an open space to me, as a “hinge.” He explains that “it is only as though the

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<sup>76</sup> Cataldi 74

<sup>77</sup> Casey 66

<sup>78</sup> The chiasmic flesh has rich theological implications which are a topic for a future project.

hinge between them, solid unshakable remained irremediably hidden from me.”<sup>80</sup> As a hinge, a connective fiber, one deep enough to bridge the chiasm of being, one deeper than the visible world, the hiddenness of Being is present to us. The presence of the hiddenness is the possibility that it invites in and through us and the world. This depth of the flesh is an opening for becoming. Merleau-Ponty says that “[d]epth is open to me...I have this dimension so as to move my look in it, this openness.”<sup>81</sup> We are lured into this openness of our senses to glimpse, only partially, the dynamic depth that enlivens our own being. Indeed, a new type of being is revealed in our sense experience.

[I]t is a new type of being, a being by porosity, pregnancy, or generality, and he before whom the horizon opens is caught up, included within it. His body and the distances participate in one same corporeity or visibility in general, which reigns between them and it, and even beyond the horizon, beneath his skin, unto the depths of his being.<sup>82</sup>

This new being of the flesh is a corporeity and the depth of the world, beyond the horizon and beneath the skin pouring forth through the world. As not fully realized or revealed to a sensible being, this power of being is pregnant and ripe with potentiality that emerges in the hidden dynamic mediation of self and others.

The chiasmic body and worldly flesh is not a fixed entity. As is apparent in the account of exchange or reversibility of my body sensed and body sensing, the self is a site of exchange, a dynamic being. As a dynamic being, the body-self and the flesh of which it is exemplar, is continuously unfolding. Merleau-Ponty refers to corporeal relations as the ontogenesis of the body.<sup>83</sup> The emergence of the body-self is suggestive of the unfolding character of being. Using language of intercourse, pregnancy and birth, Merleau-Ponty further emphasizes the creative and potent quality of the world. He refers to sense encounters as one of profound bodily engagement

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<sup>79</sup> Cataldi 75

<sup>80</sup> VI 148

<sup>81</sup> VI 219

<sup>82</sup> VI 149

<sup>83</sup> VI 136

spurred by “the patient and silent labor of desire”:

For the first time, the body no longer couples itself up with the world, it clasps another body, applying [itself to it] carefully with its whole extension, forming tirelessly with its hands the strange statue which in its turn gives everything it receives; the body is lost outside of the world and its goals, fascinated by the unique occupation of floating in Being with another life, or making itself the outside of its inside and the inside of the outside.<sup>84</sup>

This description of sense encounters evoke the intensity and intimacy of sexual intercourse or orgasm in which two are ‘lost’ in one another. The term ‘coupling,’ and its French equivalent, has as a primary definition a ‘sexual union.’ Descriptions and terms of sexual union suggests not only the intimacy of sense encounters, but also intimate the possibilities for new life and new expression-- the creativity that lurks in such unions.

To further communicate the potentiality he discerns in the sensible world, Merleau-Ponty repeatedly refers to the pregnancy of sense relations and the birth that results. What we call the visible or the sensible is a quality that Merleau-Ponty describes as “pregnant” with depth. He is explicit about what pregnancy entails. Pregnancy of the flesh “means a power to break forth, productivity, fecundity.”<sup>85</sup> The actuality or visibility of the flesh allows the hiddenness of the flesh to unfold. Through the sensible world, new experiences of senses emerge and new possibilities are revealed. Merleau-Ponty says that the invisible is “borne” or emerges from the visible.

### **Transcendence in Bodies**

In the depth of the flesh, Merleau-Ponty offers a new understanding of transcendence. Transcendence is the promise that the deep, inexhaustible hidden flesh holds for new sense encounters, experience, and knowledge. When describing our encounters with an other, Merleau-Ponty comments that the other is “always in process of an unfinished incarnation.” The other and all others and the world itself are always emerging, always unfolding to our senses. Incarnation itself has a horizon structure.

By reinterpreting transcendence as the possibility and potentiality of an emergent sensible world, Merleau-Ponty conceives the world as corporeal infinity, an immanent transcendence.

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<sup>84</sup> VI 144

<sup>85</sup> VI 207

Infinity, for Merleau-Ponty is the depth of being which is always already there and always more than we experience or know. Merleau-Ponty argues that the Cartesians have attempted to ‘prove’ infinity. The followers of Descartes have attempted to formulate a positive or determinative notion of infinity, to circumscribe infinity within what is known.<sup>86</sup> According to Merleau-Ponty infinity can not be contained within thought, nor proved through thought because the infinite is the yet-to-be-sensed and therefore the yet-to-be-known. The chiasmic flesh is a philosophy, an ontology, that “cannot be total and active grasp, intellectual possession.”<sup>87</sup> The chiasmic flesh entails a “dispossession.”<sup>88</sup> Flesh, as dispossession, does not occlude infinity or transcendence. With the flesh, Merleau-Ponty offers an ontology of openness in which being is continually unfolded through the world. The transcendence that Merleau-Ponty’s flesh suggests is a “more-than” or “greater-than” what we sense and yet, it is not above or removed from the life of the senses--the physical and worldly experience. Instead, the transcendence of the flesh is beneath and behind the sensible world, it supports, yields and births sense experience. The world, for Merleau-Ponty, is the “sole explosion of being which is forever.”<sup>89</sup> Being is synonymous with flesh because being is revealed as the flesh. Without fleshly or sensible being would be entirely invisible. But flesh *is* revealed to us, if never completely, through our sense encounters. Merleau-Ponty considers eternity not as an eternal body for the body is not a fixed or reducible being; rather, the body is an enduring horizon towards the depth of eternal being.

Douglas Low explains that “for Merleau-Ponty, this transcendence of the world is only given within experience.”<sup>90</sup> Since we can never get “outside” of experience (of the body, its eyes, its hands...) to perceive the world, we necessarily experience the world through the human body.<sup>91</sup> Our rootedness in the world does not foreclose transcendence. As Low explains, “this (sense) experience opens out to a world that runs beyond it.”<sup>92</sup> Merleau-Ponty, therefore, places sensible beings and their knowledge squarely in the world while also preserving the dynamic and transcendent quality of existence. He directs us to acknowledge the depth of the world and

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<sup>86</sup> Duane H. Davis, “Introduction” in Duane H. Davis, ed., *Merleau-Ponty’s Later Works and Their Practical Implications: The Dehiscence of Responsibility* (Amherst, New York: Humanity Books, 2001)

<sup>87</sup> VI 266

<sup>88</sup> VI 266

<sup>89</sup> VI 265

<sup>90</sup> Low 24

<sup>91</sup> *ibid*

<sup>92</sup> *ibid*

transcendence of the senses. Transcendence and infinity are completely reconfigured with his notion of the flesh and no longer threaten the value and worth of the sensible world. If incarnation is an unfinished process, we can never possess or master it within our thought; rather our thought arises from incarnation and must attend to this source.

Merleau-Ponty's formulation of the transcendence of the flesh indicates that bodies and the senses do not confine and constrict us. According to his flesh ontology, the body and its senses provide an opening, not only for recognition of and empathy for others but also for an awareness of the irreducible depth of others and a responsiveness to yet- unfathomed expressions of being. Merleau-Ponty's conception of bodies can dramatically alter patterns of disregard and exploitation of bodies and those identified with them. Inherent in his flesh ontology is a high regard for bodies and a model for the ethical relations and flourishing of the body of the world. Most importantly, these possibilities for transforming relations are rooted in bodies and bodily relation.

## CHAPTER V

### 'FLESHING' OUT A RELATIONAL ETHIC

Any consideration of the ethical implications of Merleau-Ponty's writing must begin with an acknowledgment of his reservations about the project of ethics. While Merleau-Ponty said in his address to the College of France upon his candidacy to the faculty that he intended to adumbrate a practical philosophy,<sup>1</sup> he consistently rejected claims of certainty. His decision to change the title of his last manuscript from "Origin of Truth" to the *Visible and the Invisible*<sup>2</sup> attests to his resistance to absolute claims even as he formulated the "ontology" of the flesh. This avoidance of claims of absolute Truth or fixed moral rules does not negate the ethical significance of his work. Through the 'flesh,' Merleau-Ponty offers a description of sense encounters which can serve as general, normative understanding of the way we can and should best relate to other humans and the more-than-human world.

The contributions that Merleau-Ponty's work offers to ethical reflection is requisite to address the concerns of ecological feminists. Ecological feminists have been concerned to reverse the denigration of bodies, human and nonhuman. They have sought to articulate the interdependence of human and nonhuman being and to formulate a vision of flourishing; but many ecological feminists have been reluctant to embrace bodies as a source of knowledge, relation, and ethical potency because of their fears of gender essentialism or biological reductionism. Merleau-Ponty unabashedly embraces bodies as a ground of knowledge and relation. He appeals to the body and its senses as a source for recognizing the interdependence and shared flourishing of beings, human and non-human. Merleau-Ponty's philosophy has practical moral implications which correspond with the goals of ecological feminism. His account of bodies and senses can guide us toward: an affinity for bodies and for a wide community of beings; an appreciation for diversity and mutuality with different others; a resistance to absolutism; and an openness to creativity and becoming. And, most significantly, since he draws upon relations of the body and the sensible world as a source of diversity,

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<sup>1</sup> Davis 13

<sup>2</sup> Davis 13. See VI 165 note 1

creativity and transcendence, Merleau-Ponty removes the obstacles of gender dualism and bodily reduction that have plagued ecological feminist ethics.

### **Affinity and Care for Bodies**

Merleau-Ponty's assertion of the primacy of the body departs from a formidable pattern that ecological feminists identify in philosophical and religious thought: the disregard of and disdain for bodies. The voices of feminists and ecological scholars challenge mind-body dualism and the preference for the rational. Merleau-Ponty's study of the senses has potential for effecting an appreciation of and affinity for bodies.

Merleau-Ponty's earliest writings demonstrate an insistence on the primacy of bodies. By arguing that consciousness and knowledge originate in the body, Merleau-Ponty raises the moral status of our bodies. He calls attention to the importance of our bodies in knowing ourselves and our world. This prominence of bodies proffers guidance for an ethic of human relations. Bodies, no longer superfluous appendages of an all-important mental being, require our care.

One way that Merleau-Ponty heightens the significance of bodies is to reconcile subjectivity and objectivity as two sides of the same body. He rejects the assumption that the rational capacities of the subject are separate from the sensuality of an objective body. My body is both sensing and sensed, Merleau-Ponty concludes. Bodies touch and are touched. When I hug my daughter, I am both a body hugged and a body hugging. In sensible experience, we are implicated simultaneously as both sensing and sensed. A person is able to touch things because her hand is a touchable thing, Merleau-Ponty observes. He insists, therefore, that what others refer to as subjectivity and objectivity are intertwined in the one body. The sensing is rooted in the body, acts through the body, and knows through the body.

A central assertion in Merleau-Ponty's writing is that our bodies are the **only** means for going into the world. He also refers to the body as a "vehicle" of the world to emphasize that we come to know the world through our bodies. Implicit in his description of sense experience, is the impossibility of disembodied experience or knowledge. Even language and ideas originate in the sensible world and thereby emerge through the body.

Speech breaks forth from the sensual world. Merleau-Ponty offers an account of the gestural genesis of language that links all linguistic structures and meanings to the sensible world. He explains that gestures have expressive power even without the spoken word.<sup>3</sup> Speech is not a departure from the gestural roots, the “felt significance,”<sup>4</sup> of communication. Spoken words are themselves gestures and carnal phenomena. The tone and rhythm of our utterances carry meaning to others. Speech always has a shape and sound; hence, there is always a carnal quality to our speech. Abram explains that, for Merleau-Ponty, communication is born of our body’s resonance with other bodies.<sup>5</sup> Merleau-Ponty states very plainly that “it is the body that speaks.”<sup>6</sup> Speech “germinates” in the body and “this great mute land which we never leave” and it is only as a secondary layer of language that abstract or ideal thought is formed.

Merleau-Ponty directly challenges the contention that meaning is constituted by the categories of language and thought. He says that meaning “emanates from the perceived world” and that all possibilities of language is already given in the “mute” world.<sup>7</sup> Speech and language systems develop and words begin to carry referential and conceptual levels of meaning, but they never lose the affective quality of all utterances. Ideas and conceptual meaning, through the body and its utterances, are always bound to carnality.<sup>8</sup> Merleau-Ponty argues that the ideal of thought without and/or disconnected from the sensible world is a result of our taking speech for granted and forgetting its carnal origins. As a reminder that speech and language arise from the sensible world, Abram describes how children enter into language: they make sounds and mimic their surrounding soundscapes.<sup>9</sup> Though speech loses sight of itself and its origins and tends to rest on itself as an ideal or conceptual system, Merleau-Ponty insists that all conceptual and abstract significance of language is derived from the gestural or bodily significance of speech.

Thought’s debt to the body is unquestionable in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy. He explains that thought has its “seed” in the body.<sup>10</sup> Thought is one’s relationship with oneself as a

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<sup>3</sup> PhP 184

<sup>4</sup> Abram 78

<sup>5</sup> Abram 79

<sup>6</sup> PhP 197

<sup>7</sup> VI 155

<sup>8</sup> Dillon 217

<sup>9</sup> Abram 75

<sup>10</sup> VI 145

body sensed and sensing as well as the bodily relationship with the world and others.<sup>11</sup> Each and every thought known to us occurs in the flesh, Merleau-Ponty argues.<sup>12</sup> We can think only because we are able to **feel**.

If the “subjective,” reflective, or conceptual capacities that are such celebrated aspects of humankind are inseparable from and dependent upon the body, then westerners must reevaluate the denigration of the physical. A renewed appreciation for the primacy of bodies can, at the very least, undermine the negative connotations of sensuality and active destruction of carnal beings. Ecological feminists argue that the oppression of certain groups of people is justified by carnal associations of these groups. Enduring western images of woman include that of temptress, seducing men to succumb to carnal pleasures, and that of a wild force which must be tamed. Africans, Caribbean Islanders, Native Americans and other peoples have been depicted as primitive and beastly, according to ecological feminist analysis. Associations with animality and physicality have been invoked to legitimate the disruption of complex cultures and the enslavement of millions upon millions of persons. Disrupting the negative connotations of carnality is an obvious initial step toward delegitimizing the deliberate harm of bodies; but by granting primacy to the body, Merleau-Ponty makes even more substantial strides in effecting a new attitude toward bodies.

The body, in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, has value. Even though he does not explicitly develop a moral system of value, Merleau-Ponty describes the primary role of the body in knowing the world. Bodies are sources of knowledge. This knowledge is always partial, but it is the only means of understanding. We have no other means of experiencing or knowing than through our bodies. Concepts are formed through the body and its relations. Bodies, as a source and origin from which knowledge springs, bring expression and make contributions in the world. With his recognition of the positive worth and contributions of bodies, Merleau-Ponty implies not only that harm to bodies should be avoided, but also that bodies are to be protected. His phenomenology can lead the human community toward a renewed responsibility and responsiveness to the vulnerable bodies of the very young and aged and of bodies that hunger, that bleed, that writhe with pain, and cry in agony. When we acknowledge, as Merleau-Ponty does, that bodies are not incidental, but fundamental, to the people that we are and the ideas we

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<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*

create, we can no longer posit a pure spiritual or mental being which soars freely from its starving, weary body or the suffering bodies of others.

Simone Weil, a philosopher who lived and worked among impoverished workers, conveys the suffusion of suffering which wounds the whole of a bodily being with the French term *malheur*. *Malheur* expresses the profound and permanent mark which physical pain inflicts upon the deepest reaches of the self. English approximations of this term, translators of Weil's work admit, are too weak to communicate the depth of the suffering that Weil explicates. Translators have used the English word "affliction."

Affliction is an uprooting of life, a more or less attenuated equivalent of death, made irresistibly present to the soul by the attack or immediate apprehension of physical pain.<sup>13</sup>

The potential for suffuse suffering, which Weil admits with *malheur*, can be recognized within Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of the body. Since bodies are fundamental to the self, intense and persistent bodily suffering effects a fundamental wound upon a being (and the being of others as we will see). Merleau-Ponty's work raises the priority of addressing the needs and responding to the misery of aching bodies. If we in the western world were guided by his work, we would attach urgency to the care and comfort of bodies, particularly those who endure the most profound and penetrating pain in our world. We would not turn away from the disease and desperate hunger that imperils so many bodies. The world in which bodies, all bodies are immersed would require more care, as well.

For Merleau-Ponty, the primacy of the body is based on its embeddedness in the world. The body, as that which is sensed, is enfolded or woven together with others in the sensible world. Each bodied being participates in the world. Woven together with others through the body, our body places us in contact and enables sense encounters with these others. The enfolded body is then our opening to the world only because it is "of the world." Merleau-Ponty observes that when we see things or touch things, we are ourselves part of the sensible. David Abram explains that, for Merleau-Ponty, it is impossible to even imagine a sensible experience that would not at the same time involve our own sentience **and** our situatedness in a field of

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<sup>12</sup> VI 146

<sup>13</sup> Simone Weil, *Waiting for God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951) 118

sensed phenomena for “we implicate our own senses, and indeed our own sentience” from **within** that field.<sup>14</sup>

Our paradoxical being, a body sensed and a sensing body, is lodged in the world in a particular context but is ultimately linked to each and every other being. We are embedded with others in the world. From Merleau-Ponty’s emphasis on the worldly embeddedness of each of us, one can easily conclude that all beings are interdependent with one another. The shared world of his phenomenology implies a shared flourishing as well. If the subjectivity of each is “bound up with that of the body and that of the world,” then the suffering or flourishing of one is inseparably tied to that of others, both far and near.<sup>15</sup> Merleau-Ponty raises the status of bodies, and he extends the spread of bodies. My body is inseparably bound with the bodies of others, even far distant others for we are all part of one body--the world. Therefore, caring for me and those close to me is inseparably bound up with caring for others. The flourishing of one involves the flourishing of all.

The implications of Merleau-Ponty’s embedded self for moral agency and responsibility are clear. Self-interest, a tightly circumscribed realm of responsibility to family and friends, and even an exclusive concern for the human community is antithetical to our situation of embeddedness and our interdependence with all bodied beings. Further, we do not have absolute freedom to determine or restrict our connections with others.<sup>16</sup> To choose to seek the flourishing of only a small circle of the worlds beings is necessarily a choice to neglect or exploit other beings. He insists that “the whole of nature is the setting of our own life, or our interlocutor in a sort of dialogue.”<sup>17</sup> If, as Merleau-Ponty asserts our sense perception relies on and reveals extensive interweaving with others in the world, then we are always already thrust into relation with the world’s beings. We are always already in a situation where we can either contribute to or harm the flourishing of others.

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<sup>14</sup> Abram 66

<sup>15</sup> PhP 408

<sup>16</sup> While the moral agent in the ‘flesh ontology’ does not have absolute freedom, freedom is fundamental to moral agency. For a helpful discussion of human freedom in Merleau-Ponty’s writings, see John J. Compton, “Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and Human Freedom,” *Journal of Philosophy* 22 (1982): 577-588. For discussion of the enduring issue of freedom in philosophy see John J. Compton, “The Persistence of the Problem of Freedom,” *Review of Metaphysics* (forthcoming)

<sup>17</sup> PhP 320

Merleau-Ponty himself acknowledges the ethical significance of a primordial connection with others. This acknowledgment comes in his discussion of infant development. He refers, in his discussion of infant sense perception, to a state of “initial communion.” This “initial communion” is a phase during which the infant identifies completely with others: self and other are not yet distinct identities. Merleau-Ponty argues that conscious life begins with this communion with others and that the earliest conscious life is a collective life.<sup>18</sup> Out of this collective existence, a child develops an awareness of his or her distinctiveness. We are ushered into self-recognition by first perceiving others and their recognition of us. But even as we make the transition to self-consciousness, the initial communion is not dissolved. Merleau-Ponty argues that adult sympathy is based on the initial sympathy of the infant. The primordial communion is a fount from which ethical sensibilities flow.

In his last manuscript, Merleau-Ponty elaborates upon the primordial communion evident in his earlier writings and begins to refer to the communion or commonality of beings as ‘flesh.’ The communion of the ‘flesh’ is the kinship of all beings in the sensible world. Merleau-Ponty’s ethical contributions become even more palpable with his articulation of the flesh. First of all, his use of “flesh” unequivocally asserts the significance of bodies. “Flesh” is the tissue of the body that is sensed by others. When he refers to the commonality of beings with this term, he is referring specifically to their bodiliness and their worldliness as that which binds them. We need only think of common phrases such as “flesh and blood” or “flesh and bones” to recognize the earthiness implicit in the word “flesh.” With “flesh,” Merleau-Ponty boldly asserts the significance of the sensible world.

Secondly, Merleau-Ponty describes the “flesh” as an ontological element. His final writing about the communion of beings moves beyond a description of the origins of infant sense experience and self-understanding. With the “flesh,” he describes the formative and enduring communion of all beings. His ontology is not an exhaustive account of Being itself,<sup>19</sup> but is a “general” description of beings in the sensible world and is thereby inclusive of all sensible beings. Merleau-Ponty suggests in his earlier discussion of infant development that the bodily communion of beings endures (from childhood through adulthood) and becomes a basis of adult

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<sup>18</sup> See discussion of infant development in chapter three.

<sup>19</sup> Merleau-Ponty maintains with the hiddenness or invisibility of the flesh that we can never offer an exhaustive account of being. We can never comprehend Being itself.

sympathy. By developing an ontology of the flesh, Merleau-Ponty indicates more clearly the formative and enduring nature of the communion of beings. Flesh as the common “element” of each and every being continually undergirds all of the sensible world. Whether or not, Merleau-Ponty recognizes the commonality and connectedness of all beings in his earlier writings, by the time he formulates the flesh ontology he has an expansive understanding of the communion of beings. When he refers to the others with whom we participate in the flesh, he uses the radically world-inclusive term “visibles.”<sup>20</sup> The ‘visibles’ include all beings in the sensed world. Each part of the world, including non-human entities, has a sensible or visible side that is capable of being sensed. While the flesh even spills over into what Merleau-Ponty calls the ‘invisible,’ it binds all visibles together. The human community is bound to all beings in the flesh. My body is continuous with all of the natural world. As a consequence of the comprehensiveness of the encompassing flesh, affinity, sympathy and familial bonds and the ethical responsibilities inherent to those bonds extend beyond the borders of the human community. Rather than defining ourselves over and against non-human beings, humans are identified with all beings in the world.

Along with the inclusive vision of connectedness that Merleau-Ponty offers in the “flesh,” he provides a vision of the nature of connection that is ethically suggestive. Merleau-Ponty describes the ontology of the flesh as a kinship of beings. Through the flesh, I am linked to other beings as members of a family. Merleau-Ponty does not specify the exact nature of the familial connection, but he says that an affinity exists among beings. Affinity refers to both a sympathy and a likeness for Merleau-Ponty. He discerns a fellow feeling, fondness and compassion inherent in our relatedness with others. The connection or communion is ethically and emotionally-potent: our connection with others promotes in us a feeling for and with others. Other worldly beings, according to this view of affinity and kinship of beings, are those to whom we can and should be compassionate, protective, devoted, and nurturing.

The importance of bodies, the body of the world and the bodies of self and others can not be denied in Merleau-Ponty’s sense phenomenology and flesh ontology. Bodies have value: bodies are the basis for sense perception and understanding; our body serves as an opening to the world and others; the bodies of others inspire our own development; the body of the world

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<sup>20</sup> He also includes that which is invisible or not yet visible.

enfolds us. From the primacy of bodies, we can conclude that bodies deserve consideration in ethics. We have a responsibility to bodies and the body of the earth. Also, bodies influence ethics. Our body which interweaves with the world and all others indicates the scope of the ethical community, it is the worldly community (and perhaps more). The structure of our bodies also indicates how we are to respond to others: the flesh implies new ethical responsibilities. Therefore, the collective flesh in which we are enfolded is both our inherent capacity for compassion and care **and** a basis for alternative ethical formulations. The connectedness into which we are always interwoven and through which we sense and understand can inform how we live with, sympathize with and care for others.

### **Intercorporeal Flesh as a Normative Mutuality**

“The truly social self is the mutual self”<sup>21</sup>

Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of the body restores the value, and even prominence, to bodies and their care and his “flesh” ontology also specifies a pattern for moral relations. The ethics which can be “fleshed” out from Merleau-Ponty’s is a relational ethics. Relational ethics vary, but this ethical approach generally involves a relational understanding of the self. The solipsistic or isolated understanding of the ethical subject is rejected in favor of a subject who is affected by and responsible to others. Relational ethics also highlights a being’s situation or context. As relational beings, our perspective and ethical responsibilities depend on the relationships in which we are embedded. These responsibilities are not uniform, but differ in various contexts. Relational ethics can be distinguished from deontological ethics that emphasize the moral subjects dutiful intentions. Relational ethics are not concerned exclusively with dutiful intentions or a fixed end, but with the flourishing of relationships and the beings involved in those relationships.<sup>22</sup> Even though relational ethics is not directed toward a fixed end, certain norms or values help to assess the quality of relationships and flourishing. For

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<sup>21</sup> Plumwood 159

<sup>22</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr in his essay “The Center of Value” explicates what a relational ethics entails. He explains that the goodness or rightness of relation is a matter of its goodness or rightness for the beings directly involved--the fittingness of being to being and their potentialities. The rightness of relationship also have value for other beings. According to Niebuhr goodness is always a relational or social good. He says “It is highly questionable for me whether we can call virtues good in the self apart from their goodness for other self or for the community of selves.” H. Richard Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Cultures* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1960) 105

ecological feminists, mutuality is a prevailing norm.<sup>23</sup> Mutuality is also central to Merleau-Ponty's account of the flesh. With his analysis of sensible beings as relational beings in mutual exchange with others, Merleau-Ponty indicates that mutuality is both possible and fundamental to the existence and experience of fleshly beings. His discussion of mutuality in the flesh reinforces and elaborates upon mutuality as an ethical norm.

One of the ways that Merleau-Ponty highlights mutuality as a central aspect of my flourishing and the flourishing of all beings is to articulate the mutuality inherent to the self. In his account of sense perception, he describes the fundamental relationality of the self. Each sentient being is composed of two layers or sides. Perception or sense experience occurs when the sensing and the sensed sides of a being exchange or fold over on one another. At the heart of the self is an interweaving or intertwining of the layers of the flesh. The experiencing self, he insists, can neither be reduced to the sensed body that we glimpse in the mirror nor the sensing body which sees. We experience a mutuality of the sensed and the sensing: the sensed and sensing sides co-mingle and cooperate to form a self.

The self, as comprised of the mutual exchange between its sensing and sensed sides, requires this mutuality in order to flourish. Merleau-Ponty claims that the body unites the two properties of sensing and sensed within itself and that "each calls for the other."<sup>24</sup> The touching of self needs the touched. The two sides of the self enliven and invigorate one another. Merleau-Ponty insists that there must be a reciprocal relationship between my initiation to touch and my body as an opening upon the tactile world. He explains:

Through this crisscrossing within it (the bodied self) of the touching and the tangible, its own movements incorporate themselves into the universe they interrogate, are recorded on the same map as it; the two systems applied upon one another, as the two halves of an orange.<sup>25</sup>

It is Merleau-Ponty's claim that the reciprocity of the two sides of the self are integral to all the senses and all experience. His illustration of a meeting of two circles, two vortexes, or two spheres helps to communicate the opening of the differentiated sides of the self onto one another. Based on his discussion of the intertwining of the sides and the illustrations he offers, we can easily conclude that the identity and understanding of the self emerge primarily in the relation or

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<sup>23</sup> See discussion of ecological feminism in chapters one and two.

<sup>24</sup> VI 137

<sup>25</sup> VI 133

intermingling of the two sides of the self. Without the mutuality of the sensing and the sensed, the self would be incomplete-- as a globe with only one hemisphere would be incomplete. Mutual relations are consistent with our flourishing. It is our capacity for mutuality that enables the emergence of self-identity, experience, reflection and creativity.

Mutuality also exists between the flesh of myself and the flesh of the world. Each body is an open-circuit that requires relations with others in the world. Douglas Low indicates how different Merleau-Ponty's relational self differs from a self-referential, solipsistic self. Merleau-Ponty's subject, Low explains, "is not primarily the reflective subject that intellectually constructs all meaning...[t]he subject is primarily the lived bodily subject that opens out to, that stretches out to the world, others, and the past from which it is centered in the body."<sup>26</sup> Low emphasizes that Merleau-Ponty describes a self "formed only in relationships." His image of the body stretching out to the world and others captures a central claim of Merleau-Ponty's relational ontology: we need others. For Merleau-Ponty, the dependence is reciprocal: others need us as we need them. He describes the flesh, and every part of the flesh, as an 'intercorporeality,' where the landscapes of each interweave with one another. Who we become is the result of continual exchanges with others. Our thriving depends on the thriving of others. And the flourishing of the flesh requires that different worldly beings continually enrich, nurture, and sustain one another.

For mutuality to be sustained, different beings must refrain from seeking to possess or control others. Mutuality, as defined by ecological feminists, is a relation in which the well-being or flourishing of both partners is advanced. The good or flourishing of one partner is not sacrificed for the sake of an other in a mutual relation. And, no being is valued merely as a means for the good or flourishing of another. As a particular form of a care ethic, an ethic of mutuality attracts ecological feminists because it avoids the dangers of some formulations of a care ethic. Plumwood argues, for instance that care can sometimes become a self-sacrificing or paternalistic form of care in which the dignity and integrity of one partner is diminished.<sup>27</sup> Ecological feminists contend that self-sacrificing and paternalistic care are other forms of domination that subordinates the will, the identity, and the flourishing of one partner under the

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<sup>26</sup> Low 90

<sup>27</sup> See chapter two.

others. Mutuality, as an ethical norm, resists the control, manipulation, or possession of one partner by the other. Mutuality entails a dispossessive posture towards an other.

The dispossession of sense encounters is elaborated in Merleau-Ponty's discussion of the chiasm of the flesh. The chiasm, as detailed in chapter three, is the site of intertwining. If we experience ourselves as a relation of body sensed by others *and* as body sensing, Merleau-Ponty theorizes that our flesh-- our being--must have a space in which these two sides of self can exchange. When we exchange with the world and other beings, a space of worldly intertwining must be present as well. This space or opening that facilitates relation is the chiasm. Our various senses have a chiasm in which they intermingle as do the sides of ourselves, the body sensed and the body sensing, and a chiasm spans the opening between myself and the world. The chiasm, or chiasms, makes possible a relation that is truly reciprocal-- that involves both partners and is never fully possessed by or reduced to one partner. The chiasm is a space that is not occupied or identified with one being, or one side of being. Merleau-Ponty has described flesh or being as "intercorporeal" which suggests that one being is not subsumed by another in corporeal relations. We meet others in the chiasm, in the opening between the self and other. Sense encounters require the opening and extension of ourselves out (or across) toward the other. We must give ourselves over to the other, but this giving is not a sacrifice of self or a submission to the domination by an other. The other too must exhibit an openness. Merleau-Ponty maintains that the body "gives everything it receives."<sup>28</sup> Mutuality then is a mutual dispossession that enriches both.

The flesh, according to Merleau-Ponty, is a chiasmic flesh which means that the spaces or openings within and between beings, are elemental. The gaps are never overcome. Merleau-Ponty claims that sense experience attests to the persistence of these gaps in our perception. We never reach perceptual coincidence within ourselves or with others. There is always more to experience, always more than we know to ourselves, others and the world. The chiasm of the flesh is not a deterrent or hindrance to sense encounters. In fact, the chiasm of the flesh *enables* our sense encounters.

Each sensible or fleshly being has a chiasm between the sensing and sensed sides of itself. In this opening the two sides exchange and the various senses intermingle. It is this exchange,

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<sup>28</sup> VI 144

that Merleau-Ponty calls perception and it is the opening which allows the exchange. He clearly asserts that the chiasm is not an emptiness, but the unfolding of sense experience. The chiasm is one of the most ethically-significant aspects of Merleau-Ponty's flesh.

The openness that Merleau-Ponty discerns within and between beings defies the domination of one by an other. A distance or opening between my body sensed and body sensing and between myself and other allows me to encounter others but ensures that I can never be reduced to the status of object or possession by an other. His insistence on the presence of a chiasm of the senses reinforces the reciprocity and the dispossession that lies at the heart of his account of sense perception. The chiasm is necessary to his account of sense experience because sense perception is not the act of an isolated self. The self must be in relation with others in order to perceive and therefore the self must have an opening through which to encounter. The chiasm of the flesh is the gateway for otherness and encounter that is present within each worldly being. The presence of the chiasm means that I am never a self-enclosed entity and that my encounter with something other does not entail my taking possession of it for my own.

Especially, in his discussion of the chiasm, the potential of Merleau-Ponty's flesh for reconceptualizing human relations becomes clear. Every fleshly being has a chiasm which allows the interweaving of our senses and which enables perpetual perceptual openness to others. Since the chiasm is a place of crossing over between self and world, this space is also a boundary of self and world. But the boundary is a bridge which allows relation. Therefore, the chiasm even as it enables an encounter and exchange with others in the world, ensures that the integrity and the distinctiveness of what I call 'me.' Because of the chiasm, relations with others can be mutual and marked by dispossession. I meet the other in my openness, which is also my boundary. Similarly, the other encounters me through her opening, which is also her boundary. Sense relations do not violate the boundaries of self or others. As a permeable boundary through which self and other exchange, the chiasm secures the boundaries of each and eschews relations of domination.

M.C. Dillon, in his extensive explorations of Merleau-Ponty's work has noted the ethical connotations of primordial kinship of the flesh and the dispossession of the chiasm. Dillon claims that Merleau-Ponty articulates the basic truth that is obscured by the "polemics of solipsism." This truth, according to Dillon, allows "love between human beings" to become

“philosophically conceivable for the first time because --for the first time in the history of Western ontology--it allows us to understand how it is possible for human beings to recognize each other as such and develop at a personal level the pre-personal communion that is our birthright.”<sup>29</sup> J. Patrick Burke also sees the communion and dispossession of the flesh as a breakthrough in moral thought. He says the Merleau-Ponty has made the “moral power” of a suffering child’s face intelligible by emphasizing *both* the irreducibility of being and the connections among beings in the chiasmic flesh.

The child is never merely on the side of the object and consequently cannot be reduced to a mere instrumentality of power or be discarded as we would a tumor or a tooth. She turns back upon me structurally the same gaze, the same luminous rays in which I caught her, and she asks that I see myself through her eyes...[h]er face calls me to that state of vulnerability which is the condition of all true loving.<sup>30</sup>

Through the flesh, Merleau-Ponty articulates the capacity of beings to communicate with one another and to recognize one another’s irreducible moral worth. This capacity is our potential for being stirred, affected, inspired, and changed by other beings.

### **Complexity of the Flesh as Normative Diversity**

Merleau-Ponty’s exploration of sense experience reveals that ‘selfhood’ is not a demarcation of a simple and autonomous entity. Instead, the self is a site of relation between dual aspects or sides and the self flourishes through intercorporeal encounters. This revision of the self as elementally open and reciprocally involved with others is an ethically-potent reinterpretation. The rigid separation of the human being from other human persons, the natural world and other non-human species is impossible to maintain if the self is no longer singular and closed.<sup>31</sup>

That the self is a continual and complex exchange between one body and the bodies of others implies that we not only can, but *must* encounter different others. The self as an intertwining of modalities ignited by contact with other bodies is diminished when the senses are

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<sup>29</sup> Dillon 129

<sup>30</sup> J. Patrick Burke, “The Moral Power of the Face of a Child” in Davis 302. Burke contrasts Merleau-Ponty’s emphasis on both communion and difference in the flesh with Emmanuel Levinas’ focus on absolute difference. Burke finds Merleau-Ponty’s account a more adequate description of our moral responsiveness.

dulled by isolation and seclusion. A mutuality exists between me and other. If I dismiss or disregard encounters by erecting barricades along lines of difference, I effectively damage myself for I am constituted by differentiation and exchange. The interdependence and mutuality of Merleau-Ponty's flesh dispels the philosophical bifurcation of the world and thrusts humans into encounters with a world of diversity. His flesh is a vision across the boundaries of human-nonhuman separation. Such a vision is crucial to ecological consideration, according to Paul Shephard.

Ecological thinking...requires a kind of vision across boundaries. The epidermis of the skin is ecologically like a pond surface or a forest soil, not a shell so much as a delicate interpenetration. It reveals the self ennobled and extended, rather than threatened.<sup>32</sup>

As Shephard articulates, ecological concern, and hence ecological ethics, begins with the recognition that we, though different, are sites of exchange and are strengthened by relations with the more-than-human world. When we begin to see the self as that which is formed and flourishes with and through others, human and nonhuman, we can realize that we can and must advance mutual flourishing. Even as Merleau-Ponty advances a recognition of mutual flourishing, he does not lose sight of difference and diversity.

Difference is integral to the self, as explicated in Merleau-Ponty's work. Each fleshly being is constituted by difference. A duality of reciprocal sides, a multitude of senses, and a partner in mutual exchange with otherness, the self is not threatened by diversity. Instead, we are nurtured by diversity and threatened by its absence. Merleau-Ponty's later works recommends an appreciation of different others.

Merleau-Ponty's writings on infant development emphasize the role of different others in integrating our senses and forming a sense of self. He refers to the reliance of the young child on the bodies of others to develop a complete picture of her own body. Merleau-Ponty cites studies by Wallon that describe an infant's early inability to integrate the parts of her body into a whole and also to distinguish between her body and those of others.<sup>33</sup> By watching, touching and interacting with the bodies of others, the child gradually learns that her body can be sensed by

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<sup>31</sup> The theme of the intertwining of human with the rest of nature is one that Merleau-Ponty was developing in *The Visible and the Invisible*, as evident from his notes and outlines. See VI 267 and 274 where Merleau-Ponty outlines ideas of Nature and of "man-animality" intertwining.

<sup>32</sup> Cheney 127 quoted from Holmes Rolston III, "Is There an Ecological Ethic?" in *Environmental Ethics* 85 (1975): 104

others and that multiple perspectives can be taken on her. I am able to perceive my body as *my* body only by perceiving it in relation to other bodies and other things that are not me.<sup>34</sup> The awareness of oneself as a body-sensed is the recognition that she is different from her parents and others. The recognition of different others is the simultaneous with the recognition of oneself as a distinct self. Again, different others usher us into selfhood.<sup>35</sup>

Another developmental milestone, that is related with the emergence of self awareness, is the ability to integrate different parts of oneself into a whole. In his essay about the child's relations with others, Merleau-Ponty describes the role of different others in facilitating this integration. Merleau-Ponty, again referring to Wallon's studies, explains that children rely on others to gain an understanding of their body as a unified entity. After six months of age, Merleau-Ponty claims, children scrutinize the parts of other bodies and systematically relate to his or her self "the different things (s)he has learned about the other's body from looking."<sup>36</sup> Only after a child sees the bodies of others as a distinct whole does she come to understand her own body and self as a unified whole.

The dehiscence of the self and the multitude of senses is another aspect of the difference and diversity that is fundamental to the sensing self. Perception, according to Merleau-Ponty's characterization, is a dehiscence or 'splitting open' of the self. Perception is possible because of what Merleau-Ponty calls the "reversibility" or transitivity between two sides of the same self. Perception occurs as one side of the self exchanges with the other. In the divergence and splitting open of the perceiving self, Merleau-Ponty denies a monolithic selfhood or subjectivity. He argues that the self is not a sole consciousness, but is always diversified, always more than one.

The reversibility of the two sides of the self sustains even further complexity. Merleau-Ponty describes the exchange of the two-sided flesh as an openness through which diverse senses interweave. The exchange is a synergy of multiple senses and reflects the "fundamental polymorphism" of the self.<sup>37</sup> Various senses cooperate and intermingle in perception. Merleau-

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<sup>33</sup> See chapter four

<sup>34</sup> Dillon 123

<sup>35</sup> Difference is so central to the development of the self that Merleau-Ponty intimates that the unbounded self, for whom the self expands and includes everything into itself, is no self at all. See CRO 134

<sup>36</sup> CRO 125

<sup>37</sup> VI 224

Ponty refutes any notion that the senses can be isolated: objects call upon all of the senses not just one.<sup>38</sup> The body/self is a “synergic totality” rather than a simple or singular being. We are each a “cluster” of sense consciousness.<sup>39</sup>

Another indication of the importance of diversity in Merleau-Ponty’s work is his insistence of multiple perspectives. He understands that sense perception is an experience from a particular situation, place, and time. There is no such thing as disembodied percipience. He observes that the body takes us into the world and comments that the body marks out a place in the world for the sensing self to occupy. Since we only perceive through the body, we only perceive from the location or place in which our bodies are embedded. Merleau-Ponty’s work deals most specifically with location in terms of physical space; however, his phenomenological body self is also a being who is continually integrating past and present experiences. The implication is that each being has a particular location or perspective which is distinctively shaped by not only physical space, but also past experiences and expressions.

Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of language helps to illumine the way that a current perspective or meaning is shaped by past expressions. He says that each of us begins to understand the meaning of words through their place in a context of action and communal life. Every local language “conveys its own teachings” and “carries its own meaning into the listener’s mind.”<sup>40</sup> As an expressive process, speech settles into a sediment and constitutes an acquisition for use in a communal context.<sup>41</sup>

This sedimentation is the result of previous acts of speech and will itself alter “the very expressive activity” it guides.<sup>42</sup> Through sedimentation, language organizes and structures meaning within a communal context. When we learn a language, which we do by mimicking or echoing the “inflections and accents common to our own locale and community,” we inherit a certain “style” or set of meanings.<sup>43</sup> Dillon explains how language brings past expressions to bear on present meanings: “Since we are born into a world of instituted language, we find the perceptual world already structured, organized, laden with meaning.”<sup>44</sup> Even given the

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<sup>38</sup> PhP 318

<sup>39</sup> VI 141-2

<sup>40</sup> PhP 179

<sup>41</sup> PhP 190

<sup>42</sup> Abram 84

<sup>43</sup> Abram 75; PhP 179

<sup>44</sup> Dillon 194

organizing and structuring power of past expression, the present context is not entirely determined by the past. In *Signs*, Merleau-Ponty explains that “language is not like a prison we are locked into or a guide we must follow blindly.”<sup>45</sup> The sedimentation of language does not disallow new expression. In fact, Merleau-Ponty celebrates creative language or fresh expression that convey “novel or elusive” meaning.<sup>46</sup>

The particular style of expression and structure of meaning through which we learn to speak (and within which we have some freedom to introduce new expressions or meaning) is but one locale, one communal life among others: “every language conveys its own teaching.”<sup>47</sup> Along with the diversity of soundscapes or “particular ways of singing the world”<sup>48</sup> in Merleau-Ponty’s theory of language, a multiplicity of perspectives is apparent in his account of the cognitive development of the child. In “The Child’s Relations with Others,” Merleau-Ponty indicates that different perspectives enable a child to develop a sense of self. When the child realizes that different perspectives can be taken on her--that she can be an object for others, she gains an awareness of herself as a distinct being. The germ of selfhood then is the awareness of multiple perspectives. Rather than threatening a burgeoning sense of self, the perspectives of various others contribute to it.

Throughout his sense phenomenology and in his final work on the chiasmic flesh, Merleau-Ponty contends that each sensing being has only a partial and incomplete view or sense of others and the world. We never are able to see or touch an other being in its entirety. Even with respect to ourselves, our senses fail to comprehend our full being. We can see and touch some parts of our body, but not all. We can not see our faces, which many consider to be the most expressive part of our body, for ourselves. A mirror can aid our senses, but even with a full-length mirror, sides of our body remain obscured. Details elude the most careful observation and we find that there is always more to see, touch, taste, smell and hear. Both the particularity of our sense experience and the incomplete quality of sense encounters attest to the variety of perspectives. The world and its beings are too vast and multi-dimensional for our senses to completely comprehend. There are many different perspectives that can and have been taken and many other perspectives left to be taken.

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<sup>45</sup> *Signs* 81. He also explains that “[s]igns do not simply evoke other signs for us and so on without end”

<sup>46</sup> Dillon 218

<sup>47</sup> PhP 179

The acknowledgment and embrace of a fundamental diversity and multiplicity is suggestive for ethics, especially for ecological ethics. First of all the difference is not a basis for opposition in Merleau-Ponty's work. Each self is comprised of difference and the different sides of the self are reciprocally engaged with one another. The multiple senses also cooperate and collaborate to form a unified percipience. Merleau-Ponty's work goes beyond merely describing a self as diversely constituted; he describes a harmony and symmetry of the multiple senses. With this account of sensing beings, Merleau-Ponty undermines the assumption that difference is threatening to a self or a community. Different others need not be shunned, resisted, or dominated in order to protect the self or a communal identity. In fact, he implies that difference and diversity should be welcomed, that it is within difference that identity is forged.<sup>49</sup> M.C. Dillon notes the ontological importance of Merleau-Ponty's account of "identity-within-difference."

The ontological significance of this identity-within-difference needs to be stressed. Coincidence in self-perception is one of the grounds for the traditional isolation of the epistemological subject: it provides the basis for the theses of incorrigibility of first person experience and transparency in the sphere of immanence which lead to the radical bifurcation of interiority and exteriority or consciousness and thing/Other/world... The only way to evade the trap of the polarizations of dualism is to take up the standpoint, adopted by Merleau-Ponty, of a fundamentally ambiguous identity-encompassing-difference.<sup>50</sup>

The "identity-within-difference" is certainly an ontological breakthrough which disrupts the bifurcation of inside and outside or self and other and this, in turn, is an ethical breakthrough. Merleau-Ponty describes a unity of the self which does not exclude what is other. Otherness is integral to the self: there is the otherness of the two-sides, the otherness of worldly beings which continually traverse my body and its senses, the otherness of the diverse senses, and the otherness of what is not yet known or sensed. With this interpretation of the self, Merleau-Ponty removes otherness as an obstacle for concern, compassion, and appreciation of others and otherness. If we begin to acknowledge diversity inherent to our own identities and flourishing, we will begin

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<sup>48</sup> Abram 75

<sup>49</sup> Low argues that Merleau-Ponty asserts what has to be one of the earliest expressions of multiculturalism. Low refers to Merleau-Ponty's call to attend to the diversity of language in *Signs*, but the same claims can be made of his other works. Low 92-93

<sup>50</sup> Dillon 159

to acknowledge a capacity and necessity for reaching out to diverse others. Difference can become a basis for bringing diverse others together rather than something that separates beings.

Merleau-Ponty's description of the opaqueness of the self and other indicates how the "identity-within-difference" facilitates ethical recognition and compassion among different beings. According to Merleau-Ponty the self always has a degree of opaqueness even to itself. He says that "we are bodies, but we are more also: I am not transparent to myself, as I would necessarily be were I only a *cogito*."<sup>51</sup> The opaqueness of the self is an aspect of its inherent differentiation. The sensing side is never completely coincident with the sensed side. They always exchange, but never collapse. Because of the opaqueness or differentiation of the self, the opaqueness of the other is not a barrier but a site of recognition and kinship. Dillon explains that, for Merleau-Ponty, we do not experience the other's body as our own, but that we recognize a similar opaqueness: "I am opaque to myself as he is to me" and can therefore "see the other as a personal being, a being like me."<sup>52</sup> If we were transparent to ourselves and the different sides, body sensed and body sensing, were coincident, then the opaqueness of the other would confound us. But, I as a differentiated being am never fully revealed even to myself and therefore relate to an other who is not fully revealed to me. Our opaqueness, our differentiation, is something we share, something that reveals our kinship with one another.

By offering difference and opaqueness as a basis for recognition and kinship, Merleau-Ponty indicates that difference and diversity can be central values in ethics. Ethical concern need not be based on identity or sameness. He indicates that our differences and our continual openness to what is other can bind us together. For an ecological ethics, Merleau-Ponty's work may be the most promising yet.

Ecology is a branch of knowledge that deals with the interrelationship of a community of organisms. Ecological ethics is a guide for responding within and to the relations with other beings. Ecology can be inclusive of the totality of relationships in the physical world, even supposedly "inanimate surroundings" in which beings live. Ecological ethics can be equally as expansive. The emphasis on difference and diversity in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and ontology of the flesh can help guide humans relations with one another. His work recommends

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<sup>51</sup> Dillon 129. Dillon refers to PhP 352 where Merleau-Ponty observes that I am not transparent to myself and talks about the importance of the other in giving me myself.

<sup>52</sup> Dillon 129

that we welcome different others into community with us. Merleau-Ponty's work is also instructive for relations within the larger ecological community. An openness to different others can promote an awareness of the ecological value of diversity and interdependence among species and particular beings. As the self is diminished by the denial of difference, ecological selves are impoverished and imperiled by dwindling diversity. The diversely-constituted self in Merleau-Ponty's work can promote a recovery of the complexity which creates and sustains all beings.

Ecological feminists identify two dangerous responses to difference. The first response is to subjugate or dominate different others. This type of response is evident in the genocide and in gender domination. Another equally dangerous response that ecological feminists identify is the attempt to assimilate difference. Val Plumwood contends that "[t]he other side of the self-contained master identity then is the incorporating, totalizing, or colonizing self..."<sup>53</sup> In this approach to different others, one tries to dissolve all difference and highlight the similarities. Plumwood suggests that a true appreciation and awareness of others is impossible if I seek to make the other like me. This response to difference is a denial of genuine difference. Merleau-Ponty's account of selfhood thoroughly undermines such attempts to deny difference. For Merleau-Ponty, difference is genuine. We each lie at a distance from one another and it is only when we recognize this distance, and the difference it suggests, that we encounter and engage others. Difference is the means of encounter. Merleau-Ponty's work explains how assimilation would destroy the possibility for relation. He never allows that one being could incorporate an other without doing violence to that other and to the possibility for relation. His notion of the thickness and depth of the flesh continually resists attempts to see an other as an extension of oneself.

### **Depth of the Flesh as Normative Irreducibility and Transcendent Possibility of Beings**

The irreducibility of each and every being is a moral element of Merleau-Ponty's work that we have noted above. Sense perception relies, according to Merleau-Ponty's study, on a thickness or plumpness of the flesh. This thickness is the result of a distance or space between the two sides of a being and between different beings. Merleau-Ponty describes this distance as a

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<sup>53</sup> Plumwood 157

fullness because it is the space which allows the sensed side to exchange with the sensing side of being and for beings to have sense exchanges between one another. For sense perception to occur, this chiasm, or interweaving within and among beings must take place. As we have explained the openness within the flesh and between fleshly beings makes perception possible. If the flesh was amorphous and beings ultimately indistinguishable from one another, we would not perceive the world and others. But the flesh is not an undifferentiated unity. Merleau-Ponty explains that the two sides of beings and the distance between beings never collapses. There is always a space which ensures an opening for others and preserves the particularity of self and others. Sense experience and understanding emerge from the particularity of each and every being. Merleau-Ponty's account of the sense relations maintains the integrity and particularity of every worldly being and emphasizes the boundless complexity of the world's beings.

Although Merleau-Ponty's flesh is a general element, his ontology undermines both efforts to absolutize any one being or part of the flesh and to disregard other beings. Our inability to circumscribe or completely perceive other beings attests to their existence as distinct beings. Merleau-Ponty describes the reversibility between two fleshly beings as an exchange that is "always incomplete." He claims that, even in the most intimate of encounters, we remain at a distance from other beings. In its fullness, an other being eludes us. The elusiveness of other beings indicates that we are always in the company of other expressions of being that we have yet to fully know. Particular others are for us limits to our own totalizing projections and possibilities for a fuller recognition of the flesh.

The moral status of human beings, especially those groups of humans who have dominated other beings, might be altered by Merleau-Ponty's account of the elusive other. Human history contains story after story of the subjugation of peoples and, most recently, the depletion and destruction of the nonhuman world. These patterns of human behavior illustrate a disregard or neglect of the value and possibility inherent in other beings. If, as Merleau-Ponty describes, each being is a limited but unique expression of existence, then unique possibility resides with every being. No one being or group is the realization or apex of existence. Life unfolds as a kaleidoscopic wonder through the manifold of beings. The others that elude us attest to the fact that being, value, possibility, and potential extend beyond us and our desires. When we try to possess or use other beings, we ignore the unique potential they hold. And when

we destroy other beings, we extinguish an irreplaceable potential expression of being. Merleau-Ponty's elusive flesh leaves no justification for exploiting human and nonhuman others.

The elusiveness of the flesh means that we remain at a "proximity of distance" from others. We will never penetrate or probe the full richness of an other and therein lies part of the ethical promise of Merleau-Ponty's "proximity of distance." Though the other holds rich possibilities, our desire to know and experience this richness is never satiated. Like a symphony whose notes fade or a fragrant scent that dissipates in the air, other beings retreat from our sensual grasp. Other beings like all that we sense are both near enough to excite our interest and removed enough to leave us yearning.

How can this description of sense encounters others influence our response and relation with others? Another example of sensual engagement may help to answer this question. As I stroll through a gallery, a beautiful painting catches my eye. I step back to study its shapes and colors. My nearness, close enough to sense and explore, and also my distance, a space through which the brushstrokes and subtle shifts in color form figures, enable my experience and appreciation of the painting. If I were to collapse the distance between myself and this work of art, the colors and shapes could no longer meet me to stir my interest and admiration. Similarly, our proximity of distance to other beings is a space through which we are able to regard and appreciate the beauty and particularity of an other. If I deny the distance between myself and others, by strictly identifying the other with my own purposes, aims, and being, I surrender the possibilities that the other offers herself, me and the world for new experience and new understanding. I, in effect, deny the new, different, and unfolding expression of being that is the other.

This implication of his flesh ontology's proximity of distance--that we attend to and encounter others with openness--can help steer westerners away from previous patterns of relating to human and nonhuman others. We can begin to alter the patterns of subjugating others. And, we can begin to change patterns of endangering other nonhuman forms of life and their ecosystems with our luxurious lifestyles. If we are, as Merleau-Ponty's ontology indicates we must be, open for encounters and reciprocal relation with others, whether they be Native Americans, Africans, Middle Easterners or nonhuman others, we must abandon patterns that

control and harm them. For it is in harming others that we diminish new possibilities for worldly relations.

The potency that Merleau-Ponty locates in others and in our relations with others is another ethically suggestive element in his flesh ontology. Merleau-Ponty says the flesh “sustains, nourishes, and offers possibility for all things.”<sup>54</sup> The flesh offers possibility in the relation of differentiated and diverse fleshly beings. Every expression of the flesh, every possibility of the flesh arises in and from relation of flesh to flesh. Flesh is a ground of possibility that is beneath, behind, within, through, and around us. But the fleshly ground is not static or fixed. Flesh is a relational, dynamic, and emergent ground that is expressed through beings.

One example of the relational and emergent nature of the flesh is the self. The self emerges from the relation of the two sides of being and of relations with other beings. Merleau-Ponty claims that a divergence or self-distancing is necessary for the self to emerge. This self-distancing is necessary because it opens a space for the two sides of the flesh to exchange and for the exchanges with others. Through this opening, a relation between the two sides and with others takes place and thus perception is possible and the conscious life of the self is born. Merleau-Ponty argues that even conceptual expressions, or what we have supposed to be “pure ideality,” is an expression that emerges from the relations of the flesh: “pure ideality is itself not without flesh.”<sup>55</sup> Ideality is inseparably linked to gestural or carnal expressions of the flesh. He insists that “ideas can not be detached from the sensible appearances.”<sup>56</sup> The structure of the flesh is a secure, but dynamic and relational nexus, from which *all* worldly expression surges forth.

The emergent quality of the flesh suggests a new construal of morality. Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of the flesh does not offer rules or laws as a foundation for ecological ethics. Rather, he awakens us to the web of relations through which we emerge and in which further possibilities for ourselves and the world lurk. We have mentioned that limits to our own prominence are implicit in the web of the flesh, a structure that connects us to others and sustains the unique presence and potential of others. In an ecological context, these limits indicate that we are not

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<sup>54</sup> VI 132

<sup>55</sup> VI 152. Also see VI 149-155

<sup>56</sup> VI 149

the center of existence, meaning and value. But in addition to limiting our self assertions, especially those which pose threat to others, Merleau-Ponty's emergent flesh indicates that we should act in ways that create new possibilities for fleshly expression. The implications of Merleau-Ponty's ontology thereby depart from an ethics predicated on a single or totalizing formulation of Truth and instead recommend an ethics directed toward right relation and expanding diversity and possibility.

As fleshly beings, we participate and are sustained by the unfolding of flesh in the world. Fleshly beings enable the unfolding of new expressions in the future. Since we have a role in the emergence of flesh, our actions and relations can be assessed in terms of the new possibilities we help to realize. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty implies, in his lectures at the College of France, that our assessments of the past can influence us to act in ways that promote rich possibility in the future. Merleau-Ponty contends that we are always embedded in particular situations, contexts, and histories and can never arrive at a 'closed universal history' or a complete system of possible responses and actions or a determination of the truth. However, he submits that even with the limited and partial knowledge that we can discern actions, relations, and systems that promote new, rich expressions. Comparisons of past and present produce "a table of diverse, complex probabilities, always bound to local circumstances, weighted with a coefficient of facticity, and such that we can never say of one that it is more true than another although we **can** say that one is more false, more artificial, and less open to a future, in turn less rich."<sup>57</sup> When we consider both this statement from his course lectures and the ontology of the unfolding flesh, we arrive at a new basis for ethical consideration.

Even within our particular and limited context, we can resolve to expand fleshly expression and promote greater, richer possibilities in the world. These possibilities might include the unfolding of new forms of life or greater complexity of beings, but an ethics based on Merleau-Ponty's work would certainly not include indiscriminate destruction of forms of life and the plundering of ecological diversity. Even if we take consciousness to be a highly complex and rich expression of the flesh, Merleau-Ponty's work suggests that we can begin to recognize

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<sup>57</sup> Low 83 quoted from Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Themes from the Lectures at the College de France, 1952-1960*, trans. John O'Neill (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern, 1970) originally published as *Resumes des cours College de France, 1952-1960* (Paris: Gallimand, 1968) (hereafter TFL) 44

and respond to the sentient richness in other beings. David Abram develops this aspect of Merleau-Ponty's study of the senses.

Once I acknowledge that my own sentience or subjectivity does not preclude my visible, tactile, objective existence for others, I find myself forced to acknowledge that any visible, tangible form that meets my gaze may also be an experiencing subject, sensitive and responsive to the beings around it and to me.<sup>58</sup>

Merleau-Ponty's work both introduces the possibility of sentience in nonhuman others and elucidates the significance of a richly diverse sensible world in shaping the complexity of conscious life. Given that language and pure ideality emerge from and are nourished by the sensible world and all the beings therein, Merleau-Ponty's work seems to recommend that consciousness and sentience should not be taken as a basis of division and exclusion. Instead humans should nurture all expressions of existence and an ever increasing richness within the sensible world.

Merleau-Ponty's emergent body and unfolding sensible world departs from the portrayal of the bodies as a passive and inert objects. With his description of the interweaving of mind and body, Merleau-Ponty indicates that mind and body are not neatly delineated or autonomous from one another. His discussion of emergence takes the reinterpretation of subject-object a step further. Merleau-Ponty explains that the body is never a fixed and static entity. Rather the body is a continually creative expression through relations with others. This characterization of the creative and dynamic body further develops the agency and activity of the body and further suggests that agency and activity be extended to other bodies, nonhuman bodies, and possibly to all worldly objects.

Merleau-Ponty does not provide a complete or closed account of the sensible world. He refers to the partial and limited nature of our concepts and understanding. He describes the contextual and situated quality of our knowledge. But the limits he discerns in our understanding and comprehension of the sensible world is not a hindrance to formulating an ecological ethic. In fact, the boundaries of the understanding suggest possibilities for ethics. The bodies of others and the body of the world can not be reduced or confined to our limited perspective or assessment. The world is always unfolding, a site of creative expression. The world is not a closed system, but one that is active in expressing itself through worldly beings. Merleau-Ponty,

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<sup>58</sup> Abram 67

thus, accords the world many of the characteristics of a agent--an active, creative, expressive being. Merleau-Ponty's emergent flesh, thereby, is an affirmation of the vitality of the sensible world.

When the various implications of Merleau-Ponty's emergent flesh are combined, we can clearly discern a direction for ethics. The most responsible actions and relations are those which strive not only to protect human life or even the existent life of the sensible world, but those which promote the flourishing of the complex system of beings and of new forms of life. This approach to ethics involves a more expansive vision of flourishing--one that extends beyond self-concern, an exclusive focus on human beings and meeting basic needs. The ethic of flourishing inherent in Merleau-Ponty's emergent flesh has as its goal the fullest flourishing of fleshly beings and is continually open to and promoting creative possibility. This ethic involves a ecological vision because it begins with the awareness that beings--all beings-- and their flourishing are interdependent and that flourishing is a process, a vitality, not a quiescent state.

If the ethic that 'emerges' from Merleau-Ponty's flesh is most consistent with our sense perception and our relations with others, this relational ethic of flourishing is also the most challenging to beings who must acknowledge the limits of their own ideologies. Merleau-Ponty's flesh leads us toward a concern for the flourishing of a wide community of beings, but his axiom also qualifies **all** of our ethical formulations. Though we participate in the flesh, this element of being transcends us and our formulations. The flesh is continuous with each sensible being and the sensible world but not coterminous. Flesh spills beyond the borders of each self and of the sensible world itself and can never be fully perceived or conceived by us. Hence our conceptions will always fall short. Our conceptions, ethical and otherwise, are approximations continually in need of revision and expansion. Merleau-Ponty's insistence on the limited and partial nature of universal concepts is explicitly articulated in earlier writings.

Merleau-Ponty argues in the *Themes from the Lectures at the College of France* that human knowledge is historical, situated in a particular context. As historical and contextual knowledge systems, this systems "remain partial, provisional, and never complete."<sup>59</sup> But this partial nature of human knowledge which *does* preclude absolute values *does not* preclude judgment. Merleau-Ponty objected to Hegelianism that "subjects the phenomenon (and being

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<sup>59</sup> Low 83 quoted from TFL 42-45

itself) to the totalizing rational vision of the philosopher.”<sup>60</sup> Instead of a totalized vision, Merleau-Ponty describes a continual temporal unfolding of phenomena. His ontology avoids the totalization that he criticizes in Hegelianism. The being of the flesh, though mediated in the unfolding of the flesh in the world, is never totalized or realized in one expression or one system.

Merleau-Ponty’s flesh defies the absolutism that has been nearly synonymous with ‘ontology’ and with ‘ethics’ and charts a new course for ethics. The elusiveness of the flesh can lure ethics in new directions. The elusive flesh and its continual unfolding attest to inexhaustibility and pregnancy of the flesh. The depth of the flesh is a disclosive possibility and potential that every being in the sensible world represents. Even within each self a chiasmic depth lurks. We each have a horizon structure in a world of horizons. The horizon signifies the limits of our perception, but also the fecund depths of the flesh that pours through us. As the horizon of the flesh retreats from our limited formulations, it continually yields fresh formulations and new understandings.

The chiasm of the flesh is an incomplete reversibility that retains an absence; however, Merleau-Ponty claims that the absence is not without a presence. In the occlusive depth, we can realize the fecund hiddenness that unites me as a self and connects all beings in the world. Merleau-Ponty explains that the incessant escaping and impotency to superpose two things or beings is not a failure. These experiences of others which never exactly overlap, reveals a spread between them, a “solid, unshakable” hinge.<sup>61</sup> The presence of the hiddenness is the possibility it invites in and through us and the world. This depth is not a wall, but an open horizon for becoming. Merleau-Ponty says that this “depth is open to me...I have this dimension so as to move my look in it, this openness.”<sup>62</sup> Through this openness, this depth, this horizon, we are lured out of stultified and reified understandings of self, others and the world.

The depth of the flesh and the openness to new possibility and the disclosive potential of others that it recommends is an ethical contribution that offers enormous potential for changing patterns of exploitation. History is replete with conflicts over totalizing ethical systems which exalt certain groups and condemn others. Often, the totalizing moral systems have excluded the more-than-human world from ethical consideration. Merleau-Ponty’s flesh ontology questions

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<sup>60</sup> Low 83

<sup>61</sup> VI 148

<sup>62</sup> VI 219

any assertion of absolutes in the sensible world and any totalized visions of Being and its culmination. By absolutizing or exalting any part of the flesh, we deny the potential of other beings *and* the not-yet-known, still hidden disclosive possibility of those very beings which we exalt.

The occlusions of the flesh which qualify all of our totalizing claims do not spell the end of ethics. On the contrary, I have outlined the momentous contributions that Merleau-Ponty offers towards an ecological ethic. He indicates that bodies should be taken seriously and thereby encourages care and concern for bodies and the body of the world. The kinship of all the bodies in the world implies that we are linked with and responsible to bodies human and nonhuman, near and distant. Merleau-Ponty also gives an account of sensible relations with worldly others as reciprocal engagement, mutual exchange, and dispossession. These kinds of relations, which enable the flourishing of self and other, can help shape understandings of 'right' relation in an ecological ethic. Merleau-Ponty's description of the difference and diversity inherent to every sensible being and all sensible relations can inspire openness, recognition, and compassion for different others and a commitment to promoting diverse expressions of being. And his account of the world which unfolds through us and our relations emphasizes our role and responsibility in nurturing new expressions and worldly flourishing. But perhaps more importantly, Merleau-Ponty lures us out of dominant understandings of being and value. His ontology of the flesh, though universal in scope, is inherently open, provisional, partial and limited.

The ethic that can be fleshed out with Merleau-Ponty's sense ontology carries with it a continual openness to expressions and value beyond what we know. This ethic invites us into contact and encounters with the unfamiliar and invites us into a recognition of the transcendent depth of the sensible world. Merleau-Ponty both exposes the superficiality of mind/body dualism which has discouraged our attentiveness to other beings in the world and discloses a depth of the more-than-human world. With his sense ontology, Merleau-Ponty finds an opening, a clearing--a chiasm, if you will--through which a genuine openness and regard for other beings is possible. The ethic of the flesh is an ethic of flourishing which can be responsive to the creative and diverse ecological world and the potential therein.

## CHAPTER VI

### LARGER RELEVANCE OF THE FLESH

An ethics fleshed out from Merleau-Ponty's study of sense perception can help transform the patterns of exploitation which ecological feminists decry. By using the body--bodily connection, experience, and depth--as a basis for an ontology, Merleau-Ponty defies attempts to flee or malign the human and nonhuman bodies of the earth and the bodily aversion that remains in ecological feminist writings. His ontology offers a new grounding for ethics in the depths of the flesh. The ethics of the flesh and the norms inherent to Merleau-Ponty's account of the sensible world can support ecological feminist ethics and enrich other ethical approaches as well. For ecological feminists, Merleau-Ponty indicates that oppressive bodily identities do not foreclose new liberating possibilities for women, other exploited groups, and the more-than-human world. The ethics of the flesh suggests that bodily experience has a capacity for disrupting oppressive and reductionistic identities and for promoting norms of mutuality, diversity and shared flourishing. These contributions which the flesh makes to ecological feminism also have implications for the wider field of ethics. The primordial kinship of worldly beings challenges all ethical approaches and communities of reflection to consider and value a larger community of beings, in a more-than-human world. Also, the flesh discomfits assertions of superiority and justifications of domination with the mutuality, dispossession, openness, and diversity of worldly expression. And, the emergence and transcendence of the flesh resists absolute moral claims and judgments, ensures the need for continual ethical reflection and an ongoing engagement with the more-than-human world. Finally Merleau-Ponty's account of the flesh can help human beings regain their senses and inspire a renewed sense of connection with and attention to other worldly beings.

Merleau-Ponty's contributions to ecological feminist work are best understood through a consideration of feminist responses to his work. As a phenomenologist, Ponty has been a target of feminist critique. Phenomenology is a movement largely associated with Husserl and his concern for idealized Being. One of the core attributes of phenomenological investigation is the attempt to return to pre-reflective experience and to describe these experiences and the meaning

inherent to them. Many feminists have expressed reservations about the foundationalist project of phenomenology; but the phenomenological approach of Merleau-Ponty marks a departure from the effort of Husserl and others to arrive at a certain foundation for knowledge and meaning. Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology rests on the contention that we do not have access to objective or value-free pronouncements or inquiries.<sup>1</sup> He insists on the "indispensability" of making appeals to bodily experience, but insists that these appeals always involve interpretation and should not be pursued dogmatically. His adaptation of the phenomenological investigation is significantly different from the phenomenology that many feminists resist and deeply compatible with feminist projects.

Linda Martin Alcoff, in an essay about Merleau-Ponty's relevance for feminism, notes that he "shifts the emphasis away from a foundationalist project and toward acknowledging the fact that knowledge is always unfinished and incomplete" and that experience and meaning are open-ended.<sup>2</sup> David Abram further reinforces this departure from Husserl. Abram comments that "Merleau-Ponty demolished any hope that philosophy might eventually provide a complete picture of reality."<sup>3</sup> In fact, Abram claims that Merleau-Ponty's project is to reject efforts "to explain the world as if from outside"; instead, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology gives "voice to the world from our experienced situation within it."<sup>4</sup> The unfinished and contextual quality of knowledge is communicated with striking clarity in Merleau-Ponty's last works, which until recently have been largely overlooked by his feminist critics; but even his earliest works bespeak parallels with a feminist emphasis on the contextual and embedded quality of existence.

Very early in his philosophical writings, Merleau-Ponty began questioning the tendency in modern philosophy to abstract the "subject" from the world and relations. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, written as part of his doctoral degree requirements and published in 1945, Merleau-Ponty observes that "we have become accustomed, through the influence of the Cartesian tradition to disengage from the object."<sup>5</sup> The "object" to which he refers is both the sensed body which we identify as our own and also the other sensed beings in the physical world.

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<sup>1</sup> Davis 14

<sup>2</sup> Linda Martin Alcoff, "Merleau-Ponty and Feminist Theory on Experience" in Fred Evans and Leonard Lawlor, eds, *Chiasms: Merleau-Ponty's Notion of Flesh* (Albany, New York: State University of New York, 2001) 258

<sup>3</sup> Abram 47

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*

<sup>5</sup> PhP 198

Merleau-Ponty's career is marked by a consistent concern to reconcile the division of the "subjective" and "objective" aspects of beings. A central point in his argument is that what has been consigned to inferior status of "object"--the body sensed--is primary in experience and knowledge and that "subjectivity" is lived through the various structures of the body.

The body, as Ponty understands it, is not simply an organism or fixed materiality. In his earliest writings he describes the body as a historical entity.<sup>6</sup> He insists that the body is a social being, which nevertheless can not be reduced to cultural meaning or function. Ponty resists historical materialism and argues that "[t]here is no one meaning of history; what we do has always several meanings...It is impossible to reduce the life which involves human relationships either to economic relations, or to juridical and moral ones thought up by men."<sup>7</sup>

The irreducibility of the body to social structures or cultural meanings is evident in Merleau-Ponty's description of the reversibility or "asymmetrical reciprocity" between language (the sign or signifier) and the perceived body/world (signified).<sup>8</sup> He allows that the speech eventually results in a sedimentation or linguistic structure that shapes meaning within communal or intersubjective life.<sup>9</sup> Past expressions, in other words, reconfigure the world "to favor a given view or attitude."<sup>10</sup> But these past expressions, the sedimentation or inherited meanings, are not identical with the meaning of the signified--the world. All words refer back to or "rebound" upon the world. As with the senses, the relation of language to world is one of reversibility.

As there is a reversibility of seeing and the visible, and as at the point where the two metamorphoses cross what we call perception is born, so also there is a reversibility of the speech and what it signifies<sup>11</sup>

A chiasm or distance separates the word from what it signifies. The meaning of the perceived world, as the signified, extends beyond the signifier. The world is the horizon-- "the ultimate context of understanding"--to which language refers but whose multiplicity of meaning language

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<sup>6</sup> See PhP 171-173.

<sup>7</sup> PhP 173

<sup>8</sup> Dillon 187. In describing the "asymmetrical reciprocity," Dillon says that the founding term (perceived world) has original/priority but that the founded term(speech/language) is not just derived from it because it is through the founded term that founding term is expressed. What he implies is that, for Merleau-Ponty, the correspondence or reciprocal relation between language and world is never complete because the move to language already involves a move away from a separation from the immediacy of the perceived world.

<sup>9</sup> The intersubjectivity of language is present not only in the sedimentation of language, but also in the expressive activity itself. As Dillon explains, expression presupposes community in the institution of language. See Dillon 196

<sup>10</sup> Dillon, 196

never finally resolves. Low explains that “[j]ust as perceptual meaning is stable yet indirect and even allusive, so also is linguistic meaning.”<sup>12</sup> The chiasmic relationship of language and the perceptual world ensures that linguistic (and hence cultural) systems can always be disrupted or amended and that fresh expression is never foreclosed.

Low describes Merleau-Ponty’s view of language as a corrective to exaggerated linguistic views which he attributes to postmodern and deconstructionist philosophies. These exaggerated views involve, according to Low, an abandonment of perception and the life-world for an “omnicreative language.”<sup>13</sup> As Low makes clear, Merleau-Ponty rejects the assumption that language is supplied meaning entirely from itself. He advocates instead a reciprocal interpretation of linguistic structures and their connection with bodies and the world. Merleau-Ponty’s theory of language ultimately qualifies all linguistic structures, but he does not deny the power of cultural-historical structures for impacting bodies and the meaning attached to them in the lifeworld.

Merleau-Ponty’s contention that the body is, in a qualified sense, a historical, cultural, or communal entity has been applauded by prominent feminists scholars. Butler commends Merleau-Ponty’s treatment of the body as a historical and cultural modality of existence. Iris Marion Young uses Merleau-Ponty’s analysis as an entry into an examination of female motility and bodily comportment.<sup>14</sup> Nancy J. Holland explains that Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of the body as a “lived meaning,” that is evident even in his early work, suggests how women’s bodily experience is influenced by culture. This “lived meaning,” she explains entails that the body is lived through the meaning given it, not merely by the life of which it is a part, but also by the cultural and linguistic context in which that life unfolds.”<sup>15</sup> Holland even goes so far as to claim that Merleau-Ponty’s later work is “a sort of feminism” and “the antithesis of traditional masculinist European philosophy.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> VI, 154

<sup>12</sup> Low 101

<sup>13</sup> Low 107

<sup>14</sup> Iris Marion Young, *Throwing like a Girl and Other Essays* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1990)

<sup>15</sup> Nancy J. Holland, “In a Different Ch[i]asm: A Feminist Rereading of Merleau-Ponty on Sexuality” in Lawrence Haas and Dorothea Olkowski, eds, *Rereading Merleau-Ponty: Essays Beyond the Continental-Analytic Divide* (Amherst, New York: Humanity Books, 2000) 328

<sup>16</sup> Holland 329

But feminists like Butler, Young, Jeffner Allen, and Luce Irigaray, all of whom incorporate aspects of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy into their own, have raised concerns about aspects of his work that they argue demonstrate androcentrism (male-centeredness). Butler objects to what she defines as a misogynistic disembodied gaze and heterosexism in Merleau-Ponty's account of sexuality. Iris Marion Young implies that Ponty is not sensitive to the unique bodied experiences of women. Jeffner Allen and Luce Irigaray suggest that Ponty disregards what they take to be **the** primary opposition of masculine and feminine. The fact that Ponty has profoundly influenced the work of feminists indicates that his work and contributions to feminist thought have not been dismissed, even by his critics, and that his work can enrich the work of feminists. The appropriation of his work by feminists also suggests the capacity of his philosophy for addressing those very critiques which feminists have raised.

Since we have examined at some length Butler's debt to Ponty, we will consider her criticism first. Butler's critique centers on Merleau-Ponty's discussion of a patient, "Schneider" from *Phenomenology of Perception*.<sup>17</sup> Schneider received a physical injury in war which affected his ability to act intentionally (as opposed to merely habitually) toward/in the world. Ponty examines Schneider's functioning, in various daily activities and in sexual relations, to explore the connection between sense perception and understanding. Ponty concludes that, if a bodily impairment destroys the patient's ability to synthesize perceptions and form intentions, then consciousness must emerge from the body and its belongingness and openness to the world. He suggests that motility, for example, is a process of synthesizing and directing the body toward the world. We understand the world primarily in motility rather than through the use of symbolic or objectifying functions. This assertion undermines a Cartesian separation of body and consciousness and Kant's explication of the relationship between sense perception and understanding. Consciousness is our bodily belongingness to the world of space and time and in movement we synthesize space and time. With Schneider the function which is destroyed is a motor function, not a symbolic structure. Therefore, Ponty argues that motility is the primary sphere in which meaning is engendered. In motility, my body synthesizes space and time which are indeterminate horizons which contain other points of view. Bodily experience is the

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<sup>17</sup> Judith Butler, "Sexual Ideology and Phenomenological Description: A Feminist Critique of Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*" in Jeffner Allen and Iris Marion Young, eds, *The Thinking Muse: Feminism and Modern French Philosophy* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1989) 85-100

experience of synthesizing these horizons anew--gaining a perspective in the structure of space and time within which I move. Butler concludes from Merleau-Ponty's analysis that he demonstrates a heterosexist and even misogynistic bias. Since Merleau-Ponty's account of Schneider draws on the patient's inability to respond to visual perceptions, Butler charges that Ponty privileges vision (a "disembodied gaze"). Woman is cast in the position of the object of a voyeuristic male gaze, according to Butler's critique.

The charge of privileging vision and relying on the disembodied gaze is soundly disputed by the larger body of Merleau-Ponty's work, particularly *The Visible and the Invisible*. Despite its title, this last work is an extensive consideration of the sense of touch. Touch, along with all the senses, is described as a reciprocal and reversible relation involving active fleshly beings. Butler is well-engaged with Merleau-Ponty's later work and has limited her critique to the early study of Schneider which would lead us to conclude that she may agree that other of Merleau-Ponty's works belie the apparent voyeurism and misogyny of the Schneider analysis. However, even as limited to Merleau-Ponty's discussion of sexual activity, his work counters Butler's critique.

In addition to his study of the loss of visual schema, Ponty considers the loss of Schneider's tactile function.<sup>18</sup> The disembodied gaze, therefore is not the primary means of relation between male and female: touch and presumably sensual exchange is important to this relation. Butler infers that the female body is merely the realm of possible action for a male actor. She concludes from the fact that Schneider can not initiate sexual activity that Ponty is establishing a model of sexuality as an active male and passive female. With a full consideration of Merleau-Ponty's work especially his discussion of intercorporeality, she would more likely conclude that Ponty understands sexual activity as a mutual and reciprocal exchange--an exchange which is not possible given Schneider's passivity and incapacity for voluntary movement. An examination of Merleau-Ponty's earlier writings, and specifically Merleau-Ponty's objections to Sartre's account of sexuality that emphasizes "the Look" as a primary

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<sup>18</sup> At this stage, I am discussing Merleau-Ponty's discussion of visual and tactile schemas only very superficially. Ponty does not treat vision and touch, or any of the other senses, as isolated senses. Not only is the seen and the seer intertwined, but the various senses overlap and exchange with one another. This relation of the various senses is highly developed in *The Visible and the Invisible*, but even in his account of Schneider, Ponty is beginning to explore this relationship. If we were to respond to Butler's critique of the disembodied gaze at an even deeper level, we would have to explore the intermingling of the senses. A disembodied gaze is an impossibility in Merleau-Ponty's work where he insists on the connection of vision with other bodily senses.

relationship to the “Other” and Sartre’s appeals to the master/slave dialectic as a paradigm for sexual relations, can further question Butler’s characterizations of Ponty’s account of sexual activity.<sup>19</sup>

Iris Marion Young does not necessarily argue against Merleau-Ponty’s account of bodied experience; rather she seeks to describe the “particular style” of feminine bodily experience. She suggests that Merleau-Ponty’s description of lived body can be applied to any human existence “in a general way” but that the female person has a typical style (presumably as distinct from the typical style of a male person).<sup>20</sup> The particular style of the female person is rooted in the contradictions of patriarchal society in which she lives: she is a free subject who participates in transcendence, but her situation as women denies her that subjectivity and transcendence, explains Young.<sup>21</sup> This contradiction leads to feminine experience of the body as a mere thing-- “a fragile thing, which must be picked up and coaxed into movement, a thing that exists as looked at and acted upon.”<sup>22</sup> Young claims that there is a typical style of throwing, running, climbing, and hitting “like a girl.” She also explores the particularities of pregnant and breasted existence which are particular to women. Her argument is that the modalities of feminine bodily comportment, motility, and spatiality are common to the existence of women in contemporary society to one degree of another. The source of these particular modalities is “the particular situation of women as conditioned by their sexist oppression in contemporary society.”<sup>23</sup>

The issue that Young raises with Merleau-Ponty’s early phenomenology is an important one. She explores that capacity of this “general” account of (bodied) existence for accommodating particular modes of being and seems to conclude that the generality of Merleau-Ponty’s work is not antithetical to feminist phenomenology and that in fact Merleau-Ponty’s account might be a basis for comparing masculine and feminine modes of existence. However, Young’s work departs from Merleau-Ponty’s account far more than she acknowledges and she maintains a bodily alienation that his work resists.

Ponty, in contrast to Young, is considering the habitual modes of bodily existence. He uses examples of a typist who knows where the letters are on the typewriter “through a

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<sup>19</sup> PhP 167 and 155

<sup>20</sup> Young 144

<sup>21</sup> *ibid*

<sup>22</sup> *ibid*

<sup>23</sup> Young 153

knowledge bred of familiarity which does not give us a position in objective space” and of an organist who moves in direct relation to his instrument rather than through an objective space.<sup>24</sup> Ponty also offers the example of a blind person for whom the walking stick ceases to be an object.<sup>25</sup> Young, on the other hand, has specifically identified certain activities which she claims are unfamiliar and uncommon to women to demonstrate how the consciousness of their bodies as objects persists. By doing so, Young does not dispute Merleau-Ponty’s argument, but departs from his discussion to develop the particularities of feminine ‘style.’ Ponty, in fact, would agree that an exclusive focus on unfamiliar or awkward movements would promote a view of the body as a mere object. But many feminists would take exception to Young’s assumption that physical activity is fundamentally unfamiliar or awkward for women. Female athletes would also dispute claims that women inevitably throw, run, climb, and hit ‘like a girl’ due to their experience of their bodies as frail things. This characterization depends on a particular image of women and their activities. And even though Young argues that the style of feminine activity emerges from sexist oppression rather than in “a mysterious feminine essence,” she assumes that oppression affects women uniformly.<sup>26</sup> She does not address ethnic or socio-economic differences among women or the way in which these differences influence experiences of oppression. The frail body of Young’s “typical” female style corresponds more closely with the cultural construction of privileged “delicate” white women than it does with the oppressive images of poor women or women of color, for instance.

Young’s study of breasted and pregnant experience as expressive of women’s particular experience threatens to promote other biases about the ‘typical’ or ideal women, as childbearers and significantly bosomed. Young’s assumptions are multifaceted and her suggestion that women are conditioned by their sexist oppression in a particular way only reinforces the image of women as passive and frail. Despite Young’s privileged white women’s bias and her reinforcement of limited formulations of women and their activities, the issue that she indirectly raises about Merleau-Ponty’s general account of being should not be dismissed. Does a dualism persist in Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* and is this finally resolved in *The Visible and the Invisible*?

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<sup>24</sup> PhP 144-145

<sup>25</sup> These habituated modes of existence to which Merleau-Ponty refers differ from person to person.

<sup>26</sup> Young

Young chooses to examine pregnant experience because she argues it involves the most extreme suspension of the separation subject and object, of inner and outer. She contends that this dualism is evident even in the supposed anti-dualism of Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*. According to Young, Merleau-Ponty's distinction between the two forms of the experiencing body, as subject and as object, is evidence of his lingering dualism. Jeffner Allen also raises this issue with Ponty. She argues that Ponty differentiates between the intentional human being and 'things' and that, by not thematizing women and their experience, Ponty consigns women to the realm of 'things.' Allen says, "Women appear within the pole "thing (woman)," where the androcentric failure to identify and describe women's situation relegates us, by means of an artificial inclusion, which is actually an absolute exclusion, to an almost invisible, thing-like status."<sup>27</sup> Whereas Young does not examine Merleau-Ponty's later works,<sup>28</sup> Allen finds an opening--a possibility-- "for transforming the I-Other dualism in terms of genuine polymorphism" in Merleau-Ponty's final work on the chiasmic flesh. It is here in the chiasm that Butler's performativity also gains inspiration. Allen refers to the chiasm between the body senses and the body sentient as the joints, the crossing, the wild region which can make possible integrative, non-dualistic, ambiguous, and polymorphic thinking.<sup>29</sup> She says that her hope is "to indicate an open-ended perspective from which we may begin to circle toward an inexhaustibly deep source of possibilities for experiencing and thinking otherwise."<sup>30</sup> Like Butler, Allen finds the best hope for changing patterns of oppressive gender dualism and identity in Merleau-Ponty's last work.

Luce Irigaray is less generous with Ponty than the other feminist critics; yet, she has incorporated many of his ideas, particularly his account of the chiasm, in her work. Sexual difference is the primary I-other opposition, according to Irigaray. She argues that, in patriarchal ideology of western culture, the totalizing and dominating masculine subject defines the feminine

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<sup>27</sup> Jeffner Allen, "Through the Wild Region: An Essay in Phenomenological Feminism" in *Feminist Issues*. 245

<sup>28</sup> She does comment, immediately after her critique of the lingering dualism in Merleau-Ponty's early work, that Merleau-Ponty's later work moves away from what she calls "a unified subject" (presumably a unified subject over and against an objective world). See Young 162.

<sup>29</sup> It is not insignificant that Merleau-Ponty largely avoids the use of the words "subject" and "object" in this later work and refers instead to the sensed and sensing body.

<sup>30</sup> Allen 254

other as lack or deficiency.<sup>31</sup> Masculine discourse and economy obscures the specificity of the feminine, eclipsing the other and universalizing the masculine subject. Females are consigned to status of object and their utterances denied by masculine discourse. The **only** means of disrupting the repressive male discourse of the same is by uncovering the manifold and fluidity of women's expression. She wants to recuperate "the feminine within a logic that maintains it in repression, censorship, nonrecognition" and she attempts to do so with an ethics of sexual difference.<sup>32</sup>

The ethics of sexual difference creates a place from which women can speak and be recognized so that "amorous exchanges of the male love and the beloved women" are possible.<sup>33</sup> As differentiated from the masculine, female sexuality emphasizes plurality, nearness, proximity, intimacy and exchange. The touching of the two lips of the vagina (as well as the multiple sites of pleasure<sup>34</sup>) symbolizes the diversified, complex, and relational nature of the feminine. In contrast to the masculine sameness which Irigaray implies is exemplified by an objectifying sight or gaze, the feminine embodies the intimate touch or caress. The feminine alone, she further argues, with its complexity and fluidity holds the possibility for erotic exchanges. The male is doomed to sameness and solipsism.

It is not surprising, given her account of sexual difference, that Irigaray resists Merleau-Ponty's flesh. Ponty does not develop as primary the masculine-feminine opposition and, in Irigaray's estimation, continues the pattern of eclipsing feminine particularity. His argument that various senses (including vision and touch) intertwine is indicative of the eclipse of the feminine by the masculine, according to Irigaray.<sup>35</sup> She argues that Ponty privileges vision and suggests that his "encompassing look" "envelops" the other, the feminine. In so doing, Ponty offers an analysis that is marked by the "labyrinthine solipsism" that is characteristic of male discourse.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Irigaray refers specifically to Freudian psychoanalytic theory. She claims that "All Freud's statements describing feminine sexuality overlook the fact that the female sex might possibly have its own specificity...Feminine is defined as the necessary complement to the operation of male sexuality with an unfailingly phallic self-representation." Luce Irigaray, trans. Catherine Porter, *This Sex Which Is Not One* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985) 69-70

<sup>32</sup> Irigaray (1985) 78

<sup>33</sup> See Margaret Whitford, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine* (New York: Routledge, 1991)

<sup>34</sup> Irigaray (1985) 85

<sup>35</sup> Luce Irigaray, "The Invisible of the Flesh: A Reading of Merleau-Ponty," *The Visible and the Invisible*, "The Intertwining--The Chiasm" in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1993) 153-ff.

<sup>36</sup> Irigaray (1993)157

Since Ponty does not detail the sexual difference of the flesh, Irigaray concludes that the flesh is without differentiation and therefore without the potential for fluidity and exchange.

The great irony of Irigaray's assessment of Merleau-Ponty's work is that her expression of feminine sexuality is most certainly an elaboration of his chiasmic flesh. She describes feminine sexuality as an open exchange "sort of expanding universe to which no limits could be fixed."<sup>37</sup> She refers to the complexity, diversity and reciprocity that occurs across and through women's bodies, focusing on the lips of the vagina. For Irigaray women's sexual organs are part of an irreducible multiplicity that bespeaks ever emergent and transcendent possibility of exchange. The continual creativity of the female body and her relations, she explains, flows forth from the "abyss, the unfathomable depth" of her body.<sup>38</sup> Only through the depths of the diversely-constituted feminine can the masculine achieve relationality. The fluid depths of a feminine sexuality, according to Irigaray, enables the masculine body to have amorous and reciprocal exchanges with his beloved woman. Her discussion of sexuality highlights prospects for wondrously erotic relations of masculine and feminine, but this continually creative relationality is dangerously confining. Merleau-Ponty's flesh is an alternative to the confining female sexual relationality that Irigaray develops in her ethic.

Irigaray depicts female bodies and sexuality with vibrantly voluptuous prose, which is nearly identical to the descriptions of the flesh written by Merleau-Ponty many years earlier. However, her development of a unique female bodily identity as a counter to phallogocentric discourse is ultimately dualistic and reductionistic for men and for women, their physicality and sexuality. Irigaray never questions the sameness, simplicity, and oneness attributed to male bodies. She intends to resist a Freudian focus on the phallus, but does so while remaining firmly entrenched in his gender dualism. By accepting gender dualism, Irigaray accepts the designation of woman as the other to man. Her poetic visions of female bodily diversity, in the context of her one-other opposition, are finally flat and dull. We are either male or female, either phallus or vagina, in this dualism. the multiple sites of female sensual pleasure eventually dissolve into an inanimate mass--the beloved who is the passive sexual partner to the phallus. Irigaray neglects the multiplicity and complexity of male bodies, of sexual relations (what about homoeroticism?), and of bodily needs, desires, and identities.

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<sup>37</sup> Irigaray (1985) 31

While Irigaray adopts Merleau-Ponty's details of porosity, reciprocity, depth, pregnancy, and fecundity for her feminine sexual discourse, she restricts these bodily descriptions to women's erotic experiences and defends gender as the essential experience of body and relation. Irigaray remains rooted in gender dualism and admits no possibility beyond these identities. Merleau-Ponty, on the other hand, by formulating a fuller account of bodied experience provides for the irreducibility of all bodied beings (male, female, human, more-than-human) and the possibility of an inclusive relational ethic. The diversity, openness and emergence of all fleshly expressions resists fixed, dualistic (gender or other) identities and the polymorphism of sense encounters challenges an exclusive focus on heterosexual intercourse or any other limited aspect of corporeal relation. By detailing the complexity and depth of all worldly beings, Merleau-Ponty avoids Irigaray's essentialized gender identity and yet he provides a space or place from which women and other exploited beings can speak, act and encounter one another. Instead of undermining the creativity and freedom of bodies, he indicates that expressions of resistance and transformation lurk **in** the depth of bodies and their encounters with one another. Bodies, as both sensing and sensed and expressed and emergent, are sites of continual protest against those who would reduce them to the status of passive object and deny their moral worth. Even vulnerable, obedient, suffering and exploited bodies are not without depth. The openness and exchange of the sensing and sensed body, the transcendence within the relational depths of bodied beings, ensures the those who suffer can never be reduced to their suffering.<sup>39</sup> Bodies of the flesh have an insistent transcendence that defies their designation as object only for others.

It is the stubborn refusal of Merleau-Ponty to encapsulate the flesh in any fixed identity, the "open-endedness" to which Jeffner Allen refers, that has much significance to ecological feminist ethics. The apparent ecological feminist aversion to bodies lies in their self-acknowledged effort to avoid a mere reversal of gender dualism and to reject confining and burdensome gender roles. These feminists identify the dualism of male and female, human and

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<sup>38</sup> Irigaray (1993) 204

<sup>39</sup> On a similar note, those who exploit others and inflict suffering can not be reduced to their role or identity as an oppressor. The relational structure of being, in the flesh, extends to all beings. The transcendent depth of this structure is present in and through all beings. All beings have an inherent capacity and need for mutual relation. This point is significant with reference to Irigaray and others who would locate the capacity for relation, care, mutuality, and responsiveness with women and their gendered identity. If this capacity resides only in women via their oppressive identity, men have no ability (responsibility) to transform patterns of domination. Also an ethics of sexual difference neglects intra-gender exploitation and relations with the more-than-human world altogether.

nature, self and other as the root of exploitation, but surmounting this dualism need not involve an abandonment of bodies. The connection of women with bodies (and the body of the earth) has been and will remain problematic if the body and bodily connection and experience is defined entirely by oppressive identities. Accounts of “female” bodied experience which allow no opening for non-oppressive identities and admit no continuity with the bodied experience of men and other beings threaten to perpetuate dualism and do not help illumine the depth of relation that binds humans and other beings together. Merleau-Ponty offers a general account of bodily relation and richness that reaches beyond the categories of dualism and surmounts the obstacles that confound ecological feminists. He illumines the capacity in all beings for relation and frees this capacity from a particular construction of gender. The reliance of Jeffner Allen, Butler and Irigaray on his description of the intertwining of the flesh and profound depth therein indicates the ethical potential of his account of bodies. Merleau-Ponty at once affirms the rootedness in and complex relation of all bodies while disrupting restrictive categories, roles and identities that link only some beings with bodies. With the flesh, he allows ecological feminists and feminists in general to understand the body not as an inescapable oppressive identity--as a problem to be averted and a basis of exploitation--but as a possibility in each being for new identities, disruptive assertions and alternative and relational guiding norms. Ponty’s discussion of the flesh can recover for ecological feminists the power and potential of bodies as sites of relation and resistance.

The “open-endedness,” resistance and relationality of bodies that helps to defy fixed gender norms is not bereft of norms for relation. Norms for informing non-exploitive relations are implicit in his description of the primordial flesh. Expressions of the flesh are born out of a mutuality and diversity of the sides of the flesh and of various beings. It is the mutuality, complexity and emergence of the relational flesh that allows the openness of bodily expression, the bursting forth of self, of society, of language and all cultural systems. The patterns of fleshly relation which Merleau-Ponty describes correspond precisely with those moral norms outlined by ecological feminists. As ecological feminists have described healed relations with nature, they detail mutual exchanges, dispossession and shared flourishing. But, instead of appealing to intimate human emotional attachments and women’s stories of care as a basis for norms and a pattern of relation to be extended to the rest of nature, Merleau-Ponty reveals the bodily kinship

through which all flourish. He describes a reciprocity in sensual and bodily exchanges that undergirds the intimate, emotional attachments, such as friendship and partnership. There is a more primary, a more basic bodily mutuality to which Ponty appeals that does not have the same contingent and anthropocentric quality of ethical models currently used in ecological feminist ethics. With the flesh, he provides an ethical model for worldly relations that is always already inclusive of the whole of the bodied earth and is explicitly carnal. Ponty's inclusive model does not dissolve all beings into undifferentiated oneness. A distance separates beings and is a space of exchange and connection. His kinship of the flesh avoids the dichotomous categories of male and female and human and other without surrendering the distinctions and differentiation that makes relation viable. The relational matrix presents an account of worldly interdependence which can allow ecological feminists to move beyond dichotomous bodily identities and to articulate normative relations inclusive of the whole of the more-than-human world.

As an ethical approach with no reliance upon the divisions of dichotomous thought, an ethics of the flesh has undeniable potential for the larger field of ethics in this time of global ecological devastation. The scope of relations in Merleau-Ponty's flesh facilitates an enlarged consideration in all ethical systems. In narrative ethics or discourse ethics, the danger is that is that moral consideration can too easily end at the boundaries of a particular religious community or at the edges of the linguistic community. These rigid boundaries of the moral community can result in the opposition of "us" and "them." The danger of moral exclusion is difficult to ignore during a period of fierce ethnic rivalries, religious extremist violence, and the mass extinction of other species. Ethics based only on shared beliefs of a particular community can legitimate the domination of those who are "different." Ethics based on shared linguistic structures can consign the majority of beings to the margins. An ethics of the flesh, however, pushes the boundaries of the moral community to include the whole of the world and carries those moral communities that have a tendency to insulate themselves toward an enlarged perspective of their involvement with others. At a time when the impacts of western consumption are palpably present in landscapes throughout the globe, the enlarged perspective may invite westerners into moral reflection about their consuming lifestyle and its worldwide effects. Sectarian retreat or detachment is no longer an option in the ethics of the flesh, nor is the excuse of remoteness.

The potential expansion of a moral consideration through an ethics of the flesh does not spell the end of religious, communal, or discourse ethics; rather it introduces other criteria for moral judgment in these systems. With respect to narrative ethics for instance, an ethics of the flesh places the story of a particular community in relation to the stories of others in the world and encourages a recognition of the story of the more-than-human world. For communicative ethics, the ethics of the flesh would make the criteria of universalizability more truly inclusive by evaluating normative claims according to the potential for flourishing of all bodied beings. Merleau-Ponty's flesh ontology testifies to the relevance of global ecological devastation for all communities and methods of moral reflection. During the current age of "globalization," the expansive moral community in the ethics of the flesh can better equip existing ethical approaches to respond to global issues. In effect, the ethics of the flesh allows ethical reflection to "catch up" with the expansiveness of contemporary ethical dilemmas. The global economy now transcends boundaries of nation, culture, and religion and the possibility of facilitating moral reflection in this global age requires that communities reflect upon their relations with others in the community of the earth. An ethics of the flesh is a general structure of relation that enables particular peoples to understand their involvement within the larger world.

In addition to promoting an enlarged community of concern, an ethic of the flesh undermines justifications of domination within the earth community. According to Merleau-Ponty's account of fleshly relations, expressions of worldly being emerge from relations of dispossessive openness to an other. This posture toward an other admits a mutual exchange and acknowledges the depth of being present in each other. Attempts to dominate foreclose the possibility of relation and do not admit rich, new expressions of worldly being. The fullest flourishing of beings involves mutual flourishing and the absence of domination. Just as an ethics of discourse offer implicit moral critique of social systems which inhibit the full participation of all in discourse, an ethics of the flesh would begin moral deliberation with a rebuke of those who dominate and exploit human and non-human others. Given the current disparity of well-being among the world's population and the exploitation of the world's poor for cheap labor and the world's resources for luxurious lifestyles in the western world, a rebuke of those who exploit is an essential step for curtailing ecological devastation and injustice. The ethic of the flesh challenges hierarchies and patterns of exploitation without extolling the

superiority of the poor or those who suffer. According to an ethic of the flesh, poverty, suffering, and circumstances of exploitation are not a criteria of moral worth. The primordial pattern of reciprocity, mutuality and irreducibility of beings in sense relations is the basis for judging exploitive relations and for defining right relation as that which is mutual and enables the flourishing of those involved.<sup>40</sup> An ethic of the flesh is an ethic of liberation which does not harness moral worth to one's experience of domination and suffering, nor does this ethic identify liberation as a simple freedom of suffering. This liberation ethic, with right relation as mutual flourishing, requires even more than an absence of domination. Liberation in this model is the freedom **from** and transformation of non-reciprocal relations and freedom **for** possibilities of full and mutual flourishing with others. As it qualifies all assertions of domination, the ethic of the flesh qualifies all assertions of absolute freedom. Freedom is a freedom for flourishing with others. In the relational structure of the flesh, flourishing necessarily involves others. Liberation and freedom therefore are always defined in and realized through relations with others. The kind of liberation is promising for ending the cycle of opposition, in which virtue is continually defined over and against the dominating other. Right relation, as reciprocity, is realized not in opposition to others but in mutual relation to others.

Another element of the flesh that is important for responding to our global ecological crisis is the formulation of transcendence as a depth of the carnal world. The notion of transcendence has been used in religious and philosophical ethical systems to refer to a value or being which is above and removed from the fleshly world. With such an interpretation of transcendence, the transcendent value of the worldly community is too easily denied and ecological devastation, physical need and suffering are too easily dismissed. Transcendence as the profuse and profound depths of each being and the world of the flesh can enrich religious or theological formulations of the value of worldly existence. Transcendence of the flesh is

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<sup>40</sup> A helpful exposition of the kind of relational value or moral worth that I am suggesting can be found in H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Center of Value" in *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1943). Niebuhr explains on page 107 of this essay that "[v]alue is the good-for-ness of being for being in their reciprocity, their animosity and their mutual aid. Value cannot be defined or intuited in itself for it has not existence in itself; and nothing is valuable in itself, but everything has value, positive or negative, in its relations. Thus, value is not a relation but arises in the relations of being to being." A significant difference between Niebuhr's discussion of relational value and Merleau-Ponty's flesh is that Ponty describes the relation inherent within the flesh of each being. There is a relational value or moral worth of each particular being of the flesh as well as the value of being to being. Niebuhr addresses the inherent worth of particular beings in a different

immanent, as an absent presence and potential for new expression, in the relations of being to being and throughout the world. No longer a door to religious and cognitive escapism, transcendent depth in Ponty's flesh is the source or opening of worldly expressions. In one's openness to a worldly other, transcendent value is acknowledged.

The transcendent depths of the flesh can alter rationalistic and theistic formulations of transcendence to reconsider the purely cognitive and other-worldly connotations of transcendent value and can enhance the ecological sensibilities and sensitivities of philosophical and theological ethics. If formulations of transcendence, within a religious community for instance, become more carnal and moral relational, theological formulations will be more relevant to the lives of adherents, to the corporeal experiences of pain, suffering, joy, and desire, and to worldly relation and well-being. Rather than rendering religious expression obsolete, an ethics of the flesh deepens and expands a theological appreciation of value in the world. Merleau-Ponty's fleshly transcendence admits the spiritual or sacred potential of the sensible world. Also, the flesh can infuse religious language, concepts, belief and practice with a sensual and earthly quality and recast physical existence as the expression of, rather than alienation from, transcendent being. Western thinkers as diverse as Iraneaus, Saint Francis, Spinoza, John Calvin, Teilhard de Chardin, H. Richard Niebuhr, Sallie McFague, and John Cobb have theorized about God's presence in and through the physical world; but the "flesh" can be a new way of understanding and articulating God's creative presence within, under and through the world. With the depth of the flesh, Ponty also indicates how worldly experience, knowledge, and expression can both reveal **and** conceal divine being.

Another contribution of Merleau-Ponty's flesh, one related to new ethical sensibilities, is the renewed awareness of other beings that his account of the flesh inspires. Abram devotes his discussion of Merleau-Ponty to the topic of heightened awareness of the more-than-human world. The beauty and poetry of Abram's writing are testament to the influence of Merleau-Ponty. With the account of the mutuality, fecundity and emergence of the flesh, adults might again become like children with an openness and engagement of the varied beings in the world. This engagement of the world is apparent in my walks with my three- year-old daughter as she crouches to greet bugs, buries her nose in a rosemary bush and stops to find the bird calling to her

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way. He distinguishes three relations: one the relation of being to being, two, the relation of being to its own

from the highest branches of a towering pecan tree. The receptivity and attentiveness of childhood attests to a capacity for engaging and responding to the more-than-human world. As I watch my daughter responding to other beings in the world, I better understand how Merleau-Ponty's study of children led his thoughts to coalesce in the notion of the flesh. He, no doubt, glimpsed the capacity for relation in children, as I have through my daughter, and perhaps determined to uncover that same capacity in the rest of us.

Certainly, Merleau-Ponty is not the only person to cultivate an attentiveness and openness to the world's beings. Other writers have spoken of the importance of such an awareness. Alice Walker laments the loss of the child's recognition of others. She also suggests that our capacity for recognition is not entirely diminished.

I was therefore unprepared for the expression in Blue's. Blue was lonely. Blue was horribly lonely and bored. I was not shocked that this should be the case; five acres to tramp by yourself, endlessly, even in the most beautiful of meadows--and his was--cannot provide many interesting events, and once rainy season turned to dry that was about it. No, I was shocked that I had forgotten that human animals and nonhuman animals can communicate quite well; if we are brought up around animals as children we take this for granted. By the time we are adults we no longer remember.<sup>41</sup>

As Walker's recognition of a horse's loneliness attests, this openness is not irretrievably lost as we pass from childhood into adulthood. It seems, as Merleau-Ponty argues, some vestige remains of our connection and communion with all other beings. This remnant may be stirred through the writings of Merleau-Ponty, Walker and others, in our apprenticeship to children and in our direct encounters with other beings. Howard Harrod suggests this possibilities of direct encounters in his description of his meeting with a mountain lion.

As we gazed over that short distance, the big cat slowly turned his head and showed us his full face, returning our gaze with seemingly quiet uninterest. As our eyes remained locked in a mutual gaze, the distance between ourselves as human animals and this great predator seemed to collapse.<sup>42</sup>

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essence or "internal good" and three, the relation of a being's former good toward its internal good.

<sup>41</sup> Alice Walker, *Living by the Word*. (San Diego: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1988)5

<sup>42</sup> Howard L. Harrod, *The Animals Came Dancing: Native American Sacred Ecology and Animal Kinship* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2000) 139

Merleau-Ponty, the reflections of writers like Walker, encounters like that described by Harrod, as well as the wisdom of various earth-based, indigenous traditions<sup>43</sup> can help to remind humans of our participation with the rest of nature.

While Merleau-Ponty's flesh, along with the other sources that I mention, can promote new non-dualistic understandings of the human-non-human relation and facilitate moral reflection on the ecological crisis, his "ontology of the flesh" does not erect new moral absolutes. The word "ontology" with reference to the flesh is misleading. Ontology in western philosophy is presumed to outline a fixed definition or essence of Being. In Merleau-Ponty's case, the ontology is a relational and emergent account of sensible beings. He does not define or confine Being in his discussion of the flesh and insists that all our formulations are partial and limited.

Merleau-Ponty does not claim to fully delineate the meaning of the sensible world, or of Being. In fact, the hiddenness, gaps, openings, chiasms of our comprehension--of knowledge and meaning-- are paramount in his account of the flesh. He describes general structures of experience all the while insisting on the incomplete nature of all expressions, even his own. His flesh, with all of its ethical implications, is also a plea for continual moral reflection and for caution against elevating our moral claims to the status of unbending absolutes.

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<sup>43</sup> David Abram, for instance, explores the animism of Balinese shamanism and as well as geographical dimensions of oral culture.

## CHAPTER VII

### EPILOGUE

The current ecological crisis is senseless: it just does not make sense! This statement has new meaning when considered in light of Merleau-Ponty's flesh. Instead of concluding only that ecological devastation defies reason or sound judgment, we can also consider the degree to which our senses are impoverished and flourishing (of all beings) diminished by this devastation.

I was in an airplane a few days ago. As we were lifting off the ground, I was eager to see the familiar mountains to the east. I was disappointed to have the view obscured by a gray haze over the city. In my disappointment, I remembered numerous articles about increasing haze in cities and even in national parks. This haze which limited my sight and increasingly limits the sight of all beings is due to the automobile and industrial emissions of human beings.

It is not just the sense of sight that is limited by human consumption and destruction. As greenhouse gas emissions deplete the ozone layer, our skin is toughened and burned by the sun so that touch is less scintillating. Our noses take in noxious industrial fumes and the fragrance of "Spring Rain" becomes more closely associated with hazardous chemical cleansers than with actual precipitation and soaked soil. The taste of today's vegetables, grown in depleted soil with pesticides and chemical fertilizers, is less rich than our grandparents remember. A constant hum of lights, generators, air-conditioners, and traffic drowns out the songs of birds in the cities where most people live now.

To say that ecological devastation does not make sense is to acknowledge that we are literally losing or dulling our senses by destroying the more than human world. And, if Merleau-Ponty is right that being, creativity and flourishing (of life and meaning) rest on our senses, this senseless pattern threatens being itself. The question of regaining our senses then is a question of ethics **and** existence.

There are obvious ways that humans can regain their senses. Our diminished sight can be restored by reducing gas emissions and industrial pollutants and by preserving and planting rich forests. Reducing or eliminating the most dangerous air pollutants and tightening air standards can also help protect the tenderness of skin and delicate sense of smell. Sustainable, organic and

local farming can enliven our sense of taste. Organic gardening and native plants attract birds and insects. Decreasing our energy consumption will allow these beings and others to hear one another and their songs will reach human ears, as well. Expansive preserved areas will enable the voices of coyotes, wolves and others to cry out and seek out others. These steps are more than a utopian moral vision, they are part of a necessary embrace of being.

Ecological ethicists sometimes point to practices and traditions of indigenous populations as remedies to Western exploitation. Detractors have suggested that native peoples have not always been “ecologically-friendly.”<sup>1</sup> Gary Nabham argues that indigenous people do not necessarily have a “conservation gene” that makes them immune from harming other species. But, he argues, indigenous populations have been responsive to the ecological world: “indigenous cultures probably learned to manage vulnerable habitats and plant populations in response to earlier episodes of overexploitation.”<sup>2</sup> Through interaction and encounters with the more-than-human world, many indigenous peoples have come to understand and appreciate their interrelation within the ecological world. This recognition shaped many of their cultures to live in harmony with other beings.

The Koyukon people of the northwestern interior of Alaska, for instance, still subsist today in the country they have occupied for at least a thousand years. Richard Nelson observes that Westerners identify this country as “wilderness” because they are unable to conceive of humans living in an area without fundamentally disrupting its “natural state” or harmony of beings.<sup>3</sup> What distinguishes the Koyukon from Western understandings of occupying a land is that they exhibit a humility toward the rest of nature. They believe that humans have a role, which is to serve and attend to the natural world, and they understand that they live in a world that senses. Nelson explains that “Traditional Koyukon people live in a world that watches, in a forest of eyes. A person moving through nature--however wild, remote, even desolate the place

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<sup>1</sup> Shepard Krech III criticizes the romanticization of Native Americans and points to examples of overuse by indigenous peoples. See Shepard Krech III, *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999)

<sup>2</sup> This quote appears on p. 116 in Anna L. Peterson, *Being Human: Ethics, Environment, and Our Place in the World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001). For further reading see Gary Paul Nabham, *Cultures of Habitat: On Nature, Culture, and Story*. (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 1997)

<sup>3</sup> See Richard Nelson, *Making Prayers to the Raven: A Koyukon View of the Northern Forest* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983)

may be--is never truly alone. The surroundings are aware, sensate, personified.”<sup>4</sup> The senses of the Koyukon people are open to the more-than-human world and they know that this world of diverse beings senses them. It is this kind of sense that is missing in Western exploitation. So while limiting consumption, reducing pollution, and farming organically are steps toward ecological healing, they are not answers to the senselessness.

The senselessness of our present situation has only one remedy. We have to engage our senses as fully as possible. We have to allow for the tender exchanges of the flesh, which means we have to reveal the tenderness that we have tried to conceal with our constructions. It is not surprising that what humans call “making love” is an exchange of touch in the most tender of places. Intimacy, responsiveness, and relation in its fullness is tenderness. Too often, humans try to escape tenderness. We try to name it, describe it, explain it, and categorize it so that we feel the tenderness less intensely, so that we steel ourselves against it. We think that by articulating our most profound senses we become more human or more highly-cultured when in fact what we do is distance ourselves from the tenderness that is most human, most fleshly, most truly who we are as beings.

The most intense senses and emotions that humans experience lack words. There are no words for our deepest pains. There are no words to describe our deepest joys. There are no words to contain our deepest grief or appreciation. There are no words for our tenderness, because this tenderness, this sensitivity is beneath and behind our words, in the depths of our sensing and relating with other beings. We should not retreat from this depth or fortify ourselves against tenderness, these efforts towards senselessness have been killing our world.

How do we engage our senses? How do we plunge ourselves into the sensual world? How do we approach and attend to other beings when we have become so afraid of them? One way is to let children lead us. Maybe, we can follow them in their openness, interest, and delight in other beings. As we follow maybe we can resist the temptations to hurry or instruct our children. Possibly, we can become apprentices to them, in their attention and interaction with the world and maybe, just maybe they can help us recover our senses. It might be that we do not deliver our children, but that they, in fact, can deliver us to the world.

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<sup>4</sup> quote appears in Peterson p. 103

I have no more words for now. My daughter wants to go for a walk and I think that I will follow along.

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