The Rhythm of Embodied Encounters:

Intersubjectivity in Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology

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Acknowledgements

Summary/Résumé

This thesis takes its starting point from Maurice Merleau-Ponty's insight that in order to make sense of the experience of others, one needs to describe how differences are perceived from the perspective of the subject's own body. This study of intersubjective interactions is approached from what I call a 'broad phenomenological' point of view. 'Broad phenomenology' encompasses (i) a more traditional and ontological notion of phenomenology (as read through Merleau-Ponty's writings), (ii) a rereading of this phenomenology through a feminist lens (notably through Luce Irigaray's work), and (iii) a contemporary cognitive scientific notion of embodied cognition. These three approaches have in common that they are concerned with the lived experience of particular, embodied persons who are dynamically related to the world and to other persons within this world.

I present a phenomenology of difference that is also a phenomenology of birth, volatility, and implication. Taking my lead from Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, and contemporary feminist thought, I argue that through encountering others we are both actively shaping and passively undergoing a continual transformation. In addition, by analysing Merleau-Pony's notions of 'flesh' [*chair*] and 'divergence' [*écart*] together with Heidegger's 'abyss' [*Abgrund*], I uncover an ontological birthplace of intersubjectivity that can no longer be characterised by categories and oppositions. Instead it is a place of radical openness and interbeing [*interêtre*]. This does not imply that the intersubjective relation is always friendly and safe. On the contrary, the exchange between subjects is volatile and thus it is always open to re-volution. This means that our exchange is marked by return, repetition, and responsivity, but also by violence and upheaval. To say that we are im-pli-cated in one another literally means that we are folded into one another [*Ineinander*]. Being implicated in one another means that subjects are connected in an ever re-newing, precarious rhythm of attunement and differentiation.

Le point de départ de cette thèse est l'idée de Maurice Merleau-Ponty qu'afin de comprendre l'expérience des autres, nous devons décrire comment les différences sont perçues à partir de la perspective du corps propre du sujet percevant. Le point de vue de cette étude des interactions intersubjectives est ce que nous appelons 'phénoménologie au sens large'. Cette 'phénoménologie au sens large' inclut (i) une notion plus traditionnelle, ontologique, de la phénoménologie (telle que lue à travers Merleau-Ponty), (ii) une relecture de cette phénoménologie à travers une lentille féministe (notamment à travers l'œuvre de Luce Irigaray), et (iii) une notion contemporaine, cognitive et scientifique de la cognition incarnée. Ces trois approches ont en commun d'avoir pour sujet l'expérience vécue de personnes incarnées particulières qui sont en rapport dynamique avec le monde ainsi qu'avec d'autres personnes au sein de ce monde.

Je présente une phénoménologie de la différence qui est également une phénoménologie de la naissance, de la volatilité et de l'implication. Prenant comme point de départ Husserl, Merleau-Ponty et la pensée féministe contemporaine, je défends la thèse qu'au travers de nos rencontres avec autrui nous formons activement ainsi que subissions passivement une transformation continue. De plus, en analysant les notions merleau-pontienne de 'chair' et d' 'écart' avec la notion heideggérienne d'*abysse* [*Abgrund*], nous découvrons un lieu de naissance ontologique de l'intersubjectivité qui ne peut plus être caractérisé par les catégories et les oppositions ; il est plutôt question d'un lieu d'ouverture radicale et d' 'entre-être' [*interêtre*]. Ceci n'implique pas que la relation intersubjective soit toujours amicale et sûre. Au contraire, l'échange entre les sujets est volatile et est conséquemment toujours ouverte à la ré-volution. Ceci signifie que nos échanges sont marqués par le retour, la répétition et la capacité de réponse, mais aussi par la violence et le bouleversement. Dire que nous sommes im-pli-qués l'un dans l'autre signifie littéralement que nous sommes pliés l'un dans l'autre [*Ineinander*]. Être impliqué l'un dans l'autre signifie que les sujets sont connectés en un rythme précaire et sans cesse renouvelé d'accord et de différentiation.

List of Abbreviations

I use the following abbreviations to refer to works by Maurice Merleau-Ponty:

CRO   "The Child's Relations with Others" / « Les relations avec autrui chez l'enfant »

EM   "Eye and Mind" / *L'Œil et l'Esprit*

EO   "The Experience of Others" / « L'expérience d'autrui »

HLP   *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology / Notes de cours sur* L'origine de la géométrie *de Husserl*

HT   *Humanism and Terror / Humanisme et Terreur*

IP   *L'institution dans l'histoire personnelle et publique*

PhP   *Phenomenology of Perception / Phenomenology de la perception*

PnPH   "Philosophy and Non-Philosophy since Hegel" / « Philosophie et non-philosophie depuis Hegel »

PW   *The Prose of the World / La prose du monde*

SNS   *Sense and Nonsense / Sens et non-sens*

VI   *The Visible and the Invisible. / Le visible et l'invisible*

Detailed bibliographic information is given on the first mention of the work and in the bibliography. In all references the English page numbers precede the French. Whenever possible I have used available English translations of French and German texts. Occasionally I indicate that I have modified a translation for accuracy. In those cases I have included the original word or phrase in square brackets. When no translation has been available, the translations are my own. In these cases the original quote is included in a footnote.

Introduction: how to write, read, and do phenomenology

> But if the book really teaches me something, if the other person is really another, at a certain stage I must be surprised, disoriented. If we are to meet not just through what we have in common but what is different between us—which presupposes a transformation of myself and of the other as well—then our differences can no longer be opaque qualities. (PW 142/198)[1]

Writing is really re-writing. It is the reworking of one's previous notes and drafts, the rephrasing of unfinished sentences and the insertion of those remarks that were jotted down hastily on a piece of scrap paper just so one could remember that sudden valuable thought. Writing is really rewriting and thus each final document is a *palimpsest*, a document that is numerous times wiped clean again and written-over. It is this curious word, palimpsest, which interests me here. It is constructed out of the Greek word *psestós* which is related to the verb 'to rub' or 'to smooth' (*psên*). The prefix *pálin* adds 'again' to it. Thus, *palímpsestos* does not really refer to writing again but instead it speaks about something being 'scraped again', 'smoothed-again', or being re-erased. Writing, I should say, is really *re-erasing*. One erases the traces that gave rise to the final thoughts by scraping them off the page, by smoothing them over, and levelling them out.

The above is not just an account of how this document was created or re-erased. The palimpsestic properties of a document have further significances on how we read the works and notes of others and write about these works. It is important to understand that the erasure of a palimpsestic document is not an annihilation of

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1. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Prose of the World,* ed. Claude Lefort, trans. John O'Neill (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973). *La prose du monde* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969). Hereafter cited in text as PW. In all references the English page number precedes the French.

the previous thoughts, but rather that the traces become an (in)visible part of the final text.

To read is to encounter a thought that is more or less strange or familiar. It is also to encounter multiple hidden traces in a work: the authors' erasures, the glimpses of her context and the residue of one's own life. Consequently reading a palimpsestic text is never straightforward and uncomplicated. But this complication of reading is necessary if I want the text to speak to me. If a book really teaches me or touches me, "it is necessary that I be surprised or disoriented" (PW 142/198) and that the differences in the text (the complications of the text) rise to the surface. The palimpsestic texts disorient me through their multiple layers of meaning and re-orient me towards something that is different from what I already know. Reading is thus truly disorientation and redirection.

The above thoughts on writing and reading are methodological insofar as they reveal something about the way in which this thesis is written, and about the manner in which Merleau-Ponty's (un)finished texts and notes are read and at times redirected and transformed. But these thoughts also begin to reveal the central concern of this thesis, namely they portray the encounter with *difference*: differences in texts or notes, differences between a reader and a writer, differences between two subjects that bring with them their own (bodily) traces of histories, politics, cultures, genders, races, classes, ages, etc. In this thesis I explore the embodied encounter between subjects who are different. I present a palimpsestic phenomenology of intersubjectivity, difference, and implication. The phenomenology of difference that I present here is strongly grounded in Merleau-Ponty's thought, but it also goes further than it when I continue the hidden or sometimes little noticed traces in his

work and (re)think them to their conclusion, and when I engage in a dialogue with his predecessors, contemporaries, and critics from different disciplines.

I present a phenomenology of difference that is also a phenomenology of birth, volatility, and our implication in one another: it is a phenomenology of being born together and of giving birth to each other. I argue that through encountering others we are both actively giving and passively undergoing a continual birth. I read Merleau-Ponty's use of the Husserlian *Ineinander* [in-one-another] as our mutual *im-pli-cation*. In addition I uncover an ontological birthplace [*Ursprung*] of both myself and another that can no longer be characterised by categories and oppositions. This does not mean that the intersubjective relation is always friendly and safe. Instead the exchange between subjects is volatile and always open to re-volution, which means that our exchange is marked by return and repetition, by violence and upheaval, and by renewal and transformation.

(i) The diversity of difference

Much of the literature on intersubjectivity characterises the discussion in terms of one's own subjectivity versus 'the Other'. I argue that this use of otherness is misleading. To start with the subject and to set over against it *the* Other, implies that the Other is just *one* person. In a footnote to *The Visible and the Invisible* Merleau-Ponty writes, "[I]f the access to the other [*autrui*] is an entry into a constellation of others [*des autres*]…it is difficult to maintain that the other [*l'autre*] be nothing but *the* absolute negation of myself. For when it is a matter of absolute negation there is but

one of them" (VI 81-2/111-2).[2] Of the Other of absolute negation there is only one, and the difficulty of intersubjectivity is how I can perceive and approach this one who is absolutely different from me. However, in our daily lives we meet more than one Other: we meet other*s*. It is important to keep in mind that there is not just *one* otherness that is set apart from the sphere of my ownness. I claim that the label 'the Other' overlooks and fails to include the diversity of otherness. Discussing otherness in terms of 'the Other' has both simplified the issue of intersubjectivity and made it more difficult.

On the one hand, the difficulty of the *one* Other is that this Other is set up as so wholly different that no common ground remains between Other and Self. The Other now has been turned into a sort of limit concept that can never be known to us and always and forever lies beyond our personal horizons. I do not here want to claim the opposite, namely that others can be completely known, but my worry is that the label 'the Other' creates a wholly different Other with whom communication is not possible. On the other hand, the problem of intersubjectivity is simplified when the label the Other is attached to it because it mistakenly puts the Other in the category of a single being with clearly designated characteristics, namely everything that is the opposite of my characteristics. But, when my skin is white, what is the skin tone of the Other? When I am a man is the Other a woman or an ambiguously sexed or gendered individual (a neutral sex or a third sex)? Or when I am a Christian is the other a Muslim, a Buddhist or secular? When I am a human being is the other human

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2. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible,* trans. A. Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2000). *Le visible et l'invisible* (Paris: Gallimard collection tel, 2004 [1964]). Hereafter cited in text as VI. In all references the English page number precedes the French.

at all?[3] I worry that the use of 'the Other' emphasises a classification of beings according to dichotomised pairs that can be easily distinguished and that are often associated with a problematic history of oppression. I want to challenge the framework of dichotomous pairs by claiming that there is no necessarily clear opposite to any of my attributes and that to think in opposing pairs is politically and ethically problematic.[4] Contrary to this simplified version of Otherness, people are different in *many* respects, e.g., we all have more or less physically differing bodies; there are bodies of different heights and sizes, bodies with different sexual organs, different brain sizes, different hormonal and neuronal organisations, different skin tones, bodies with smaller or larger ears, etc. In addition, our bodies have different socially constructed identities such as gendered, racial, class, religious, lingual, national, educational, economic, legal, and political identities. These social and biological identities are sometimes related to each other, sometimes not at all. Another complication of embodied existence is that the identity one has in the public eye (often based on certain perceivable and constructed biological or social

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3. Emmanuel Levinas would argue that these questions are not the right ones to ask. According to Levinas the Other is radically separated from the Self (or the Same) and outside of any ontological questioning: "The other is other than being. Being excludes all alterity" (Emmanuel Levinas, "Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity," in *Collected Philosophical Papers,* trans. A. Lingis [Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987], 70). Merleau-Ponty and Levinas take a radically different starting point from which to engage the question of self and otherness. Thomas Busch writes that "Levinas and Merleau-Ponty each speak a different language" (in "Ethics and ontology: Levinas and Merleau-Ponty," *Man and World* 25 [1992]: 197). While it is worthwhile to compare these languages and the differing ontological and ethical projects of these thinkers, I will not undertake this project here. For an excellent analysis on this topic see Busch's paper. Busch questions them both when he asks first Merleau-Ponty: "Where does one locate obligation in the phenomenological field?" and then Levinas: "Does not the total separation…between ethics and ontology risk reducing ethics to a formalism, to a devaluing of the political, and to fragmenting the ethical act of judgment itself?" (ibid., 200).

4. Elizabeth Grosz points out that the problem with dichotomisation cannot be located in the number two, rather it is located in the *one:* "the one can allow itself no independent autonomous other, all otherness is cast in a mold of sameness…The one allows no twos, threes, fours. It cannot tolerate any *other.*" Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 211n1. By holding on too strongly to *oneself* others are caricatured as one and the same Other who is radically divorced from us. Thus we end up with the binary between the One and the Other.

particularities of the body) might not correspond to one's subjectively experienced identity. In *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism,* Elizabeth Grosz insightfully shows how the discourse on the body should include both a movement from the *inside out*, that is, it should take into account the lived experience of particularly shaped bodies, and a movement from the *outside in*, that is, it should look at the various cultural inscriptions on the body.

I worry that discussing otherness in terms of the one Other erases the complexity of the biological and social makeup of the other and of the self. Linda Martín Alcoff convincingly argues in her book *Visible Identities: Race, Gender and the Self* that both another and I are not clearly demarcated subjects with a discrete and stable set of interests. Instead Alcoff emphasises the hermeneutic and phenomenological insight that "the self operates in a situated plane, always culturally located with great specificity even as it is open onto an indeterminate future and reinterpretable past not of its own creation."[5] But, Alcoff points out, even this hermeneutic insight is often misinterpreted by implying that the situation of the self is consistent, monocultural, and internally coherent.[6] Alcoff shows that the identity of the self and the identities of others are much more fluid and complex structures than is implied by the simple division of me over and against the Other.

When the label 'the Other' includes so many differences and complexities of identity formation and experience, I do not think it is correct to discuss the problem of intercorporeity as a problem between the subject and the Other, rather it is the problem of the encounter of *a* situated subject, with a particular and possibly

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5. Linda Martín Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender and the Self* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 43, 82.

6. Alcoff's claim is that especially Western hermeneutic and phenomenological traditions are guilty of viewing situation and culture as a stable and consistent factor in one's life (*Visible Identities,* 124).

incoherent biology and a socio-cultural history, with *an*other situated subject with a particular possibly incoherent biology and a socio-cultural history. For this reason I will not use the term 'the Other' but instead speak of the <u>o</u>ther, <u>an</u>other or of other<u>s</u>.[7] The plural term is important in the sense that not all meetings between people are dyadic, but rather multiple persons are often involved in an encounter even when only implied or imagined.

Parallel to the discussion of otherness and difference, throughout the thesis the concept of the subject will be explored and tested. My discussion starts with a simplified notion of the subject. As a result of Merleau-Ponty's initial rejection of the non-localised disembodied gaze, the subject presented is the fully conscious and self-reflective subject whose body is the unchanging centre and constitutive interpreter of her world. This simple notion of the subject is problematised through revealing that this subject is unable to truly encounter others. As a preliminary remark on subjectivity I stress the following: taking Alcoff to heart, I agree that the subject is not a unified, coherent, and stable structure. By exploring the relation with others who are different, the simple notion of embodied subjectivity needs to be complicated, more layers will be added and its coherence will at places be pulled apart. The subject will turn out to be a centre that can be decentred, a reflective personal 'I' who lives precisely anonymously and unreflectively in the world, it is a subject who in her very core carries the full complexity of otherness, and it is a subject who, in Merleau-Ponty's words, is marked by *reversibility*. Through the course

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7. In this thesis I do not make the distinction between the notions 'alien' or 'stranger', and 'other'. One might want to refer to one's neighbour as an 'other' who is still part of one's own society. The 'stranger' would then be referring to someone who is *wholly* other and approaches one from somewhere outside one's own society and territory. See Anthony Steinbock, *Home and Beyond* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1995). Contrary to Steinbock I argue that the stranger is also another and that our neighbour is always also (partly) strange to us.

of the thesis the fluidity and fragmentation of the subject will become more and more apparent, all the while keeping in mind that the danger of making the concept of subjectivity a truly fluid concept is that it might slip away under one's fingers. The notion that subjectivity is fluid does not mean that subjectivity is a mere illusion and that subjectivity does not exist; subjectivity is a phenomenologically real experience. The fluidity of the concept needs not so much to be contained but to be sedimented[8] without thereby losing its dynamic, complicated, layered, and heterogeneous texture. Allow me to leave these loose threads here; they will be tied, disentangled, and reconnected over the course of this thesis.

While discussing the notion of intersubjectivity, I do not always present Merleau-Ponty's works in a chronological manner, rather I pursue the leading concerns of this thesis by putting fragments of his different works together, comparing them and connecting them. This means that in the text I jump from earlier work to later work, from unfinished material to complete works. While this might be disorientating at first, I do this to show that what I am mainly concerned with is to trace and complicate the notion of intersubjectivity through reading several of Merleau-Ponty's works rather than the reverse. That is, the primary aim of this work is *not* to show the development of Merleau-Ponty's thought by way of discussing one of his main notions. All the same, I recognise that in Merleau-Ponty's body of work there is a clear movement from a primarily phenomenological project towards an ontological questioning of the grounding notions of this same phenomenology;[9] there is a movement from a concern with embodied existence towards a concern with existence as *flesh*, and from double sensations towards

8. See chapter two (2.2.1) and three (3.2.2).
9. See VI 165/217, 176/228.

reversibility. I do not want to do injustice to these different aspects and developments of his work, nevertheless, it is also possible to detect a continuity of some of these main concerns in his earlier and later thought. When the thought behind these notions or the understanding of the centrality of these notions has changed, I point that out. The fragmentation and the criss-crossing through his work together form a diverse and complicated understanding of intersubjectivity. In this sense the set-up of the thesis mirrors the discussion of the subject and the other in this thesis, i.e., as fragmented, complex, and layered structures that come together in different identities.[10]

(ii) The phenomenological reduction: the incomparable monster

To perceive phenomenologically means to bracket one's presuppositions about the world in order to be able to describe its phenomena as they appear to a consciousness. In Edmund Husserl's earlier writings this takes the shape of bracketing all of one's assumptions and beliefs about the world, even the assumption that the world exists. This reduction brings consciousness to a level of purity in which consciousness, "instead of living *in* them [its positings], instead of effecting *them*…effect[s] acts of *reflection* directed to them; and…seize[s] upon them themselves as the *absolute* being which they are."[11] In the introduction to the *Phenomenology of*

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10. The layered structure of consciousness should not be understood as an ordered and hierarchical addition of layers, one of which gives rise to another, which gives rise to another. Bettina Bergo writes: "The 'layers' which become 'fields of presence' in Merleau-Ponty, are not deduced from each other in a descending or ascending order that would be part of a transcendental logic. Thus one 'layer' no longer gives unilateral rise to another. They are always already imbricated, or contaminated by each other." Bettina Bergo, "Philosophy as *Perspectiva Artificialis:* Merleau-Ponty's Critique of Husserlian Constructivism*,"* in: *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology,* Maurice Merleau-Ponty (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2002), 164.

11. Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, First Book, General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology,* trans. F. Kersten (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1982), 95

Perception Merleau-Ponty describes Husserl's phenomenological reduction as follows:

> It is because we are through and through compounded of relationships with the world that for us the only way to become aware of the fact is to suspend the resultant activity, to refuse it our complicity (to look at it *ohne mitzumachen* [without participating] as Husserl often says), or yet again, to put it 'out of play'. Not because, we reject the certainties of common sense and a natural attitude to things—they are, on the contrary, the constant theme of philosophy—but because, being the presupposed basis of any thought, they are taken for granted, and go unnoticed, and because in order to arouse them and bring them to view, we have to suspend for a moment our recognition of them. (PhP xiii/13-14)[12]

Merleau-Ponty expresses that as phenomenologists we need to perceive without participating, not because we want to remove ourselves from the world, but in order to draw to the foreground precisely this relationship with the world. Merleau-Ponty's description of the phenomenological method should be understood in the context of his earlier remarks: (i) he writes that "man [*sic*] is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself" (PhP xi/11); and (ii) he worries that the reduction is too often depicted as "the return to transcendental consciousness before which the world is spread out and completely transparent" (PhP xi/11). In addition Merleau-Ponty is particularly concerned with embodied existence as part of the Heideggerian notion of "being-in-the-world" and he has read selections of Husserl's later work *The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* in which Husserl emphasises the historical background of consciousness.[13] Consequently Merleau-

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(§50). *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie, I. Buch, Allgemeine Einführung in die reine Phänomenologie* (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976 [1913]), 95 (§50). Hereafter cited as *Ideas I*. Page numbers always refer to the original German pagination (found in the margins of the English translation). For clarity the paragraph number is also given.

12. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. C. Smith (London: Routledge, 2000). *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris, Gallimard collection tel, 2005 [1945]). Hereafter cited in text as PhP. In all references the English page number precedes the French.

13. Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology,* trans. David Carr (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970). *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendentale Phänomenologie (1934-1937)* (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1962). Hereafter cited as

Ponty limits the reduction when he writes:

> [t]he most important lesson which the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction. This is why Husserl is constantly re-examining the possibility of the reduction. If we were absolute mind, the reduction would present no problem. But since, on the contrary, *we are in the world*, since indeed our reflections are carried out in the temporal flux on to which we are trying to seize…there is no thought which embraces all thought. (PhP xiv/14, my emphases)

According to Merleau-Ponty, the complete phenomenological reduction will fail because it is impossible to purify consciousness from its embodied existence in the world. That the complete reduction cannot be carried out does not mean that phenomenology is futile. Instead Merleau-Ponty interprets Husserl's ongoing concern with writing introductions to phenomenology as an example of the necessary effort to start the project of 'purified' reflection over and over again. The philosopher "is a perpetual beginner" and phenomenology is "an ever renewed experiment" (PhP xiv/14).

In a much later text, *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology* (lecture notes from 1960), Merleau-Ponty readdresses the problem of reflective separation and the experiment that is phenomenology.[14] While in this context he does not explicitly mention the phenomenological method, I show how his insights into 'interested' and 'disinterested' living reveal the full complexity of perceiving phenomenologically.[15] In *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology* Merleau-Ponty discusses unreflective living as living through our interests into the world. When I am interested in something I *live*

Crisis. In all references the English page number precedes the German. For clarity the paragraph number is added.

14. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology,* ed. Leonard Lawlor with Bettina Bergo (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2002). *Notes de cours sur* L'origine de la géométrie *de Husserl,* ed. Renaud Barbaras (Paris : Presses Universitaires de France, 1998). Hereafter cited in text as HLP. In all references the English page number precedes the French.

15. In *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology* Merleau-Ponty discusses interest and disinterest in the context of the 'horizon of humanity'. I here discuss it in a much broader sense namely in the context of living in a world in which one encounters other humans but also objects, animals, ideas, etc.

in it, I am wholly *with* it and do not experience myself as separate from it. Standing on the C.P.R. train bridge in Saskatoon I see an American white pelican flying over my head. The grace of the bird's floating and the power of its wingspan take hold of me and I can be 'lost' for minutes following this bird in its flight, feeling myself being lifted up in the air as if I was flying too. I am interested in the pelican, this interest has drawn me out of myself, and I am unreflectively living *with* the beautiful bird. Similarly, when I listen to a conversation that I am interested in, the conversation draws me in and makes me become part of it to such an extent that there is just the conversation in which I lose myself and it does not matter anymore from which body the words are spoken.[16] Merleau-Ponty writes that living *interestedly* in this manner means that I "coexist" with the world, he then adds that this interested living in the world turns me into becoming an "incomparable monster" (HLP 36/43). He uses this interesting reference from Malraux's novel *Man's Fate* only a few times throughout his later writings.[17] His use of the term 'incomparable monster' in this context indicates that in my interested living no comparison between myself and the world (or other) is possible. I interpret this in two ways: (i) losing myself in my interest *in* another means that I am no longer experiencing myself as differentiated from another. If this is the case then there is really nothing to compare or to measure between us. Thus I am incomparable when "I coexist with other humans through my interests" (HLP 36/43). (ii) But, one might wonder, why do I lose myself in the flight of the pelican or in a particular conversation? Is it not precisely because of *my* interests? Another person might not even register the pelican because she is instead

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16. The above examples of 'living through one's interest in the world' are of course reflections after the moment which was precisely non-reflective.
17. VI 62-3/89, PW 19/29.

enjoying the slightly unnerving height of the bridge; another might not be interested in the conversation but find it utterly boring and cannot wait to get out of it. I am interested in this conversation *because* I am a philosopher and I am interested in the pelican because I generally enjoy watching birds. Thus through *my* interests I am incomparable insofar as I am unique and necessarily tied to my own situation and my own fascination for this situation. Now suddenly there is nothing to compare myself with because I am without equal, I am "not one of them" (HLP 36/43) who are only figures in *my* world. Bringing these two aspects together, I am the incomparable *monster* precisely because (i) I am 'lost' in the world and thus comparison does not matter; and (ii) I am without equal. The monster that I am in my unreflective (interested) living is both defined by its co-existence with others and by its always being uniquely situated and for that reason no longer co-existing with others. As an incomparable monster I live paradoxically: both *with* others and *alone* in my uniqueness.

Living *dis*interestedly I am not engulfed in the world in the same sense. Instead I take a step back and look at this human existence, at *my* existence. I now no longer live into the world through my interests, instead I call them to mind, I suspend them, and become a "disinterested spectator" (HLP 36/43). As a disinterested spectator, I reflect on the world, on my own being, and the being of others. Through this reflection I discover the world (Merleau-Ponty writes that I discover "humanity in general" [HLP 36/43]) but I also discover that I always already belong to this world. Thus, as a spectator I first take myself *out* of the world in order then to put myself *back* there again (see also HLP 36/43). This description of disinterested reflection sounds interestingly close to Merleau-Ponty's descriptions of the phenomenologist

practicing the phenomenological reduction. That is the phenomenologist suspends her interests and withdraws herself from the world in order to rediscover the world and to find that she always already belongs to the world. As phenomenologists our reductive method has a paradoxical effect since we remove ourselves from the world in order to discover that this was never possible since we always already belong to it.

Because as a human being one is both the interested incomparable monster and the disinterested spectator, Merleau-Ponty suggests that one lives in a paradox: "when it engulfs me truly (interests), it does not engulf me truly (monster). When it does not engulf me truly since I conceive it and me in it (I escape), then I autoposit myself in it. Antihumanistic humanism" (HLP 37/43). This paradox is 'antihumanistic humanism' since (i) it affirms that we *belong to humanity* through unreflectively co-existing with other human beings and through reflectively returning to them; and (ii) it affirms that *we are no longer human* because we are unreflectively without equal and we reflectively aim to withdraw ourselves from humanity. To rephrase: we belong to humanity, both passively (living with and 'in' others) and actively (reflectively recognising our belonging to the human world), and we simultaneously set ourselves apart as different from others, again both passively (by living through *our* interests) and actively (reflectively withdrawing to disinterestedness).

The above insights are significant for the phenomenological project because they emphasise that one cannot actively will one's complete withdrawal from the world. Both actively and passively one always already belongs to the world. Returning to the *Phenomenology of Perception,* Merleau-Ponty takes inspiration from Eugen Fink when he writes that the phenomenologist never really cuts her ties with the world,

instead she withdraws in "wonder in the face of the world" and she "steps back to watch the forms of transcendence fly up like sparks from a fire" (PhP xiii/14). Later Merleau-Ponty describes a similar withdrawal when he writes that philosophy should describe the things by "letting them be" (VI 102/136).[18] Thus the phenomenological reduction in Merleau-Ponty's work is the ever-renewed experiment of stepping away in wonder in face of the world, perceiving it by 'letting it be' while realising that this 'letting be' is never easy or uncomplicated.

(iii) Broad phenomenology and an overview of the chapters

This thesis studies intersubjective relations from a broad phenomenological point of view. This notion of a 'broad phenomenology' encompasses (i) a more traditional and ontological notion of phenomenology (as read through Merleau-Ponty's work), (ii) a rereading of this phenomenology through a feminist lens, and (iii) a contemporary cognitive scientific notion of embodied cognition. These three approaches have in common that they are concerned with the lived experience of particular embodied persons who are dynamically related to the world and to other persons within this world. The aim is to discover through this broad phenomenological approach how our bodies are implicated in difference.

The feminist perspective underlies the main concern of this thesis: namely how a phenomenology of difference can be formulated from out of a Merleau-Pontian framework of embodied existence. While on the one hand his emphasis on *embodied* existence is promising for a feminist project it is also problematic because he often

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18. I discuss this 'wonder' and the 'letting be' of phenomenology in more detail in chapter four (4.3).

strips this body of sexually specific differences.[19] The perceiving body becomes a body in general without a gender, it is *anyone's* body. This concern is addressed in chapter one and two. Chapter one takes as its starting point a feminist critique of the discourse on the 'Other' as presented by Linda Alcoff and Luce Irigaray. Phenomenologically to make sense of the experience of others, one needs to account for the perception of difference from the point of the familiarity of one's own body. I analyse what it means to claim, as Merleau-Ponty does, that the body is a 'measurant' of another body.

The second chapter takes its starting point from within a dialogue with cognitive science and psychology. Recently there has been growing interest in combining cognitive science and phenomenology in order to gain more insight into 'embodied cognition.'[20] In this interesting cross-disciplinary field one is concerned with exploring the dynamic coupling of an embodied mind with its environment. Both Husserl's and Merleau-Ponty's writings lend themselves well to such an interdisciplinary approach. Merleau-Ponty engages with the psychologists of his time in order to illumine his phenomenological insights. This interest in psychology is most apparent in his writings and lectures on child psychology during his time at the Sorbonne (1949-52). Chapter two opens with the problem of solipsism in order to

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19. See for example: Judith Butler, "Sexual Ideology and Phenomenological Description: A Feminist Critique of Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*," in *The Thinking Muse: Feminism and Modern French Philosophy,* ed. Jeffner Allen and Iris Marion Young (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 85-100. Shannon Sullivan, "Domination and Dialogue in Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*," *Hypatia* 12, no. 1 (1997): 1-19. Silvia Stoller, "Reflections on Feminist Merleau-Ponty Skepticism," *Hypatia* 15, no.1 (2000): 175-182. Sonia Kruks, "Merleau-Ponty and the Problem of Difference in Feminism," in *Feminist Interpretations of Maurice Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Dorothea Olkowski and Gail Weiss (University Park: Penn State Press, 2006), 25-48.

20. There is a fast developing body of literature on phenomenology and cognitive science. See for example the journal *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences.* See also: J. Petitot, F. Varela, B. Pachoud and J.M. Roy, eds., *Naturalizing Phenomenology: Contemporary Issues in Phenomenology and Cognitive Science* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999). Evan Thompson, *Mind in Life: Biology, Phenomenology, and the Sciences of Mind* (Cambridge: Belknap, Harvard University Press, 2007). Andy Clark, *Being There: Putting Brain Body and World Together Again* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997).

reframe it in terms of anonymity and to critique Shaun Gallagher and Beata Stawarska's rejection of the anonymous body as a body without an identity. Analysing the imitation behaviour of infants and adults, I reinterpret Merleau-Ponty's controversial notion of anonymity in terms of habit and rhythm. This anonymous body is able to 'tune into' other bodies and to take over those bodies' patterns of behaviour. I argue that anonymity is *double*, both individual and general.

A main concern in the third chapter is how a body that is always related to its own past can encounter something or someone who is truly new or different than oneself. The chapter explores the dynamics of the Hegelian dialectic and Husserlian institution [*Stiftung*] in order to concentrate on giving a rigorous exposition of Merleau-Ponty's complex notion of institution. Institution is interpreted in the context of the body's rupturing rhythmic relation to its own past and future. I argue that the new can rupture the historical rhythm of the body when it is understood through the notion of the leap of birth. Merleau-Ponty's view of birth is distinguished from Hannah Arendt's concept of natality and related to a more Levinasian sense of responsivity, which is, however, not yet ethical for Merleau-Ponty. Introducing birth into the argument allows me to view Merleau-Ponty's work through a feminist lens. I argue that the encounter with the other is a mutual giving birth to each other and as such this encounter is able to renew and transform both our bodies. The fourth chapter continues the investigation into the birth, or origin, of the relations between embodied subjects. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty's later ontological works and connecting them to important observations that I borrow from the later Husserl and Heidegger, from Eugen Fink, Mauro Carbone, and Renaud Barbaras, the chapter explores what Merleau-Ponty calls the folding of the

'flesh'. I argue that the flesh of the world is the condition of the possibility for difference to break forth. The relationship between subjects is marked by an openness, or potentiality. The encounter with the other is presented as a mutual 'letting be' that receives the other subject in difference.

The fifth chapter returns to a more psychological and phenomenological register. Beginning with the development of young children it concentrates on the reflective properties of the body. By analysing the 'mirror stage' I explore the Lacanian debt in Merleau-Ponty's notion of reversibility and open it up for a feminist critique and a re-evaluation in terms of a more intermodal and multisensory notion of the reversible body. The chapter ends on a worrisome note because Merleau-Ponty's use of the psychoanalytic notions 'sadomasochism' and 'self-desire' render the intersubjective relation inherently violent. In the afterword, a return to the Irigarayan critique and an exploration of Merleau-Ponty's difficult term 'interbeings', leads me to transform the violent relation of the *Ineinander* into a more constructive (but never 'safe') notion of co-looking and implication, which is a transformative looking *with* the other who is different than oneself.

Working in a broadly phenomenological (interdisciplinary) field is not unproblematic. Just as it is naïve to imagine the intersubjective relation as always productively and harmoniously attuned, so it would hardly be realistic to imagine interdisciplinary work to be always fruitful, cooperative, and seamlessly fitting together. Helena de Preester and Veroniek Knockaert express it well when they write:

> Interdisciplinarity demands more than explaining one's own idiom to other parties…[It] also asks for the ability to let oneself be inspired and maybe even confused by other perspectives. It is a matter of both

clarification and confusion, as the evidence of one's own point of view might not turn out to be unshakable. One's own perspective may prove to be indeed a perspective.[21]

They continue to argue that the interdisciplinary encounter should *not* be a meeting in which differences are tolerated but not really engaged with: "confrontation should be sought for, as well as creative encounters opening up new paths for conceptualisation, research and (clinical) practice."[22] Their remarks on interdisciplinarity echo the comments that opened this thesis. Namely that disorientation and re-orientation are necessary if we want a text really to teach us something. Similarly when the other is really a different person then these differences should be able to confuse and possibly even worry us. The confrontation between *different* subjects should not only bring tolerance but it should also bring us face to face with our entanglement in one another and the possibility of transformation.

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21. Helena De Preester and Veroniek Knockaert, Introduction to *Body Image and Body Schema: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Body,* ed. Helena De Preester and Veroniek Knockaert (Amsterdam: John Benjamin's Publishing Company, 2005), 1. This great collection of papers gathers together diverse perspectives on the body from philosophers, psychoanalysts, neuroscientists, psychologists, psychiatrists, and a philologist.

22. De Preester & Knockaert, *Body Image and Body Schema,* 1-2.

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Perceiving another with my body

> My body is not only one perceived among others, it is the measurant [*mesurant*] of all, *Nullpunkt* of all the dimensions of the world. (VI 248-9/297)

There are those moments when I feel a shiver going through my body upon seeing another person walking in the freezing cold without a coat or when I cringe while watching an injection needle pierce somebody's skin. In response to my perception of this other, I tighten my scarf or I grasp my arm at the same spot where she is injected. I do not seem to control this reaction because it happens before I reflect on it myself. Through a sympathetic connection between our bodies I recognise my own feelings, intentions, ideas, actions, and habits in her. But is she really shivering as I am, and does she cringe when the needle pierces her skin? All things considered, maybe she has received a sedative and feels nothing at all. When I regard the experiences of another body from the point of view of the experiences of my own body, one has to wonder whether after all it is her body that I perceive. When I consider her to be similar to me, is it not rather *my* body that I perceive as if it were *hers*? For example, think again about my perception of another person receiving an injection. This body-being-pierced is understood from the point of view of my own body-as-if-it-were-pierced. My sentiment of the needle possibly piercing my own skin is used as the measure by which she is perceived. The result of this measurement is that I see her as similar to me because I ascribe to her my own body-as-if-it-were-pierced. I cringe while looking at her body because I perceive her body as a

possibility of my own.[1] In this case I would fail to perceive the other as she is, and instead I would overshadow her with the assumption that she is like me. I would immobilise her under my projective gaze.

This seemingly simple aspect of our daily experience, that is, having a sympathetic body that rightly or wrongly 'reads' and even 'feels' the emotions and intentions of other persons, gives rise to a wide array of philosophically interesting questions. In this chapter, I take up and analyse one essential piece of the phenomenological puzzle: the sympathetic body's projective or measuring perception. I analyse the (solipsist) problem of a projective perception with the help of Luce Irigaray's critique of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy. After this I reveal an initial complexity of the intersubjective relation by thinking the body's measuring dimension together with its affective dimension.

1.1 Perception as measuring

1.1.1 The pure gaze

In the current Western world we are often asked for our objectively neutral opinion on issues of politics.[2] We are urged at that moment to forget, for example, our

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1. I describe this sensation of feeling another body in terms of possibility in order to express that what is sensed here is not the same sensation as what one feels when one is *actually* being pierced by an injection needle. On the contrary, it is generally acknowledged that there is a rather large difference between the sensation of being injected in one's arm and the uncomfortable and more diffuse feeling in one's arm when perceiving another person being injected.

2. An example of this quest for neutrality can be found in the journalist's aim to be neutral and to report the facts as they truly are. In light of the discussion on whether or not so-called embedded journalists during the Iraqi war were able to be objective, H.D.S Greenway writes in the New York Times: "William Branigin's account in 'Embedded' of how he reported, in the Washington Post, the killing of Iraqi civilians at a checkpoint – an account markedly different from the Pentagon's – shows that being embedded does not necessarily lead to lost objectivity." And: "Is objectivity ever

cultural roots and our political convictions in order to discuss the issue *as it really is* by looking at the bare facts. Such an attitude is not only evident in the political domain, but is also prevalent in issues as diverse as economy, public policy, religion, and (social) science. For example, scientific research endeavours to study 'the facts' as they are in an objective manner. Variables and methods are controlled and statistically analysed such that an 'objective' conclusion can be drawn.[3] In (feminist) philosophy there is ample awareness of the dangers of taking up the so-called neutral position. In her paper "The Problem of Speaking for Others" Alcoff convincingly discusses the discursive danger of privileged locations[4] and points out that:

> there is no neutral place to stand free and clear in which one's words do not prescriptively affect or mediate the experience of others, nor is there a way to decisively demarcate a boundary between one's location and all others. Even a complete retreat from speech is of course not neutral since it allows the continued dominance of current discourses and acts by omission to reinforce their dominance.[5]

In the striving to be neutral and objective several assumptions are made, namely that the facts are accessible (and perceivable) and that we can take a position with regard to these facts that is not hampered by our own personal and cultural history and

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really possible or even desirable? Most reporters and editors would answer yes." What is evident in the above report is that these reporters can to a certain extent overcome their being embedded in the US army. But the question is whether the mere ability to report the facts *differently* than the army shows that one is truly objective. Can one escape one's embeddedness in one's own life? Greenway quotes Vietnam correspondent James Ward: "The best and most faithful of these characters come to understand that in some profound sense they are owned by their memories, and that in turn their own angle of vision…depends on the earliest circumstances of their own lives…and how danger was defined." H.D.S. Greenway, "Embedded With Their Satphones," *New York Times*, November 23, 2003, http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9A02E7DD1438F930A15752C1A9659 C8B63&scp=1&sq=Embedded+With+Their+Satphones+&st=nyt.

3. This is not to say that the results of properly conducted scientific experiments are not valuable. The main warning is the following: "I cannot shut myself up within the realm of science. All my knowledge of the world, even my scientific knowledge, is gained from my particular point of view, or from some experience of the world without which the symbols of science would be meaningless" (PhP viii/8-9).

4. Linda Alcoff, "The Problem of Speaking for Others," *Cultural Critique* 20 (Winter 1991-1992): 7.

5. Alcoff, "The Problem of Speaking for Others," 20.

geography. It is as if I should become a universal subject who can perceive the facts with a pure gaze. Merleau-Ponty writes that in order to attain the pure objective gaze of a universal subject I would have to suspend my temporal and local bodily existence by cutting all ties that connect me to the world and float above the world with a gaze that would be untouched by history, geography, and experience.[6] In this detached existence, everything would be transparent since I would see the world and the facts in the world *as they are* and thus I also would see others as their true selves because "there is nothing behind these faces and gestures, no domain to which I have no access" (PhP xii/12). From this objective position, the positions of others are no longer compelling. Engaging with them, my aim is not so much to listen to them but rather to show that they are misguided and fail to see the truth. In addition, as a universal subject I know them better than they know themselves and thus even when I listen to them I know their story better and I know what is the right thing to do for both of us.[7] This also means that the differences I perceive in our positions are no longer genuine or constructive, but rather the others' differences are their own mistake or are due to their unenlightened situation. It is evident that this kind of 'total view' on the world and others easily leads to paternalism, domination, and neglect of the position of others.

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6. Merleau-Ponty asks: "is being *kosmotheoros* my ultimate reality? Am I primitively the power to contemplate, a pure look which fixes the things in their temporal and local place and the essences in an invisible heaven; am I this ray of knowing that would have to arise from nowhere?" (VI 113/150).

7. bell hooks expresses a similar worry when she criticises a certain manner of speaking about the Other: "often this speech about the 'Other' annihilates, erases: 'No need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself…only talk about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way…such that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you, I write myself anew. I am still author, authority…the speaking subject…you are now at the center of my talk." bell hooks, "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness," in *Women Knowledge and Reality: Explorations in Feminist Philosophy,* ed. Ann Garry and Marilyn Pearsall (New York: Routledge, 1996), 54.

Against this view Merleau-Ponty maintains that obtaining the objective pure gaze is not a real possibility after all. Not having a history and a geographical location, I would *position* myself in a 'nothingness' or a 'nowhere' and thus I would *not be positioned* at all.[8] Not having a place in the world, I would not be able to express anything or take up a position since there would be no ground from which I could speak. In addition, it is not evident that I would be able to have experiences in any respect when I am positioned in nothingness. Merleau-Ponty asks: "is not to see always to see from somewhere?" (PhP 67/96)[9] and is our seeing not taking place through and from a *body*? For Merleau-Ponty it is crucial to understand that the very possibility of experience is located and embodied in existence:

> we have found underneath the objective and detached knowledge of the body that other knowledge which we have of it in virtue of its always being with us and of the fact that *we are our body*. In the same way we shall need to reawaken our experience of the world as it appears to us in so far as we are in the world through our body, and in so far as *we perceive the world with our body*. But by thus remaking contact with the body and with the world, we shall also rediscover ourself, since, perceiving as we do with our body, the body is the natural self and, as it were, the *subject of perception*. (PhP 206/249, my emphases)

Our 'objective' perception is never really detached insofar as we always find a body underneath it from which the perception was made possible. In order for us to have experiences and to take up positions we need to be embodied beings that find themselves in a world. The perceiving subject *is* her body. This also means that all is *not* transparent and that the other is not fully accessible to our objective gaze, instead *the encounter with another is a problem*. In order to understand how we perceive other

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8. We would "think it without the support of any ground, in short, withdraw to the bottom of nothingness" (VI 111/148).
9. Much later Merleau-Ponty asks similarly: "[b]ut would this still be an experience, since I would be soaring over it?" (VI 111/148).

subjects it is therefore crucial to understand how we perceive another subject with our body.

1.1.2 The body as means, middle, and measurant

Merleau-Ponty finds in Husserl's phenomenology the tools to put the 'universal subject' back into the world by giving her a body that is always already positioned in a world. In *Ideas II* Husserl uses the term *Mittel* to emphasise the centrality of the living body: "the body is, in the first place, the *medium* [*Mittel*] *of all perception;* it is the *organ of perception* and is *necessarily* involved [*dabei*] in all perception."[10] The term *Mittel* can have different connotations. First in its direct context the body is a *Mittel* as it is the *means* by way of which the world is perceived, i.e., it is the organ of perception. In addition, Husserl argues that the body is always necessarily with us [*dabei*] as a means [*Mittel*] to having experiences. Because the body is the centre of all the different orientations that I can adopt, Husserl labels the body the zero point [*Nullpunkt*] of all perception.[11] This indicates that the body that is a means for perception is also a body that is located at the centre of perception. It is the middle point [*Mitte*] of the perceived world. This emphasis on the centrality of the body as means and middle, leads Husserl to reject the Cartesian 'I think' and to replace it with the bodily intentionality of the 'I can'. The 'I can' presents to me the abilities and the

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10. Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, Second Book, Studies in the Phenomenology of Constitution*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz and André Schuwer (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989), 56 (§18a). *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie. II. Buch, Phänomenologischen Untersuchungen zur Konsitution* (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1952), 56 (§18a). Hereafter cited as *Ideas II*. Page numbers always refer to the original German pagination (found in the margins of the English translation). For clarity the paragraph number is also given. See also *Ideas II*, 144 (§36).
11. Husserl, *Ideas II*, 56 (§18a), 158 (§41a).

possibilities that I have to act [*tunkönnen*] as a body in the world.[12] By replacing the 'I think' with the 'I can', intentionality has now become a directedness to the world through my *body* and through my body's ability to move in the world and to perceive the world.[13] Following Husserl, when Merleau-Ponty posits consciousness as an 'I can' he describes it in terms of "being-towards-the-thing through the *intermediary* of the body" (PhP 138-9/173, my emphasis). Elsewhere he calls the body the "general medium [*moyen général*]" (PhP 146/182) and the condition for having a world.

It is clear that Merleau-Ponty has taken seriously the leads from Husserl's phenomenological description of the body when he writes that: "My body is not only one perceived among others, it is the measurant [*mesurant*] of all, *Nullpunkt* of all the dimensions of the world" (VI 248-9/297). The body is more than the means and the middle of perception, the body is now also understood as a '*measurant*', and by describing the body as a measurant, Merleau-Ponty again implies that the body as an organ of perception can never be completely neutral. By making the body the condition of possibility of measurement[14] the central place of the body gets to be elevated from being a passive orientation point (the being 'here and now') and a means (the channel through which perception is possible) to an *active instrument* for measurement (the perceiving as 'such and such'). The important distinction between these three terms is that to be the 'zero-point' means that the body is the centre of

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12. Husserl, *Ideas II,* 258 (§60a).
13. This intentional power of the body is described as "project[ing] round about us our past, our future, our human setting, our physical, ideological and moral situation…which results in our being situated in all these respects" (PhP 136/170).
14. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'The Experience of Others," trans. F. Evans and H.J. Silverman, in *Merleau-Ponty and Psychology, Studies in Existential Psychology and Psychiatry,* ed. Keith Hoeller (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1993), 37. « L'expérience d'autrui » *Psychologie et pédagogie de l'enfant: Cours de Sorbonne 1949-1952* (Lagrasse : Éditions Verdier, 2001), 543. Hereafter cited in text as EO. In all references the English page number precedes the French.

my world in relation to which all my perceptions are located,[15] in addition, to be the 'means' of perception suggests that the body is a channel through which perception happens, whereas to be a 'measurant' implies that my body is the centre in relation to which all my perceptions are *interpreted* and thus are given meaning.[16]

The 'I can' of the body makes possible perception as a measuring. Through the 'I can' of my body I see the world in terms of my projects and habits.[17] Thus I measure the world according to my own being in the world as a body. When the world is perceived by me as a possibility for action and for carrying out projects then I also perceive other persons who appear in this world in terms of my projects and conducts. In the *Phenomenology*, Merleau-Ponty emphasises precisely this perceptual-measuring role of the body when he claims that my recognition of the other person is possible to the extent that I realise that the other's "living body has the same structure as mine…it is precisely my body that perceives the body of another, and discovers in that body a miraculous *prolongation of my own intentions*, a familiar way of dealing with the world" (PhP 353-4/411, my emphasis). Through measuring my own body against hers I see traces of a common history and culture in the other person's body and from my particular position I recognise my own actions, intentions, and habits in the other person. Thus the being there [*dabei sein*] of the body is meaningfully related to its world through this constant measuring of the things against its own body. This also suggests that the body is a *Mitte[l]* in yet another

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15. I.e., it does not mean that the body is nullified.

16. Husserl's body as *Mitte[l]* is not just an orientation point and location, he presents the encounter with the other also through an act of constitution. All I point out here is that Merleau-Ponty takes the notion of the body as zero point from Husserl but then emphasises the body's role as a *measurant*.

17. This suggests also that I perceive what 'you can' through my own possibilities (my 'I can').

sense, namely my own body always finds itself in the middle or focal-point of my own perception. When I measure the other's body against mine, it is not really her body that I perceive, rather it is *my* intentional body that I perceive, more specifically it is my body that I perceive as if it were *hers*. In terms of the example above, when perceiving this woman on a cold winter day, the possibilities of my own body become the measure with which I perceive her body. But this measure is not like a ruler (the measure) held next to a piece of paper in order to measure its true length with one's eyes. Since the body is both the organ of perception and the measure for perception, it is as if a ruler covered up the piece of paper such that the paper's length could no longer be perceived. Consequently what is to be measured is replaced by the measure itself. All that I can see now is the measure itself (my cold body) and not that which is to be measured (the woman's body).

From Merleau-Ponty's later work one can extract a notion of intersubjectivity that is based also on such a relation of projection of one's own body onto the other which leads to a sort of 'occupation' of the other (one places one's own body in front of hers). Merleau-Ponty writes how my look dresses what it sees with its *own flesh* (VI 131/171), i.e., he explains how the other wears *my* flesh and how she is made to be similar to me through my look. My body is the *exemplar sensible* (VI 135/176) that senses whatever resembles its outside, that "speaks to the other although [it] has only to do with [it]self" (VI 225/274) because the seer senses only herself in the other. The body of the other is a replica of, a response to, and a second to myself (PW 135/188). In short, the seer is caught up in the "fundamental narcissism of all vision" (VI 139/181). This example very clearly presents problems for perception, as

it seems to turn perception into a constant perception of oneself rather than of something or someone who might be different. From this dilemma arise worries about the narcissism and solipsism of embodied perception. In the rest of this section I discuss these worries in more depth after which I offer a more productive reading of the notion of the body as measurant (see 1.2). In the chapters that follow I slowly undo this problematic interpretation of Merleau-Ponty's notion of intersubjectivity. This does not mean that the above concern is fully overcome but rather it means that the more simple critique that Merleau-Ponty upholds a solipsistic and narcissistic philosophy is challenged by showing the multifaceted complexity of the problem of intersubjectivity in Merleau-Ponty's work.

1.1.3 Irigaray's worries about insular perception

I use the term 'insular perception' to describe a perception that is completely caught up in its own world and which radiates forth from the most central spot in this world: the perceiving body. Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on my inability to escape my spatial and temporal embodied position is precisely what makes my perception insular. Nothing will be able to remove me from this central location because my body captures me at this spot at this time with this history. My perception of another person is insular not just because I am at every moment locked to a certain time and place, after all this is the typical phenomenon of our lived existence, but, more importantly because the other person is measured *against my own body*. If I am only able to recognise the other insofar as she shares my intentions and if I dress her with *my* flesh, then when I meet her face-to-face I am not able to regard her on her own

terms since I do not truly allow her to have a different body and different intentions. Following this reading of Merleau-Ponty I, as subject, create a world in which I am the sole centre and my particular body and place become the exemplar by which other bodies are judged. My body then is an island in the following double sense: (i) I cannot escape my situation, and (ii) I am alone and closed off from the other since I can only let her enter my world by reducing her body to the measures of my body. When perception is so strongly insular, then narcissism (being interested only in oneself) closely approaches solipsism (there is only oneself).

In her chapter "The Invisible of the Flesh," Luce Irigaray rightly picks up on this worry. She remarks that if I cannot see the other as different, then I do not see the other at all. Instead I become blind to bodies that are structured differently.[18] Irigaray claims that Merleau-Ponty's seer "dwells unceasingly in *his* world. Eventually he finds some accomplices there, but he never meets others."[19] Irigaray's choice of the word 'accomplice' is significant. Accomplices are not just partners, but rather they are caught up in what I do. To turn another into an accomplice is to make her undergo my actions and to refuse her agency over her own actions. One could imagine that in the most extreme case of being an accomplice, she is submitted to whatever I do and think and as a result she has nothing of her own left but is fully subject to my behaviour and intentions. It is as if she were the mere mirror image of me that *necessarily* perfectly copies my actions. My relation with the other person is

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18. She writes: "If I cannot see the other in his alterity, and if he cannot see me, my body no longer sees anything in difference. I become blind as soon as it is a question of a differently sexed body." 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. C. Burke and G.C. Gill (New York: Cornell University Press, 1993), 68.

19. Irigaray, "The Invisible of the Flesh," 173.

then nothing more than a relation with myself and as Narcissus I am continually lost in my obsession with this image. Instead of meeting others I remain inside my world and my horizons only.[20] For Irigaray, looking at the other as a complete reflection of myself is to have doubled myself but also to have lost any living connection with myself and with the other. According to Irigaray, the look in the mirror involves both the death of the other and of the self because the mirror is a technical artifice that takes away the living volume of both our bodies: "I see myself in only two dimensions, and I see the other as an inverted alter ego."[21] The mirror flattens my look as the three dimensionality of my body is now reduced to merely two dimensions. In addition the other as my mirror image is my 'second' *self*. However, that does not mean that there are now two of us. As another version of *me* she is the *same* as me and finds her ground in me. Thus there is only one subject because she is never truly a second or *other subject*.

There are several ways in which one could respond to this critique. In what follows I begin to address Irigaray's critique by turning to Merleau-Ponty's account of reversibility as essentially a *two-way exchange* and by rethinking measurement through the body's affectivity. In chapter two I address Irigaray's critique once again and explore in more depth the accusation that the Merleau-Pontian subject is caught

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20. Irigaray claims that "the philosophical subject…has reduced all otherness to a relationship with himself—as complement, projection, flip side, instrument, nature—inside his world, his horizons…the other is always the other of the same and not an actual other." Luce Irigaray, "The Question of the Other," trans. N. Guynn, *Yale French Studies* 87 (1995): 10. In chapter five I discuss in more depth the problems of what I call a 'shallow mirror' after which I present the mirror as more than just a technological artifice (5.2.5). There, I also I discuss the intersubjective significance of the mirror image (especially 5.1.3 and 5.2).

21. Luce Irigaray, *To be Two,* trans. M.M. Rhodes and M.F. Cocito-Monoc (New York: Routledge, 2002), 40.

in a solipsist world. There I uncover an originary affective *solitude* that makes the intersubjective relation possible.

1.1.4 Towards multiples: a first account of reversibility

A first step towards theorizing a phenomenology in which there are truly multiple subjects is taken by moving away from a one-way (projective) relation towards a cross-way (projective-introjective) relation. The problem of reducing the other to a mirror image of *oneself* is evident, but the intersubjective relation is more complex than such a one-way relation between myself and another. Merleau-Ponty writes in this context that "man is mirror to man [*sic*]"[22] and that "the other [is] a mirror of me as I am of him" (VI 82/113). The mirror metaphor for intersubjective perception serves two roles: (i) we recognise ourselves in the other, i.e., the other is a mirror for us; and (ii) we find the other in ourselves as an internal equivalent and thus *we* are the mirror for the other. The mirroring of the other is thus a *two-way* exchange, i.e., the mirror is the instrument of reversibility: it changes "myself into another and another into myself" (EM 168/34). The next thing to consider is whether this two-way exchange of reversibility leads to a perception of multiple *subjects who are different*. In other words does the introduction of a dialectic movement within perception also truly bring us multiple subjects from which this movement would originate? Merleau-Ponty writes that as a sensing perceiver I am part of the sensible world and thus "it is necessary that the vision be doubled with a complementary vision or *another*

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22. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *"*Eye and Mind," trans. Carleton Dallery, in *The Primacy of Perception*, 168. *L'Œil et l'Esprit* (Paris: Gallimard collection folio, 2005 [1961]), 34. Hereafter cited as EM. In all references the English page number precedes the French.

vision…myself seen from without, *such as another would see me*, installed in the midst of the visible, occupied in considering it from a certain spot" (VI 134/175, my emphases). My body thus has a double and reversible role both as a seer and as a visible object to another subject's regard. I can only be perceived when there is a look towards me that originates in the other. With this claim Merleau-Ponty emphasises that through perceiving the other I am reversible with the other, i.e., I can be the object of perception for the other. Introducing reversibility, Merleau-Ponty tries to account for an exchange of bodies in which I am not necessarily the dominant one who projects her body onto others, instead reversibility opens up a space in which I as a sensible am sensed by another.

For Irigaray the image of the notion of reversibility does not solve the problem of the solitary body. She relates her experience of attending a lecture given by Merleau-Ponty, in which he illustrated the reversibility of his own body, both as a perceiver and as an object of perception. Touching his left hand (the perceived body) with his right hand (the perceiving body), Irigaray describes how she felt uneasy because Merleau-Ponty "appeared then as cut off from others."[23] Irigaray's worry is that it is precisely the reversibility of one's *own* body, i.e., *my* touching and *my* touched, that separates the subject from others. Rather than opening a place for another, the touching/touched reversibility is for Irigaray a demonstration of the insular existence of the lived body. In addition she also argues that visual reversal (I am a mirror to another's gaze while the other is a mirror to my gaze) is not successful because, she argues, it is not a true reversal. She writes that "reflecting the world and

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23. Luce Irigaray, "To Paint the Invisible," trans. Helen Fielding, *Continental Philosophy Review* 37 (2004): 396. See also chapter five (5.2.3) and Husserl, *Ideas II*, 144ff (§36).

the other amounts to fixing them according to our perception: a solipsistic and narcissistic attitude once again."[24] I draw from this the following essential point: if I am a mirror for the other, this does not mean that I am the clear and straight surface upon which the other is perfectly reflected. Instead my bodily surface has depth, it has fissures and lobes, it has internal organs, openings, a back side, and it has an interiority hidden beneath the surface. For Irigaray this means that whoever is reflected on my body surface, this surface will not reflect her on her own terms. Instead it will reflect her solely through the actively distorting surface of my body, i.e., once again it is my living body that places itself in front of the other. Instead by being mirrored in *me* the other has once again been reduced to my own and once again we are stuck in insular perception.

In chapter five I will give a more precise analysis of the problematic of the mirror metaphor for reversibility and discuss whether it might serve a productive role in introducing the other in our world. For now it suffices to note that Irigaray's unease with the mirror metaphor is at least twofold: (i) the mirror is a technical artifice that is unable to reflect the living quality of that which is mirrored in it but instead the mirror neutralises and "erases the living identity of each person."[25] It is in this way that the mirror annihilates the relationship between the subject and another to leave a single and lonely subject in its place. And (ii) the mirror ensnares the narcissist in perceiving only her/himself which precludes her/him to have genuine relations with others.

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24. Irigaray, "To Paint the Invisible," 399.
25. Irigaray, *To be Two,* 41.

Irigaray's critique shows how in the measuring look at another I perceive another subject through the measuring projections of my *own* body. Irigaray concludes that based on Merleau-Ponty's account of the body I can never meet another person face-to-face because I am alone and caught up in my completely reversible world in which nothing new could ever happen.[26] In this closed world others are never really other but just 'other my-selves'. The question that needs to be addressed is: how can I as a lived body understand another person as a lived body without getting stuck in an absolute subjectivity and egocentrism which turns her into a mere duplicate and mirror image of my own body?

Merleau-Ponty is not unaware of the difficulty of meeting another when one meets her through one's own body. In his discussion of Sartrean existentialism, Merleau-Ponty recognises that insofar as I am a consciousness I can only live my own life "and others will never be but other myselves" consequently he asks himself "but is this solipsism…the whole or even the essential?" (VI 71/100). I answer that solipsism is not the essential of the intersubjective relationship. If a phenomenology of difference is to make sense then there should be the possibility for the subject to genuinely encounter difference in her world, to be faced with another person whose body is not re-described in terms of my own, whose body is not overwritten with my own intentions and sensibilities.[27]

After having discovered the problematic of the measuring and mirroring body, I suggest that a first response is found in re-conceiving the notion of 'the body as

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26. "All that remains to be said is that the world is isomorphic with the subject and vice versa, and the whole is sealed up in a circle, nothing new happens, only this permanent weaving between the world and the subject" (Irigaray*,* "The Invisible of the Flesh," 182).

27. 'The essential' of the intersubjective relationship is the manner in which the other subject can interrupt me. This is shown in the chapters that follow.

measurant' as a simultaneously active and passive body. It is important to take away from the perceiving body the absolute power to conceive of the other solely on the body's own terms. I suggest that in Irigaray's analysis of the reversibility of the body, not enough weight and complexity has been given to the decentring power of the *affectivity* of the body. Below I discuss a more productive notion of measurement and by doing this I move beyond the self-contained subject to a subject who is affected by another. This affectivity entails more than merely re-describing another subject in terms of one's own body.

1.2 Reconceiving measurement

We have seen in the previous section that being a body-in-the-world is what grounds my possibility to perceive the world and relate to it in all its diverse manifestations. This living body that I am encounters other living bodies and looks at them, talks with them, and lives with them in the social cohesion of the world. According to Merleau-Ponty it is being a living body that allows me to understand other people as other living bodies. I recognise my habits, intentions, and a familiar style in the other's expressions and behaviours. This recognition is an experience true to our phenomenological experience of our daily interaction with others, i.e., I take the money out of my purse and hand it to the cashier who is reaching out to take it. All this happens in a self-evident manner where our bodies are tuned into each other and our behaviour and habits are understood and expected even before they manifest themselves. Nevertheless, this account of relating to another subject through my own

lived body is subject to the following worry: when my own body is the intermediary measurant for my ability to know others then how can I ever encounter the other living body on her own right without the prejudices and projections of my own body? We need to leave open here the possibility that the answer to this question will be a Gadamerian 'never.'[28] Merleau-Ponty's view on this is rather Gadamerian as he would say that I can never leave my own embodied and situated position. While it might be true that we can never perceive the world without our own prejudices, the important question asked here is more complex, namely: how does the other appear to us as different *through* our own embodied prejudices? In addition the issue is to understand how another subject is able to transform our prejudices and projections.

1.2.1 The body as passive-active instrument

It is necessary to re-analyse and complicate the notion of measurement in order to get a full and less problematic understanding of what kind of measure the body is. In order to complicate the notion of measurement, I discuss two opposing and misguided interpretations of the Merleau-Ponty's claim that the body is a measurant of all. Thus I start my argument by claiming what the body is *not*. First I claim that the body is not the sole constitutor of the world. Second I argue that the body as measurant also does not mean that the body is a mere *device* that automatically responds to the world. These two arguments are also a response to Merleau-Ponty's own question: "is the body a thing, is it an idea?" (VI 152/197). Merleau-Ponty's position lies at the midpoint of these two, that is, the body is simultaneously an

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28. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum, 2002). First published in German, 1960.

active perceiver and a passive receptor of the world.

(i) One might be tempted to read 'the body as measurant of all' as a body that has a complete hold over the world. That is, if the body covers up that which is to be measured, what guarantees that there is something to be measured underneath it anyway? Thus one might confuse the body as measurant with an idealist's body which founds and constitutes the world around itself. This world would not have any reality apart from the founding body which has a complete grasp of it. Merleau-Ponty criticises such an idealist position when he writes:

> We do not have a consciousness constitutive of the things, as idealism believes…we have with our body, our senses, our look, our power to understand speech and to speak, *measurants (mesurants)* for Being, dimensions to which we can refer it, but not a relation of…immanence. (VI 103/137-8)

The body is here depicted as a measurant by virtue of its *sensibility* and not by its constitutive force. This suggests that there is a responsivity and receptivity in the body. Thus the body as measurant loses its powerful hold to give way to a passive dimension. This means that the world slips from the body's grasp and it finds itself *belonging* and *responding* to a world. Our body's affectivity provides measurants or dimensions for perception by virtue of its response to the world. Our body, by way of its own materiality, sees, hears, smells, tastes, and touches a world to which it belongs and by which it is affected. My lived experience of the world affirms this passive dimension of my body as I realise that I am subject to the world pre-personally, that is, before I know it, as when I automatically turn my head in response to a movement in the fringe of my visual field.

In *The Visible and the Invisible* Merleau-Ponty further elucidates the affective dimension of the body by explaining that we are not only affected by the visible world but also by the *ideas* that are invisibly part of the world. Commenting on Proust's description of a musical performance in *In Search of Lost Time,* Merleau-Ponty writes that the violinist does not produce the sonata, but rather he is "at the service of the sonata; the sonata sings through him or cries out so suddenly that he must 'dash on his bow' to follow it" (VI 151/196).[29] The sonata by itself has a reality that is not internal to the body's creation of the notes. The sonata affects and calls out to the musician. The enchantment of music is precisely that it is not the musician's own possession, but rather the musician is possessed by the music as are the listeners.[30] Thus, my living body as a measurant is neither the foundation of the world, nor of other persons, nor of the ideas that exist within the world. Instead the body is revealed as a sensible body that is at times so much taken away by the world that it must rush in order to pursue them.

(ii) The above analysis of the body in terms of passivity might give way to the claim that the body is merely a passive measuring device or medium that receives and records sense data. In the introduction to the *Phenomenology of Spirit,*[31] G.W.F. Hegel describes how the naive consciousness can become aware of the 'thing-in-itself' by two different means [*Mittel*]: as a passive medium [*Medium*] and as a measuring tool

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29. See also Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time, vol. one, Swann's Way,* trans. C.K. Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, revised by D.J. Enright (London: Chatto & Windus, 1992), 423. (The book is also known as *Remembrance of Things Past.*) See a similar argument and reference in PhP 145/181.
30. About 'ideas possessing us' see VI 151/196.
31. G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit,* trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977). *Phenomenologie des Geistes* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1980 [1807]). In all further references the English page number precedes the German. The German page number refers to the original page number (found on the top left hand side of the page).

[*Werkzeug*].[32] For Hegel both a medium and a tool modify the experience of the 'thing-in-itself', and thus both fail to perceive the in-itself. What is even more problematic, the notion of needing any means at all to perceive the in-itself already presupposes that the in-itself is wholly distinct and removed from consciousness.[33] In addition, it also creates a distinction between ourselves as consciousness and our body as the tool or the medium with which the consciousness measures the object in-itself. The subject is thus broken up in fragments that are wholly separate and independent from each other and can never truly reach each other without modifying the experience itself.[34] Merleau-Ponty shares Hegel's critique on the too naïve characterisation of consciousness as the mesurant which is absolutely separated from the measured (*mesuré*).[35] Already in the *Phenomenology* Merleau-Ponty explicitly denies

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32. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 46/3-4.

33. "To be specific, it takes for granted certain ideas about cognition [*Erkennen*] as an *instrument* and as a *medium*, and assumes that there is a *difference between ourselves and this cognition*. Above all it presupposes that the Absolute stands on one side and cognition on the other, independent and separate from it, and yet is something real" (Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit,* 47/5-6); "what is really absurd [*Widersinnig*] is that we should make use of a means at all" (ibid*.,* 46/4).

34. Taking this warning from Hegel to heart, when considered as either a medium or as a tool, the body modifies the objects of its experience and is separate from consciousness. Throughout his work Merleau-Ponty, like Hegel, is concerned about this fragmentation of consciousness and the body. Rejecting Hegel's idealist solution Merleau-Ponty formulates an answer in terms of reversibility. However traces of the modifying power of the body remain even in *The Visible and the Invisible* when Merleau-Ponty writes that the body is "open to the things in which it reads its *own* modifications" (VI 249/297, my emphasis) and thus the living body is a body that perceives the world as it is *for* itself. It is the notion of 'perception as modification' in Merleau-Ponty's work that concerns me throughout the thesis.

35. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Philosophy and Non-Philosophy since Hegel," trans. Hugh J. Silverman, in *Philosophy and Non-Philosophy since Merleau-Ponty,* ed. Hugh J. Silverman (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1997), 33. « Philosophie et non-philosophie depuis Hegel » *Notes des Cours au Collège de France* (Paris: Gallimard: 1996), 288. Hereafter cited as PnPH. In all references the English page number precedes the French. Grosz finds problematic these descriptions of the body as a measuring tool or medium because they devalue the body. She claims that to present the body as an *instrument* or tool implies that the body is at the service of a subject who handles the tool, i.e., the body is dominated by the consciousness that animates it (*Volatile Bodies,* 8). She also worries that the body depicted as an instrument assumes a Cartesian framework in which the body becomes a sophisticated automaton steered by the active and substantially different consciousness. Similarly, she is concerned that to present the body as a *medium* of expression, which conveys otherwise hidden thoughts and transfers outer sensory information, is to turn the body into a passive receptacle (ibid*.,* 9). In both these cases, the body is a servile and passive device that might modify

that the body is a tool when he writes that the body is not an object in front of
consciousness, but instead it is *with* consciousness; consciousness *is* this *living body*.
Even the individual parts of the body, the organs, are not tools [*outils*] for the subject
that are always available and at hand (PhP 91/120) as a ruler is available and at hand
for a geometer. Later Merleau-Ponty writes in a similar vein:

> Either I consider myself as within the world, inserted into it by my body
> which is beset with causal relations, in which case the 'senses' and the
> 'body' are material instruments [*appareils matériels*] which have no
> knowledge of anything; the object throws an image on the retinas, and
> the retinal image is duplicated in the optical centre by a second image,
> but all this consists of nothing but things to see and nobody who
> sees…Or else I try really to understand how sight comes about, in which
> case I must get away from the constituted, from what is in itself, and
> seize by reflection a being for whom the object can exist. (PhP 237/284,
> translation modified)[36]

Merleau-Ponty here clearly rejects the idea that the body is a sort of causal apparatus,
a device or appliance for measuring and recording the world. If this were the case, he
claims, one could not speak any longer of a *perceiver*. Although the study of these
material bodily processes might get us closer to the mechanics involved in perceiving,
we would never reach an understanding of perception as such, as this kind of study
loses sight of the perceiving subject. To understand embodied perception in a

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the information it transfers but does so in a predictable manner. The body then is not a constitutive
force in creating the meanings of the world, but rather it just measures what is out there and passes
on the information. Grosz worries that assumptions like these about the body add to the social
devaluing of the body. She claims that such views on the body are related to the oppression of
women insofar as women are portrayed as being first and foremost bodies. I share Grosz' concern
but I add that Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the body as a measurant is not a devaluing of the
body over and against consciousness (see also Helen Fielding, "Reflections on Corporeal Existence:
A Phenomenological Alternative to Mind/Body Dualism," in *Feministische Phänomenologie und
Hermeneutik*, ed. Silvia Stoller, Veronica Vasterling and Linda Fischer [Wurzburg: Königshausen &
Neumann, 2005], 96-112).

36. See also: "We do not have…a preordination of the things to the consciousness, as *realism*
believes…we have with our body, our senses, our look, our power to understand speech and to
speak, *measurants (mesurants)* for Being, dimensions to which we can refer it, *but not a relation of
adequation*" (VI 103/137-8, my emphases).

phenomenological manner it is necessary to keep in mind the perceiver who does the perceiving. It is obviously the phenomenologist who speaks here and who brings us back to the *lived experience* of perception, which cannot be reduced to the optical centre in the brain.[37]

Notwithstanding these considerations, Merleau-Ponty does think that a certain instrumentality is part of the original structure of my body. My body "is my basic habit, the one which conditions all the others, and by means of which they are all comprehensible" (PhP 91/120). My body is this general structure of habit and "the fabric into which all objects are woven, and it is, at least in relation to the perceived world the general instrument [*l'instrument général*] of my 'comprehension'" (PhP 235/282). My body is thus some sort of instrument, but which kind needs to be determined.

Based on the discussion above I claim that in order to understand how the body is the 'measurant of all', it is necessary to distinguish the claim that the body is an *apparatus* or tool from the claim that the body is a general *instrument*. To assert that the body is a measurant is not to claim that the body is an apparatus or a passive automaton. I claim that the term 'instrument' can be a more promising metaphor when it is understood as fluidly and sensitively involved with the body. An example of a musical instrument might make this clear. A violin becomes to such an extent part of the body of the musician who plays it that it is unclear where the musician's

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37. This does not mean that the phenomenologist denies that neural processes are involved in visual perception. She would merely claim that these processes do not figure into our subjective visual experience even though they do bring us closer to understanding the mechanics of perception. See Paul Ricœur's reply to the neuroscientist Jean-Pierre Changeux: "I have never believed that thought functions without a physical basis…but the construction of the mental that you [Changeux] presuppose proceeds by dismantling and impoverishing human experience." Paul Ricœur and Jean-Pierre Changeux, *What makes us Think?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 79.

arm ends and the bow begins. In the expression of the living music the arm and the bow become one. The violinist's body *extending into* the violin becomes the "location of passage" for the music which exists by itself (PhP 145/181). What I suggest here is that an instrument can become an area of sensitivity for the musician just as the blind person's cane extends the "active radius of touch" and ceases to be an object for the subject (PhP 143/178). This notion of what I call a *sensitive* instrumentality, which is not separate from the subject, is more promising for understanding the 'body as measurant' as opposed to the notion of 'apparatus' discussed above. With this notion of sensitive instrumentality, I suggest that Merleau-Ponty extends the so-called "technique of the body" which requires one also to rethink the notion of *technē* as that which "outlines and amplifies the metaphysical structure of our flesh" (EM 168/34).[38]

Consequently, the question as to whether my body is a passive thing or an active idea is answered in the following way: "It is neither, being the measurant of things" (VI 152/197). It is neither the case that the living body is the constitutive force of an idealist's world, nor is it the case that the living body is a mere passive receptor of the things that are given to us, a medium or device that adequately matches concept and object. I.e., as a measurant the body is a passive-active instrument: *both* receptive to the meaningful world *and* actively interacting with it as a perceiving subject.[39] In the context of a discussion on the body image, Gail Weiss summarises the relation between the body and the world as follows:

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38. In the same paragraph Merleau-Ponty presents the mirror as a *technique* of the body and as an *instrument* of reversibility (EM 168/34). The mirror is then no longer a dead technological artifice. See Irigaray's critique (1.1.3). For a further discussion see chapter five (5.2.5).

39. The relation of activity and passivity in Merleau-Ponty's work is complex. He will say that they are not opposites, rather they belong to each other. See also chapter four (4.2.2) and HLP 42/51.

to say that the body bears the schema of the world in itself is to indicate that the body does not impose any sort of pregiven structure upon the world, but is itself structured by its world, which in turn implies that the body image reflects from the start the particularities and generalities of a given situation, not merely the idiosyncrasies of its own physiological or genetic makeup and psychical constitution. Nonetheless Merleau-Ponty is careful to avoid any characterization of the world as a "body constituting" force, since it is the body which "possesses this world at a distance rather than being possessed by it."[40]

In order not to imply that the reflecting body is wholly passively undergoing the constitutive forces of the world, Weiss draws on a passage in *The Prose of the World* in which Merleau-Ponty writes that the body is not possessed by the world but instead the body "possesses this world *at a distance*" (PW 78/110, my emphasis).[41] In this passage, Merleau-Ponty emphasises that the body has a certain hold over the world which is never complete. This possession is 'strange' as it implies a 'having' that is never fully in one's power (EM 166/28) and that remains at a distance from oneself because the body is already receptive to that which it 'possesses'. This also means that the body 'possesses' the world precisely by never fully possessing it (i.e., what is grasped remains out of full reach) and thus that neither the body nor the world has full constitutive power. I suggest that the relation between the body and the world[42] is characterised by this 'possession at a distance' which is a *dis-possession*. The term 'dis-possession' expresses well the "strange possession" (EM 166/28) that is marked by distance and consequently that is simultaneously a possession and an impossibility to possess totally.

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40. Gail Weiss, *Body Images: Embodiment as Intercorporeality* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 11.
41. Similarly, Merleau-Ponty writes that "to see is to have at a distance" (EM 166/28).
42. Which includes also the relation between the body and objects or ideas, and (most importantly) the relation between differing bodies.

1.2.2 'Swimming in the world': the body dis-possessed

Having uncovered the double passive-active role of the body in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, I look closer at what it means to say that something is 'a measurant'. Generally 'measurement' indicates that a certain quantity, amount or size of things is determined through a calculation either with a device or through comparison with a standard. When one understands the body as measurant in the common sense of calculation and comparison with a standard, one is in danger of reducing experience to quantification. Experience would then be a question of detecting quantifiable relations between objects that are in space. Depth, for example, would be reducible to length and width, that is, it would be reducible to the spatial measure between the subject and an object when they are perceived from a correctly situated point of view.[43] In the context of discussing the phenomenological concept of distance Merleau-Ponty specifies that although "in perception, my body serves as the absolute measure…this is still not the measuring itself [*mesurer*]. It only makes measurement possible" (EO 37/543). With this opposition he wants to separate the act of measuring and quantifying the world from the sort of measure that the body is. The body is not an objective measuring device, it is the *absolute measure,* namely it is the *condition of possibility* for measuring.

I look up from my book, from the letters that are not even perceived as having size because I was reading, I lift my mug to drink from it, and see a woman standing on the other side of the square. From my location, the woman's image on my retina

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43. And thus one is again placed in the position of a pure spectator (EO 37/543).

is smaller than the mug's and hidden behind it, but do I actually perceive her as such? This is not my experience: instead, while perceiving her out there in the distance, I perceive her as probably relatively my height. I perceive her height as if she were standing near to me. Distance is therefore not an objective property of my body. My body is not a simple standard of height that measures the world as if it were geometrical space because in our free perception the near and the far object are "situated in two totally different dimensions" (EO 36/542). In spontaneous vision I cannot even see both the woman and the mug at the same time. Bringing one to the foreground of my gaze means that the other one automatically withdraws into the horizon. Even this attempt at describing my perception transforms the experience and gives it a certain orderliness. In spontaneous vision "at every moment I was swimming in the world of things" (PW 52/74) and thus I was being swept away by those things that did not themselves possess a particular order. For example, there are the letters that make up the words, there is the mug, the woman, paving stones, trees and a sky, the woman again, and then another sip of my tea and I continue reading... living is not subject to any quantifiable order. Order and measure would be added only upon my reflection on it or my attempt to draw the scene. Phenomenologically speaking, the world is not *quantified* by the body – it is *lived* through the body. Consequently, distance is not a question of the woman standing one or one hundred metres away from me but rather it is a question of me being (un)able to touch her and to discern the features of her face.[44] I never have the object

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44. See EO 37/543: "Distance is not therefore, an objective magnitude. Distance is the degree of precision with which I am able to see the object"; and PhP 261/311: "Distance is what distinguishes this loose and approximate grip from the complete grip which is proximity."

of my perception in a frontal grasp, i.e., I do not perceive it from a neutral position in which the object is wholly and maximally given to me, in my possession, ready to be measured. Instead I am *dis-possessed* of them as they have a thickness which resists my grasp.

The notion of dis-possession is closely related to a reduction of the body's constitutive power. Merleau-Ponty writes: "a non-constituted rationality is possible only if the thing is non-frontal…but what bites into me, and what I bite into through my body; if the thing is…given through an indirect grasp, lateral like the other person – such rationality has decentering as the ground of meaning" (PW 45n/63n). I take two suggestions from this quote: first, perceptual meaning finds its ground in taking the subject out of the centre of the world. I am taken out of the centre of the world as soon as I am not the master of my world but instead I belong to the world and other objects and subjects escape me. Second, having been taken out of the centre of the world, objects, and others affect me. Thus while I 'bite' into the object, this object also 'bites' into me. This 'mutual biting' metaphor is instructively chosen as it expresses that the interaction between an object and me is not just a gentle and superficial affection of one on the other. Rather there is a more 'fleshy' connection between both of us: 'sinking our teeth into each other' means that we partly envelop and puncture the other (there is in biting a true notion of reaching into something), it also captures that we simultaneously taste the other while we feel the 'teeth' of the other sinking into our flesh. Biting is the overlapping or crossing over (the chiasm) of the subject and the object.[45]

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45. There are potential violent connotations to this image of biting. In chapter five, after having

Merleau-Ponty writes that "every visual something, as individual as it is, functions also as a dimension" (EM 187/85). This quote helps shed more light on the 'biting' that happens between myself and the objects in the world. While my body reaches out to the thing – bites into it – this thing also 'bites into me' and thus brings its own style and dimension *into* me. While my hand actively reaches out to pick up a cup, passively and pre-personally its grip is adjusted to fit the dimensions of the cup. Similarly, while walking in Park Güell in Barcelona under a passageway with tall, right-slanted pillars and walls, one's body begins to lean to the right although it has ample space to move. One experiences the world differently through the dimension of the passageway. Thus, as it mingles with my body the thing becomes the dimension through which I experience the world. This shaping of my hand or of my body is not something 'I' do as 'I' am already decentred (or swept away as I said before) by the hold that this cup or this row of pillars has over me. I argue that the subject is being decentred in relation to the object and consequently dis-possessed of it.

One might want to note that in the previous example of me seeing the woman across the square, there is a measuring happening all the same. Did I not perceive the woman as being relatively *my height*, as being as tall as any other human being? Is not the cup I see much *smaller* than me? I argue that the term 'measurant' is not completely misplaced as a description of the body's being in the world. That is so because I have a particular body that belongs to the world and my freedom to

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explored the notion of the in-one-another in more depth, I discuss such a violent consequence of the intersubjective encounter (5.3).

perceive the world is restricted according to this body. Merleau-Ponty is also helpful here:

> Whether or not I have decided to climb them, these mountains appear high to me, because they exceed my body's power to take them in its stride, and, even if I have just read *Micromégas,*[46] I cannot contrive it that they are small for me. Underlying myself as a thinking subject…there is, therefore, as it were a natural self which does not budge from its terrestrial situation…I may say for example that the Alps are molehills. In so far as I have hands, feet, a body, I sustain around me intentions which are not dependent upon my decisions and which affect my surroundings in a way which I do not choose. (PhP 440/503)

The natural self mentioned in this quote is the subject who has a relationship with the world *through her body*. Consequently, this person cannot do otherwise than to see the world in relation to her body's abilities. While looking out of an aeroplane window, she takes in the Alps with one glance but she still does not experience them as the molehills in her garden, which she knows she could flatten with one step of her foot. My experience of what is large and small would only change if I had a different body, e.g., if I were the alien from Sirius who is 12,000 feet tall. But this new experience would then be restricted by the having of that particular body (i.e., the Sirian would not be able to see the Alps as high). Thus we are not measuring the world from up above (the world, again, is not within our grasp), instead the body as measurant has its place in the very ground of experience. Merleau-Ponty describes the body as "*Nullpunkt* of all the dimensions of the world" (VI 249/297) meaning that our body is the ground from which we perceive the world through different dimensions (e.g., the cup, the pillars). It also means that the 'body as ground'

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46. *Micromégas* is a satirical short story written by Voltaire in 1752. In the story a young man 120,000 feet tall from the planet Sirius visits the earth and marvels at its microscopic inhabitants. See Voltaire, "Micromegas," in *The Romances of Voltaire*, ed. Manuel Komroff (New York: The Dial Press, 1928), 307-325.

functions also as a dimension and that it can change, for example when we grow up and grow taller. Returning to the neighbourhood playing fields of one's childhood can be an alienating experience when suddenly the excitingly spacious fields are transformed into a smallish piece of land. Alternatively one could expand this argument and think through the altered dimensions of our world when our bodies change when we for example are pregnant or when we lose or gain body parts (through amputations, prostheses, wearing canes, hats, walking on stilts, playing instruments).[47] Becoming part of our bodily (im)possibilities, I suggest that these losses or gains will also change the dimensions of the experienced world.

Maybe anticipating his critics, Merleau-Ponty writes that "when we speak of the flesh of the visible, we do not mean…to describe a world covered over with all our projections" (VI 136/177). However, I argue that Merleau-Ponty cannot completely leave behind the notion of projection. That is, my encounter with the other always involves a *dis-appearance* of the other. This term brings out the tension that is present in the relationship between myself and another: while she appears to me she escapes me.[48] My embodied existence that belongs to the world does not allow me to step away and perceive the other as she 'truly' is. Interestingly, precisely because I belong to the world I also never succeed in covering her completely. Thus I *dis-cover* (i.e., I both uncover and cover up) objects and other persons which I do

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47. I suggest two interesting but differing arguments that discuss the extension and fragmentation of our living bodies. i) Andy Clark introduces the cognitive scientific notion of cognitive hybrids. See for example his book *Natural-Born Cyborgs: Minds, Technologies and the Future of Human Intelligence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003). ii) Donna Haraway presents a feminist anti-essentialist notion of identity in: "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 149-182.

48. I am grateful to Geraldine Finn for a stimulating conversation about the 'dis-appearance' of the other person.

not possess, which sweep away my body out of the centre of the world, and which offer to my body new dimensions through which the world then continues to unfold itself.

I see her walking in the winter without a coat, I shiver as I feel *my* cold in her body, but immediately I also take into myself the resonances of *her* body. That is, I find myself having already straightened my posture while I walk as freely as she does. In this way we encounter one another while never able to immobilize one another through a full frontal grasp.[49]

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49. This argument is expanded in chapter four (4.3.1).

The anonymous cohesion of social life

In the previous chapter we saw that an initial answer to the traditional problem of the *solus ipse* is found in the realisation that the problem of the encounter with another subject is a *real* problem and ought to be taken seriously as such. Merleau-Ponty rejects the traditional version of solipsism in the "The Philosopher and his Shadow" by emphasising that there cannot be an 'I' without a 'not-I.'[1] He claims that it is impossible to set up the purely egocentric and solitary self without also assuming the possible existence of an alter ego or non-self at the same time. From this it follows that in my loneliness I am never truly alone because the alter-ego always hovers around me. This is a realisation that is also found in Husserl's *Cartesian Meditations*: the bracketing of the alien does not remove the alien from my experience, but rather my efforts of trying to bracket the existence of another subject shows me the connection that I have with her and presents her to me as a true possibility.[2]

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1. In Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs,* trans. Richard McLeary (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 173-4. *Signes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), 219. Hereafter quoted as *Signs*. In all references the English page number precedes the French.

2. Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, trans. Dorion Cairns (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960), 129 (§44). *Cartesianische Meditationen und Pariser Vorträge* (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1950), 129 (§44). First published in French, 1931. Page numbers always refer to the original German pagination (found in the margins of the English translation). For clarity the paragraph number is also given. Husserl's presentation of otherness in the *Cartesian Meditations* is often couched in the problematic language of my own body and mirroring. Thus he claims that my ego is the *constitutive norm* for all people (ibid., 154 [§55]) and that, because my body is the only body which is constituted as living, it has to be the case that the other body receives its living quality from the *transferral of my living body* on the other's body (ibid., 140 [§50]). In the intertwining of my body and the other's, the alien body is given as *my own* transcendental experience (ibid., 143-4 [§52]), i.e., the other is constituted *in me* as other (ibid., 156 [§56]), the other is a mirroring of myself (ibid., 125 [§44]). Although Husserl denies that the experience of the other is an inference of analogy he does claim that the other is an analogue to me (ibid., 141 [§50], 144 [§52]) and a modification of myself (ibid., 144, 145 [§52]). It should be noted that although this language of ownness is present in Husserl, he nuances his claims by noting that the other as a mirroring and an analogue should not be

Initially the reducing ego might think she is alone but the proper phenomenological reflection will show that the other is real.[3] Both Husserl and Merleau-Ponty thus deny the *solus ipse* by stating that it is impossible for there to be a self without the presence or at least the *possibility* of a *non*-self. However I claim that the solipsist worry that is implicit in Irigaray's critique (as presented in chapter one [1.1.3]) is not an issue of the *solus ipse* in the sense of the singular and solitary existence of the *one* self. Rather the difficulty lies in there being a self who is surrounded by others but encounters in these others only herself. This version of solipsism I call *plural solipsism* which states that I am alone in the world not because there is solely me, but because there are only me-*s*. This also means that plural solipsism is a far-reaching version of Narcissism. One could object that plural solipsism is in fact solved by Merleau-Ponty's answer to the *solus ipse*. In this world in which I meet only other me-s, the possibility of a genuine alter-ego would still be hovering around my lonely existence. However the relevant question here is whether we would ever actually meet this possible alter-ego. That is, if the alter-ego remains a *possibility* and if through our embodied location we are only able to recognise and encounter other me-s, then I claim that there is after all no *actual* otherness in sight (or, not to overemphasise sight, there would not be otherness in touch, hearing, smell, and taste), so consequently we would not perceive a genuine alterity in the other.

In this chapter I discuss in depth the peculiar 'solitude' of the affective body. I

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understood in the conventional way (ibid., 125 [§44]). We should recognise that not everything is a modus of my own consciousness (ibid., 135 [§48]). I do not simply experience the other as a duplicate of me, the other is an 'I' who governs at its own centre of orientations ('here') (ibid., 146 [§53]). Most importantly Husserl warns us that it is not the case that all that I recognise as being constituted in me also has to *belong* to me (owned by me) (ibid., 175 [§62]).

3. Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, 176 (§62).

argue that this solitude does not close the subject off from the lives of others, but rather it makes possible that she and others are always already collectively engaged.

2.1 Original solitude of the anonymous body

The question that underlies the problem of plural solipsism is the following: how can others that are genuinely not-me be understood through the mediation of a body that is undoubtedly *mine*? Merleau-Ponty writes in answer to this:

> The reason why I am able to understand the other person's body and existence "beginning with" the body proper [that is *my* body], the reason why the compresence of my "consciousness" and my "body" is prolonged in the compresence of my self and the other person, is that the "I am able to" and "the other person exists" belong here and now to the same world, that the body proper is a premonition of the other person, the *Einfühlung* an echo of my incarnation, and that a flash of meaning makes them substitutable in the absolute presence of origins. (*Signs* 175/221)

In this quote Merleau-Ponty claims that there is a fundamental relation between how I am in my body and how another person is in her body. That is: (i) my judgement that I relate to the world through the 'I can' (my intentional existence) and my judgement that the other exists (her intentional existence) take place in the same world; (ii) my body carries a pre-sentiment of another within itself; (iii) my empathy for another subject, my feeling into the other, is already part of my subjective living in my own body such that she is an echo of my own lived body; and (iv) I and another are 'substitutable in the absolute presence of origins'. On a first reading the first three claims echo the fundamental problem of my relation to another subject when it is mediated through my own body. My judgements about myself and about the other take place in one and the same world, but, if this world is the same merely

because I project myself into the world by virtue of my body, this 'same world' really is *'my* world'. In addition I can relate to another subject because somehow my body already contains the other subject in itself as *my* presentiment and the other is *my* echo. By describing the other as already having been felt by me and as the echo of my own bodily existence, it looks like Merleau-Ponty offers us a different version of the argument (in chapter one) that the other is nothing more than my mirror-image.[4] Consequently, rather than an answer, this restates the problem of how we can relate to another when this relation is already tainted by my own subjectivity. I suggest that claim (iv) reveals a more promising answer to the general problem of relating to another.

What does Merleau-Ponty mean when he claims that I and another are "substitutable in the absolute presence of origins" (*Signs* 175/221)? Merleau-Ponty writes one page earlier:

> The constitution of others does not come after that of the body; others and my body are born together from the original ecstasy. The corporeality to which the primordial thing belongs is more corporeality in general; as the child's egocentricity, the 'solipsist layer' is both transitivity and confusion of self and other. (*Signs* 174/220)

Merleau-Ponty explains that the origin of me and another lies in 'being born together'[5] in which neither my nor her body is constituted first, but rather we have a *corporeality in general.* Merleau-Ponty speaks here of our earliest existence as infants in which our bodies are 'general' in the sense that they are not differentiated as 'mine' or 'hers'. The confusion of the self and the other in this early existence as a

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4. This quote will gain complexity in the following chapters. In chapter three I introduce responsivity as an example of how my body carries a genuine presentiment of the other within itself (3.3). In chapter five the notion of echo is reread in a more promising and complex manner (5.2.2).

5. I.e., being constituted together.

corporeality in general makes redundant any emphasis about what is mine and hers. In this origin of our being we are not differentiated and thus we are substitutable in this sense.[6] Speaking about substitutability implies here that in the earliest human life there is no personal differentiation but just *anonymous* (i.e., non-differentiated) existence. This anonymous existence rests on an initial confusion of, and transitivity between, self and other and is lived in the 'solitude' of neonatal life in which there is neither individuation nor a numerical distinction between myself and another:

> The perception of others cannot be accounted for if one begins with supposing an ego and another that are absolutely conscious of themselves, each of which lays claim, as a result, to an absolute originality in relation to the other that confronts it. On the contrary, the perception of others is made comprehensible if one supposes that psychogenesis begins in a state where the child is unaware of himself [*sic*] and the other as different beings. (CRO 118-9/178-9)[7]

In his lecture, "The Child's Relation with Others" Merleau-Ponty describes the world of infants as a world in which the self is not yet developed and another subject has not yet appeared. Merleau-Ponty describes how infants initially live a non-differentiated group life in which there is no sharp separation between the individuals in the group; not being aware of themselves, infants are also not aware of others as separate. Merleau-Ponty adopts Max Scheler's account of *precommunication* in which "the other's intentions somehow play across my body while my intentions play across his [*sic*]" (CRO 119/179).[8] In *The Nature of Sympathy* Scheler writes that the

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6. This does not mean that we are substitutable because we are necessarily the *same*. The substitutability is not one of complete substitutability. At the end of this chapter I expand this in the context of double anonymity (2.2.2.1).

7. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The Child's Relation to Others," trans. William Cobb, in *The Primacy of Perception,* 96-55. « Les relations avec autrui chez l'enfant » in *Parcours: 1935-1951* (Lagrasse : Éditions Verdier, 1997), 147-229. Hereafter quoted as CRO. In all references the English page number precedes the French.

8. "We cannot say that in such a state the child has a genuine communication with others. In order

personal life of young children are as of yet hidden from them, instead they live immersed in their immediate environment. This immersion is not just one of a separate being who is immersed in something that is other (such as a person in a swimming pool), rather Scheler describes it as "diese *Eingeschmolzenheit* in die Seele der Gemeinschaft."[9] The German *'Eingeschmolzenheit'* speaks of a being melted into the larger whole of the community and emphasises more the total absence of distinction than the English 'immersion' which is the standard translation[10]. Scheler continues and argues that what children experience is not yet a result of communication [*Mitteilung*] since communication requires a separation [*Teilung*] between the self and the other; it requires that one can perceive a content as having its origin in another person.[11] Instead young children are subject to a mode of immediate transference of experience about which Scheler writes: "what occurs rather is an immediate flow of experiences*, undifferentiated as between mine and thine,* which actually contains both our own and others' experiences intermingled [*ineinandergemischt*] and without distinction from one another."[12] Since for Merleau-Ponty experience is always embodied experience, this means that not being a self, or not being able to reflect on myself, children live in a world in which, quite literally, their body and the body of others intermingle and extend into another.[13]

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that there be communication, there must be a sharp distinction between the one who communicates and the one with whom he communicates" (CRO 119/179).

9. Max Scheler, *Wesen und Formen der Sympathie* (Bern: Francke Verlag, 1973 [1923]), 242 (my emphasis). My translation: this "dissolving in the spirit of the community."

10. See: Max Scheler, *The Nature of Sympathy,* trans. Peter Heath (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1954), 248. All further references are to the English edition unless a German word is used for illustration, then the German pagination follows the English.

11. Scheler, *Nature of Sympathy,* 247/241.

12. Scheler, *Nature of Sympathy*, 246/240.

13. It should be noted that Scheler here speaks of a transference of ideas, feelings and tendencies and that he does not, as Merleau-Ponty does, speak about this explicitly in terms of the body (*Nature of*

The anonymous life is not only a characteristic of neonatal life, it is also a characteristic of all perceptual life. Primordial anonymous existence grounds another subject and me in *general existence* and this primordial existence, in which there is neither 'me' nor 'another', later makes it possible for *me* to have a relation to *another*. The anonymity of neonatal life offers an account of how another appears in our lived experience from a background of a non-differentiated community: "next, on the basis of this initial community, both by the objectification of one's own body and the constitution of the other in his difference, there occurs a segregation, a distinction of individuals—a process which, moreover, as we shall see is never completely finished" (CRO 119/179). This means that we never completely are able to fully separate ourselves from the others. Thus the world of anonymous group life, or of the "primordial *We* [*On*]," does not disappear but rather remains with us in and is "experienced anew in each of our perceptions" (*Signs* 175/221). Merleau-Ponty explains that in our adult life my communication with another subject ceases to be a problem as soon as I remove myself from the *reflective* field of the transcendental reduction (egology) and direct myself towards *the perceptual field* (*Signs* 175/221), but he does not continue to elucidate this further. In his other work he writes extensively about the anonymous mode of perception. For example, in the *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty writes about perception: "As soon as there is consciousness and in order that there may be consciousness, there must be something to be conscious of, an intentional object, and consciousness can move towards this object

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Sympathy 259). See also his claim that the lived body belongs to the object sphere rather than the sphere of the person in *Formalism in Ethics and Nonformal Ethics of Value,* trans. Manfred S. Frings and Roger L. Funk (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 399.

only to the extent that it 'derealises' itself and throws itself into it" (PhP 121/153). This means that to perceive something is to lose myself in the pre-reflective moment of the present. For the argument under scrutiny, the central issue is that while I perceive something I lose the reflective experience of my 'I'. Thus "[e]very perception has something anonymous in it" (PhP 238/285) because I am given over to the object. Elsewhere in the *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty argues that every sensation brings with it a certain depersonalisation since "I experience sensation as a modality of a *general existence*, one already destined for a physical world and which runs through me without my being the cause of it"(PhP 216/261, my emphasis). It is not *I* who chooses or creates my sensation whereas I can choose my profession or can be the author of a thought. Instead, my sensation depends on me being *receptive* to the world in which I already find myself. To sense an object is to be crossed out as a conscious 'I' and to be taken over by the perception itself. It is only after the fact, when the object of perception is relegated to the past that one can consciously reflect on the object and situate oneself as an 'I' in relation to the object.[14] The impersonal, anonymous sensation is thus a condition for the possibility

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14. "If I cannot see the object except by distancing it in the past, this is because, like the first attack launched by the object upon my senses, the succeeding perception equally occupies and expunges my consciousness…perception is always in the mode of the impersonal 'One'" (PhP 240/287). See also: "unreflective primary perception constitutes for perception a kind of original past: a past that has never been a present" (PhP 242/289). Merleau-Ponty draws in this section heavily on Husserl's lectures *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time*. Husserl argues that in the present moment I am intentionally directed outwards, i.e., I have objects for consciousness. However my own lived consciousness in the 'now' can never be such an object for my lived consciousness in the 'now', because that would lead to an infinite regress of my consciousness being intentionally directed to my consciousness as an object. When I reflect on my conscious acts I reflect from the 'now' onto my consciousness as an object in the just past. Thus it is impossible both to be a consciousness in the now and to reflect on that same 'now' consciousness. Only when a conscious act has elapsed can it be objectified for my new present consciousness. The only self-awareness that I can have in the present is a tacit self-awareness. Edmund Husserl, *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time (1897-1917),* trans. J.B. Brough (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991). *Zur Phänomenologie des Inneren Zeitbewusstseins (1897-1817)* (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1966). See pp. 76-

of my ability to reflect on my personalised perceptual act. This underlying experience of a sensibility that precedes reflection, means that 'one perceives' before one can speak of 'I perceive'. I am not prior to the object of perception but I am being born together with it.

In trying to find a response to solipsism, a Husserlian phenomenological reduction to 'egology' might be able to hint towards the primordial bond I have with another (the alter-ego who appears as soon as I reduce to the egology), but Merleau-Ponty adds that the bracketing of the perceptual and the developmental field overlooks the particular nature of this primordial bond. Thus, when Merleau-Ponty writes in the "Philosopher and his Shadow" that I am able to understand the existence of another subject because I and the other are substitutable in the absolute presence of origins, we can read this in two ways: (i) in a *developmental* sense our shared origin lies in our being born into an anonymous transitive community from which later we learn to distinguish ourselves; and (ii) in a perceptual sense our shared origin lies in the notion that we lose our particularity as an 'I' when we are intentionally directed to the world, i.e., perception is anonymous before it is personalised in reflection. Thus Merleau-Ponty is committed to the claim that the origin of our social behaviour lies in a *two-fold primary anonymous existence.*

What is the same in both modes of anonymity is that one experiences the world as a non-differentiated depersonalised entity, but the depersonalisation that finds its foundation in the unreflective *receptivity* of a person to the world is not

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83 (§§ 38-9) and pp. 118-120 (appendix IX). Page numbers always refer to the original German pagination (found in the margins of the English translation). For clarity the paragraph number is also given.

necessarily the same as the depersonalisation that finds its foundation in the unreflective *transitivity* of infant (and adult) life. A more careful relation needs to be drawn between them. First, in the *Phenomenology* Merleau-Ponty claims that children live in an anonymous world because they have not yet grasped the cogito (PhP 355/412-3) and thus they are not yet able to master reflection. Instead they live wholly in the present perception and consequently they also live wholly in the other as perceived. Consequently "[the child] has no awareness of himself or others as private subjectivities" (PhP 355/412). This notion of anonymity is not yet fully built on transitivity but rather on the general structure of perception as depersonalisation, the living into the object of one's perception. The tendency to map the encounter with the other on the depersonalising structure of perception shows up through most of Merleau-Ponty's work.[15]

Second, perceptual anonymity can be expanded into the social world in which I not only perceive objects but also perceive objects of others, i.e., cultural objects. In the *Phenomenology* Merleau-Ponty draws an analogy between the perception of the natural world and the perception of the social world. He argues that whereas the perceptual object gives itself to us in the mode of a 'one perceives', the cultural object (e.g., a bicycle) come to us through perceiving patterns of existence that speak of the unnamed other, '*someone* does such and such' (e.g., 'someone cycles'), and thus "in the cultural object I feel the close presence of the others beneath a veil of

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15. It culminates in his claims on reversibility in the *Visible and the Invisible* (as the reversibility of the seer and the seen) when he writes that there is not only a reversible relation between myself and another but also between myself and the world and myself and a thing. This conflation of categories can be problematic. Being interested here mainly in the encounter between one situated subject and another situated subject, I do not want to completely equate the intersubjective relation with the relation between the thing and the subject. Reversibility becomes an umbrella phenomenon that does not pay enough attention to its internal differences. See also chapter four (4.3.2).

anonymity" (PhP 348/405). The combination of the depersonalisation of the other as 'someone' in the cultural world and the depersonalisation that lies at the heart of perception (as 'one') brings about a social world that is not a wholly divided world of different perceptions, but that is one world *which we share* as "anonymous subjects of perception" (PhP 353/411). This world comes together in the shared cultural object of perception. In this notion of *sharing* Merleau-Ponty comes close to a formulation of what later he calls the *transitivity* of bodies: when we perceive another behavioural pattern as something familiar, then this implies that we could behave like that ourselves or that we can take part in that behaviour. In both cases the behaviour of the other signals a possibility for the behaviour of our own body and I see the intentions of the one body return in the intentions of the other body. In this shared world in which we partake as anonymous subjects of perception our perspectives are transitive in so far as they slip into each other (PhP 353/410-1). In his later works[16] this notion of the transitivity between bodies comes more clearly to the foreground and is more closely connected to the understanding of an anonymous community. In what follows I explore this primordial bond of *transitive anonymous existence* in more depth to see how our 'substitutability in the absolute presence of origins' opens up our bodies for social life. This exploration will show that the origin of our social life is found in the anonymous life in which the other is already included not as a duplicate of myself but as a different other whose differences are not yet made explicit.

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16. See for example "The Philosopher and his Shadow" (in *Signs*) and "The Child's Relations to Others".

2.2 The anonymous road into the social

Merleau-Ponty argues that saying 'I' always implies another and thus one never can be truly *alone* when affirming the self. According to Merleau-Ponty it is when the notion of 'self' is altogether lost that one can speak of true loneliness because *anonymous* existence has erased all the boundaries of the ego and the alter-ego. He writes:

> We are truly alone only on the condition that we do not know we are; it is this very ignorance which is our solitude. The 'layer' or 'sphere' which is called solipsist is without ego and without ipse. The solitude from which we emerge to intersubjective life is not that of the monad. It is only the haze of anonymous life that separates us from being; and the barrier between us and others is impalpable. (*Signs* 174/220)

It is in this anonymous existence that solitude is possible because there is not yet a distinction between myself and another. My claim is that this anonymous solitude is also precisely social and the condition for the intersubjective world. What needs to be kept in mind is that the solitude described through anonymity is not the solitude of an 'I' alone. Rather it is a solitude that erases the 'I' and 'you' and thus a solitude that emphasises the 'we' in the indefinite and impersonal form of the French '*on*' rather than the '*nous*'. A remark on the translation of '*on*' into the English 'one' is in order here*:* this translation emphasises too much the singularity of the impersonal pronoun. '*On*' is a more communal pronoun used both for the expression of the impersonal and general subject '*on ne fait pas ça*' and for the expression of an indefinite 'we', '*on y va!*' that does not automatically assume a 'they' set over and against it.[17] Thus it neither implies a singularity nor a duality. I want to emphasise

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17. There is also a distinction between a formal and an informal usage of the pronouns '*on*' and '*nous*'.

here the special meaning of the loneliness of the 'we' [*on*] that comes forth out of the ignorance of neonatal life.[18] One other remark on the language used here: it is interesting that the etymological origin of the word 'alone' lies in the conjunction of the words 'all' and 'one', because it makes it possible to read the word 'alone' in two ways: (i) as emphasising the *one* single individual who is wholly alone and is separated from the others, which is the more conventional understanding of 'alone'; and (ii) as emphasising how the multitude of the *all* is brought together in the indefinite communal experience of anonymous life. I will write '<u>a</u>lone' when I mean to discuss the communal solitude of anonymity.

M.C. Dillon has written that "[s]olipsism is not merely a philosophical mistake; it is rather an aspect of human life."[19] Dillon wants to point out that both the *solipsist separation* from other bodies and the *community* between bodies should be part of a theory of intersubjectivity. I claim that *both* in the separation (as an insular existence) and in the communion (as anonymity) there are elements of solipsism present that should be taken into account if a phenomenology of difference is to make sense.[20] Intersubjectivity is not just about recognising another as being different but also about interaction and communication. It is the anonymous life that sets the background for the possibility of this communication. In the early anonymity of life, rhythms and attunements are shaped which are essential for social behaviour. Consequently to claim that the life of the infant is an anonymous life of being <u>a</u>lone

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Used formally '*On*' appears mainly in its first version as a pronoun for the impersonal general subject. In this formal context it does not normally include the indefinite 'we'.

18. This ignorance is described as not *knowing* who and that we are, i.e., there is no self-knowledge.

19. M.C. Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1997), 114.

20. Solipsism is thus an integral part of our embodied life but not "*the* essential" (VI 71/100). See chapter one (1.1.4).

is not to say that the infant lives in what Cynthia Willett calls a form of asocial autism.[21] Thus it is not the case that the social is necessarily tied up with being able to distinguish between a self and a non-self and it is also not the case that the unbarred existence of being alone is an a-social form of life. In the following sections I defend this claim by discussing two challenges made against it: one from the scientific domain and one from within phenomenology. I consider the argument that social behaviour is necessarily tied up with being able to distinguish between a self and a non-self, after which I argue for the contrary, namely that there is a true form of social life already present both in the anonymous existence of neonates and in the anonymous traces that run through adult embodied existence.

In the sections that follow I consider the phenomenological experience of infants. However I cannot do so without making the following cautionary remark: since we are dealing with the experience of the infant it is of course hard to verify any of these claims that are based, on the one hand, on behavioural data and, on the other hand, on the phenomenology of similar processes in adult life. Being true to principles of phenomenology, it is not clear whether it is possible to generalise certain findings taken from research conducted with adult subjects to children. More specifically it is unclear how we can make statements about what infants experience. Merleau-Ponty writes in the *Phenomenology* that "my earliest years are an unknown land" (PhP 347/404). Later he asks in *The Visible and the Invisible* whether we have the right to understand the child's experience as being similar to our own. At the same moment that we as phenomenologists are trying to respect the phenomena, would

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21. Cynthia Willett, *Maternal Ethics and Other Slave Moralities* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 27.

we not run the risk to "reduce the child's experience to our own" (VI 203/253)? But does this mean that we cannot do phenomenology on infant experience? G.B. Madison argues that it is highly speculative and questionable to address childhood experience from a phenomenological point of view; the world of a child, he says, is only interpretative.[22] On the one hand, I agree with Madison that we need to be extremely careful not to ascribe certain phenomenological experiences to infants, but on the other hand, I also think that this kind of critique leaves a rather narrow field for phenomenology. Merleau-Ponty connects this question to *all* our thinking of others and of ourselves: "the same question arises with regard to every *other*, to the alter ego in particular— —And *to that other than me who is the I reflected on,* for myself who reflects" (VI 203/253). If the narrow field that is left for us is the field of our own present self,[23] then how are we ever to make sense of others at all? In "The Child's Relations with Others," Merleau-Ponty helps us think about a solution when he writes:

> We must abandon the fundamental prejudice according to which the psyche is that which is accessible only to myself and cannot be seen from the outside. My consciousness is turned primarily to the world, turned toward things; it is above all a relation to the world. The other's consciousness as well is chiefly a certain way of comporting himself toward the world. Thus it is in his conduct, in the manner in which the other deals with the world, that I will be able to discover his consciousness. (CRO 116-117/175-6)

It is with this kind of look that I will discuss the behaviour of the infant. I will take into account mainly the way that the infant is directed to the world and see how that

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22. G.B. Madison, "Flesh as Otherness," in *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty,* ed. G.A. Johnson and M.B. Smith (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1990), 31.

23. This is complicated by our everyday inherence in the anonymous prereflective life. If we can never grasp the present reflectively then is phenomenology doomed to failure from the very beginning? See also Husserl, *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time*, 132 (appendix XII).

may reflect what the infant's relation is with the world and with others.

2.2.1 Self and non-self: scientific challenges to anonymous existence

In her paper "Merleau-Ponty in dialogue with the cognitive sciences in light of recent imitation research," Beata Stawarska correctly points out how Merleau-Ponty's conception of the anonymous world of the infant is based on psychological data and assumptions that were prevalent in his time.[24] Stawarska argues that it is fruitful to maintain the relation between psychological sciences and phenomenology, but that there is a need to update the developmental psychological theories that underlie Merleau-Ponty's claim. She presents recent data on neonate imitation that imply, she claims, that the infant makes a minimal distinction between the self and the other right from the beginning.[25] Contemporary science can thus function as a constraint on phenomenology by correcting claims about the phenomenological experience of the infant. In this section, I discuss which constraints are put on the phenomenological discussion of neonatal life by these recent imitation studies and whether these data present a convincing case against the notion of the anonymous life of infants.

The argument for early differentiation of a self and another hinges on the observation that neonates as young as a few hours old imitate facial movements of their mothers or of strangers. This imitation behaviour is particularly interesting since

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24. Beata Stawarska, "Merleau-Ponty in Dialogue with the Cognitive Sciences in Light of Recent Imitation Research," *Philosophy Today* 47 (2003): 89-99.

25. Ibid, 91. Stawarska makes a similar claim about the necessity of a minimal distinction between self and other in "Anonymity and Sociality: The Convergence of psychological and philosophical Currents in Merleau-Ponty's ontological Theory of Intersubjectivity," *Chiasmi International* 4 (2004): 306.

these infants have not yet obtained an image of their own body. These infants are not yet visibly aware of their own tongue but are able to mimic tongue-protrusion-like behaviour. For this reason this sort of imitation is called 'invisible imitation'. Shaun Gallagher argues that Merleau-Ponty was well aware of the difficulty of invisible imitation. He quotes Merleau-Ponty's lecture on 'The Child's Relations with Others' when he writes, "[f]or invisible imitation to be possible 'it would be necessary for me to *translate* my visual image of the other's [gesture] into [my own] motor language.'"[26] What is at stake in invisible imitation is that a translation needs to take place between different modal fields: the visual field and the motor field. Merleau-Ponty did not think that this kind of cross-modal activity could take place before the third to sixth month of infant life (CRO 122/184).[27] It is clear that Merleau-Ponty's description needs to be corrected on this account due to more recent scientific data (discussed below) which shows that cross-modal behaviour is in fact possible in neonates. However this seems to be only a minor constraint that does not necessarily change Merleau-Ponty's description of the anonymity of neonatal life. Or does it? Both Stawarska and Gallagher seem to think Merleau-Ponty's account falls short here. Gallagher writes:

> The newborn infant's ability to imitate others, and its ability to correct its movement, which implies a recognition of the difference between its own gesture and the other's gesture, indicates a rudimentary differentiation between self and non-self. This may be a bare framework

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26. Shaun Gallagher, *How the Body Shapes the Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 79 (emphasis in original). Gallagher adjusts Merleau-Ponty's remark on cross-modal translation in a suggestive manner. He makes it seem that Merleau-Ponty describes the translation process as taking place between the *other's* gesture and one's *own* gesture and as such this formulation implies that the subject is aware of *self* and *other*. However, Merleau-Ponty actually writes that in order to imitate: "it would be necessary for me to translate my visual image of the other's smile into *a* motor language (CRO 116/175, my emphasis).

27. Gallagher, *How the Body Shapes the Mind*, 76.

of the self that is based on an innate system of embodiment. But it serves to introduce a disruptive moment into the supposed indifferentiation of the earliest hours, and at the very least, a rudimentary differentiation between self and non-self, so that one's earliest experiences include a sense of self and of others.[28]

Gallagher rejects the supposed anonymity of life in which infants are not yet able to differentiate between the own and the other. Invisible imitation shows, he claims, that newborns have a rudimentary awareness of self and of non-self right from the beginning of life. Similarly Stawarska writes about this: "The very modus operandi of imitation precludes a confusion between the two actors involved and, insofar as imitation is a process observable at age zero, it follows that a minimal distinction between self and other occurs from the start and not at a later developmental stage."[29] If this is true, then it seems that we need to let go of Merleau-Ponty's conception of neonatal life as an anonymous life. To examine whether this conclusion must be drawn, I discuss the imitation data in more detail below.

2.2.1.1 The invisible imitation experiments

From birth on, even in the womb, infants take part in a life of kinaesthetic rhythms with their caregivers. Neonates and caregivers develop intricate patterns of behaviour that are precursors to later communication. Some of these patterns and responses that develop between neonates and caregivers are patterns of imitation. Recent studies have shown that neonates as young as forty hours to six weeks old are capable of imitating appropriate behaviours such as mouth openings and tongue protrusions. In a series of experiments conducted over the last thirty years A.N.

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28. Ibid. 84.
29. Stawarska, "Merleau-Ponty in Dialogue with the Cognitive Sciences," 91.

Meltzoff and M.K. Moore show that infants are capable of imitative behaviour.[30] In several experimental situations infants as young as six weeks old were presented with adults (either strangers or their own mothers) who would model one particular facial gesture in a pattern of 15 seconds of repetitive facial gesturing plus 15 seconds of showing a neutral 'pause' face. Each infant saw only one specific facial movement in this burst-pause format for a particular amount of time, such as the opening of the mouth. It was shown that infants responded to each of these modelled gestures with significantly more equivalent gestures than different ones. The clearest response was seen in the case of the tongue protrusions: faced with a model, infants responded with significantly more tongue protrusions than mouth openings or other facial movements. Interestingly the imitative response to mouth openings was less significant with respect to the frequency of the behaviour and more significant in trying to match the *duration* of the modelled mouth openings. In addition, infants were able to defer imitation: after being faced with a model who would show tongue protrusions on one day, the next day infants responded with tongue protrusions to the same model even when the model kept her/his face neutral.[31] Meltzoff and Moore claim that these results indicate that the infants do actually mimic the facial movement with which they are presented and the matching behaviour shows that they perform some sort of 'corrective' behaviour to mouth openings.

Meltzoff and Moore draw a general conclusion that early imitation is important

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30. A.N. Meltzoff & M.K. Moore's papers: "Imitation of Facial and Manual Gestures by Human Neonates," *Science* 198 (1977): 75-78; "Imitation in Newborn Infants: Exploring the Range of Gestures Imitated and the Underlying Mechanisms," *Developmental Psychology* 25 (1989): 954-962; "Early Imitation within a Functional Framework: The Importance of Person Identity, Movement, and Development," *Infant Behavior and Development* 15 (1992): 479-505; "Imitation, Memory, and the Representation of Persons," *Infant Behavior and Development* 17 (1994): 83-99.

31. Meltzoff & Moore, "Imitation, Memory, and the Representation of Persons," 96.

in infants learning to understand other persons. I agree with this general conclusion and will return to the significance of imitation at several other places in this thesis. More specifically Meltzoff and Moore conclude that early imitation and especially *deferred* imitation serves an *identity* function.[32] I challenge this explanation since it makes too may assumptions about neonates' cognitive functioning and their phenomenal experience. Meltzoff and Moore hypothesise that through imitation infants test if the person they see is the same one who they saw before and with whom they played a particular identity game. Thus they ask: "[i]s this the self-same person acting differently, or a different person who merely looks the same?"[33] and "are you the one who does tongue protrusion?"[34] Assuming such an identity testing taking place in infants of six weeks old needs solid experimental support and I do not think Meltzoff and Moore provide this support. The identity function hypothesis is based on a certain pilot experiment in which infants were first presented with one adult doing one gesture and then they were presented with another adult performing another gesture. Apparently the second adult did not elicit imitation of the second gesture but instead infants started performing the previously imitated gesture. Unfortunately and surprisingly, except for reporting this curious behaviour of some infants, Meltzoff and Moore neither report the precise method, subjects, controls, and statistically significant data of this pilot experiment nor do they provide a reference to such an experiment.[35] The experimentally significant data that they do provide is based on the deferred imitation condition of their actual experiment in

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32. Ibid., 96.
33. Ibid*.,* 96.
34. Meltzoff & Moore, "Early Imitation within a Functional Framework," 502.
35. See Meltzoff & Moore, "Early Imitation within a Functional Framework" and "Imitation, Memory, and the Representation of Persons."

which infants are only trained on one imitating gesture and are shown at a certain stage a neutral face of the *same* adult who had previously modelled that *same* gesture.[36] Consequently, based on this experimental situation it is not immediately obvious how infants would have responded to a different face or to a different gesture, let alone if they would have been able to 'test' the different adults with the different responses they were taught. In addition it was shown that infants do not differ in imitative response to the mother or to the experimenter even when both were made to look as visually distinct as possible.[37] This suggests that infants do not really test or differentiate between the models that they are shown.

Both Gallagher and Stawarska ignore the so-called identity function explanation and interpret the invisible imitation experiments as indicating that in these young infants, some of whom are no older than forty hours, some distinction between self and non-self must be present. They base this conclusion on one important finding in the experiments, namely that the neonates are able to correct their imitative responses to match them as close as possible to the model. They both argue that correction can only take place when one scrutinises one's *own* behaviour and is aware of the difference between one's own behaviour and the other's modelling behaviour. This is a more convincing argument than Meltzoff and Moore's argument. To this role of correction Gallagher adds another claim, namely that for imitation to occur one need not only be aware of one's body but also to be aware of it as one's *own*.[38] Thus infants are assumed to be pre-reflectively, non-conceptually

36. See Meltzoff & Moore, "Imitation, Memory, and the Representation of Persons," 86.
37. Meltzoff & Moore, "Early Imitation within a Functional Framework," 492.
38. Gallagher, *How the Body shapes the Mind,* 105.

self-conscious and able experimentally to differentiate between self and non-self.[39]

2.2.1.2 Attunement: an alternative interpretation of invisible imitation

In this section I want to challenge both Gallagher's and Stawarska's claims and show that invisible imitation in neonates may instead support a phase of anonymous transitivity in child development, the trace of which continues in adult life. My weak claim is that when it is possible to tell a different story about neonate imitation then the evidence for the presence of a sense of 'self' in the neonate is at most inconclusive. Consequently it would be wrong to make any inferences about what neonates experience or what they are aware of. My strong claim is that imitation in neonates shows that there is a strong spill-over or tuning effect in newborns which can be explained in Merleau-Pontian terms as a *contagion effect* between bodies that are not differentiated in terms of 'mine' versus 'yours'.[40]

Many of the small games and interactions that caregivers play with infants are based on imitation behaviour. Contrary to Gallagher and Stawarska, I argue that the development of these imitation patterns is facilitated by taking seriously the anonymous connection between infants and their social world. As Merleau-Ponty describes, in anonymous life there is an original sympathy at work that gives rise to an immediate connection and a spill-over effect between bodies. If we take seriously the claim that an infant lives in an anonymous world it will not yet know '*your* mouth' and '*my* mouth' and the similarities and differences between the two. The infant who

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39. Ibid, 106.
40. "The child responds to the cries of other children by calling out himself; there is a contagion of cries" (CRO 124/187).

is not aware of its *own* body and the body of *another* lives as much in its body as in the body of another. As far as the body of the infant has the necessary capabilities, the intentions of the one body can spill over into another body. Merleau-Ponty illustrates this by recounting the following example: when playfully pretending to bite the finger of a particular baby, the baby opens its mouth in response to this (PhP 352/409). This is peculiar for reasons already mentioned above: the baby does not yet know its face and even if it would know it, its face and the adult's face are significantly different from each other. This example comes as close as possible to an example of invisible imitation that parallels the experiments discussed above. Merleau-Ponty explains that suddenly this biting has for the infant an intersubjective overtone as it perceives "my intentions in its own body" (PhP 352/409). In "The Child's Relations with Others" Merleau-Ponty continues this observation with another example of early imitation, the responsive smile of an infant. Merleau-Ponty's solution to early childhood imitation rests on the claim that what children imitate is not yet the other as another psyche, but rather children imitate the *conducts of others* that resonate with their embodied existence. That is, I can imitate conducts that speak to my motor possibilities, but it is not necessary that I then also understand the other as a whole person (CRO 117/176). This formulation of cross-modal translation of conducts leaves open a form of imitation that is not yet completely personalised and experienced as *mine versus yours,* but rather rests on a sympathetic connection between the infant and the other which does not:

> presuppose a genuine distinction between self-consciousness and consciousness of the other but rather the absence of a distinction between the self and the other. It is the simple fact that I live in the facial expressions of the other, as I feel him living in mine. It is a manifestation

of what we have called, in other terms, the system me-and-other. (CRO 146/216)

The sympathy that children feel is not yet the ethical adult sympathy that Scheler calls '*das Mitgefühl*' which is a re-action to another's feeling, the feeling-*with* another human being. The sympathy that Merleau-Ponty describes is rather a form of emotional infection [*Gefühlsansteckung*] which finds its culmination in the reciprocal *Einsfühlung*, the feeling one with each other in which there is a mutual coalescence between a group, between lovers, or between caregiver and child.[41]

To understand the extent of the spill-over effect as *Einsfühlung*, it is important to realise that the body and the life of infants are made up of rhythmic movements.[42] In their excellent review of the scientific literature, J. Jaffe et al. describe how the infant's life, behaviour and interactions are structured as recurrent rhythmic patterns.[43] Infants are shown to be very sensitive to temporal patterning, which implies that for infants the modality of the stimulation is a less crucial aspect than the temporal patterning of the stimulation with which they are faced.[44] At birth newborns are able to perceive time and estimate the durations of events,[45] they also notice changes in speech sound durations in words (i.e., changes in the duration of the /s/),[46] and through their sensitivity for rhythmic classes they can discriminate

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41. On emotional identification [*Einsfühlung*], see Scheler, *The Nature of Sympathy,* 25-28.
42. See for example Esther Thelen's work on the dynamics of early infant life in: "Time-Scale Dynamics and the Development of an Embodied Cognition," in *Mind as Motion,* ed. R.F. Port and T. Van Gelder (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), 69-100. And "Grounded in the World: Developmental Origins of the Embodied Mind," *Infancy* 1, no. 1 (2000): 3-28.
43. J. Jaffe, B. Beebe, S. Feldstein, C.L. Crown, and M.D. Jasnow, "Rhythms of Dialogue in Infancy: Coordinated Timing in Development," *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development* 66, no. 2 (2001): i-149.
44. Ibid., 8.
45. A.J. DeCasper, and A. Carstens, in Jaffe et al, "Rhythms of Dialogue in Infancy," 8.
46. Elena Kushnerenko et al., "Central auditory processing of durational changes in complex speech patterns by newborns: An event-related potential study," *Developmental Neuropsychology* 19, no.1

between the different speech patterns of different languages and cultures.[47] In accordance with these studies, David Leckowics has shown that the discrimination of *duration* is one of the most basic functions in the auditory system which suggests that the perception of time comes prior to the perception of pitch or location.[48] Infants themselves take part in these patternings. The exchange between caregivers and children takes the shape of sharing temporal patterns which is said to be "the basis for the development of empathy in the child."[49] Between them and their caregivers an interesting rhythmic exchange or rhythmic coupling, is developed by moving and by making sounds.

The importance of temporal patterning is echoed in Meltzoff and Moore's imitation research when they remark that the stimulus to be imitated should not be offered to the infants constantly but needs to be shaped into a burst-pause format (15 seconds on and 15 seconds off). When temporal patterning is so very important in infants' life it should not be surprising that Meltzoff and Moore's results indicate that infants are able to match the duration of a modelled mouth-opening. What is more surprising is the conclusion that matching would *necessarily* involve an awareness of the self and of the other. I claim that matching could be a side-effect of infants' temporally structured life, which Willet calls their "rhythm of life,"[50] and suggest that matching responses fit in easily with the infants' sensitivity to duration and their tuning into temporal patterns of the environment. Willett expresses my

(2001): 83-97.

47. T. Nazzi, and F. Ramus, "Perception and Acquisition of Linguistic Rhythm by Infants," *Speech Communication* 41, no. 1 (2003): 233-243.

48. David J. Lewkowicz, "The development of intersensory temporal perception: An epigenetic systems/limitations view," *Psychological Bulletin* 126, no. 2 (2000): 281-308.

49. Jaffe et al, "Rhythms of Dialogue in Infancy," 10.

50. Willett, *Maternal Ethics*, 30.

sentiment when she writes that "it is difficult to see how the transferral of kinetic rhythms implies the recognition of Self and Other that constitutes intersubjectivity."[51] Moreover she reminds us that just because there are forms of imitation among adults that require us to make a distinction between the self and another person (such as when I struggle to imitate the movements of a ballet dancer), it does not follow that this distinction is already made in early infancy. She criticises thinkers who interpret Hegel's dialectic to mean that whatever is perceivable in the adult must have already been present in the newborn.[52] I want to add that it would be a mistake even to assume that all adult imitation rests on making an explicit distinction between the self and another. More strongly I suggest that imitation behaviour in adults is more often based on an anonymous process of attunement than that it is the explicit and willful imitation of another's behaviour by my *own* body.

Merleau-Ponty writes that in normal imitation we do not reflectively separate and locate each other's hands, but rather while imitating a hand movement my hand *is* immediately the other's hand, and I and the other lose our 'separate reality' (PhP 141/176). The idea that our embodied life is rhythmically structured resonates with Merleau-Ponty's writings on sense perception in the normal adult. He remarks that "in the sensible a certain rhythm of existence is put forward" (PhP 213/258) and that the world provides "the theater of a certain living pulsation adopted by my body…each part of the whole is 'sensitive' to what happens in all the others, and 'knows them dynamically'" (PhP 215/259). My body tunes into the rhythmic beat of

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51. Ibid, 26-27.
52. Ibid, 25-26.

my environment and learns to know the world through sympathising with the patterns of the world.[53] The patterns in the world and in my body pull on one another and form a dynamic patterning of life.

Jaffe et al. note that tuning behaviour is not restricted to newborns and write: "[r]elating to another person is a shared process. As partners communicate, they adapt moment-by-moment by coordinating verbal and non-verbal rhythmic patterns, such as on-off cycles of vocalising and pausing, or of looking and looking away."[54] Without consciously adjusting our gait we tune into the rhythm of the marching band when we walk past them; not even being aware of the music that is played in the background I start tapping my foot to the rhythm while I concentrate on my reading. Moreover, when I consciously try to persist in tapping a particular rhythm when others play a rhythm that interferes and is out of sync with mine, I will have a difficult time maintaining my rhythm when I am not used to do this. Jaffe et al. summarise research done over the past forty years that shows that during a conversation between two adults they each tune into the speech patterns of the other. Their pauses match the pauses of the other and the rhythm and inflection of their speech is also matched.[55] All of this seems to happen on a level where I am not aware of the other's different timing patterns; instead, the other and I easily tune into each other and find a shared rhythmic pattern.

Once more I return to Gallagher and Stawarska's remark that imitating infants

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53. PhP 214/258.
54. Jaffe et al, "Rhythms of Dialogue in Infancy," 1.
55. Ibid., 12.

are aware of the self and the other since they are shown to *match* their behaviour to the behaviour of others. I agree with Gallagher and Stawarska that anything that is called *correction* is in need of 'me' being aware of the discrepancy between myself and another. But I do not think that all gradual matching processes require correction. Tuning one's responses to the responses of others can involve a process in which the match between the response and the stimulus gets closer over time without the person herself being aware of it. An example of this sort of tuning in an adult is the learning or losing of an accent in speech. Let us say that after having lived for a considerable amount of time in England a Dutch person has obtained a strong British accent. Her subsequent move to Canada makes the distinction between her British accent and the Canadian accent all the more apparent. However after living a few years in Canada, the British accent is replaced with a Canadian one without the conscious realisation of the speaker. Suddenly, with surprise, she hears herself saying 'aboot' in a perfectly Canadian way. She was never aware of the fact that she was learning Canadian English. She even tried to resist it since she loves British pronunciation. Nevertheless, she tuned into the language and speech patterns of the people surrounding her.[56]

Not just language, vocal and kinaesthetic rhythms show tuning effects, emotions and postures also show spill-over effects. Elaine Hatfield, John Cacioppo and Richard Rapson show that people who share their lives together also start infecting each other with their emotions. Depressed individuals are likely to infect

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56. The reverse also happens, your manner and style of speaking your own language can change (sometimes for the worse) when living with a learner of that language. Once more this shows how we are relational and dynamic beings.

their partners with feeling sad and depressed. Postures in crowds are contagious as can be observed in spectators of a sport who so lose themselves in a game that they take the posture or shape their hand as if they are going to throw the ball themselves.[57] In any one of these behaviours my body is already tuned to the body of another and in experiences such as these I do not regard my body as exclusively mine or another body as exclusively hers. Instead I wince when I witness someone else getting an injection and it is as if I feel the needle in my own body. This experience "happens automatically without conscious awareness…Consequently, people tend, from moment-to-moment, to 'catch' others' emotions"[58] and one behaves as a 'we' [*on*] rather than an 'I'. The catching of each other's emotions, kinaesthetic and vocal rhythms happens from moment-to-moment in our most basic communications. It is for this reason that above I claimed that the anonymous form of imitation happens more often than imitative behaviour that relies on recognising the other as being different from myself. In further support of this claim, it has been shown that imitation is impaired when people are made explicitly aware of differences between the imitator and the imitated.[59] In addition, it is generally noted that when explicitly asked to mimic another subject's behaviour, the imitation does not look as exact and fluid as when this imitation happens without explicit self-awareness. Research on the neurological underpinnings of imitation and the discovery of so-called 'mirror

57. Elaine Hatfield, John T. Cacioppo and Richard L. Rapson, *Emotional Contagion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 33. Merleau-Ponty uses a similar example when he writes about the correspondence of perception and motility (CRO 146/216) and postural impregnation: "We know the famous example of the spectators at a football game who make the proper gesture at the moment when the player would make it" (CRO 145/216).

58. Elaine Hatfield & Richard L. Rapson, "Emotional Contagion," in *The Corsini Encyclopedia of Psychology and Behavioral Science,* ed. W.E. Craighead and C.B. Nemeroff (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2000), 493.

59. M. Brass, and C. Heyes, "Imitation: Is Cognitive Neuroscience Solving the Correspondence Problem?" *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 9 (2005): 489-495.

neurons' calls imitation a 'like me' sort of behaviour that happens in a 'we' space.[60] Therefore, when the behaviour of adults is still pervaded by these kinds of imitation-like anonymous tuning behaviours why is it so hard to imagine that this is even more so the case with infants?

Thus far I have argued the following: there is evidence that both infants and adults tune into what Merleau-Ponty calls 'the rhythm of existence' and that this tuning and imitation process is interfered with when one is made to be explicitly aware of the difference between the other and oneself. This imitation behaviour is not in need of an explicit recognition of oneself and the other since often attunement happens on a prereflective level. To translate this into Merleau-Pontian terms, imitation can happen in the anonymous domain precisely because as an anonymous perceiving body there is no 'I' that needs to be held onto and thus the body can easily live in and attune to the rhythms that surround it. Since our anonymous bodies are not reflectively individuated and differentiated, our expressions and emotions are transitive from one body to another body. As a result, the weak claim made at the beginning of this section is affirmed, i.e., infant imitation can be explicated in different terms than a necessary early differentiation of oneself and another and thus one cannot deduce from the phenomenon of invisible imitation alone that the infant knows itself as a 'me'. In addition and more *strongly*, neonate imitation presents itself as one particular illustration of the spilling over of expressions, emotions and intentions from one body unto another and thus this phenomenon helps strengthen

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60. Victor Gallese, "From Mirror Neurons to the Shared Manifold Hypothesis: A Neurophysiological Account of Intersubjectivity," in *Biology and Knowledge Revisited: From Neurogenesis to Psychogenesis*, ed. S. Taylor Parker, J. Langer & C. Milbrath (MahWah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2005), 179-203.

Merleau-Ponty's claim that infant and perceptual life is characterised by an anonymous non-differentiation of bodies.

2.2.2 The primordiality of the self

In the previous section I have assumed that behaviour that is called unreflective, non-conscious behaviour is equivalent to anonymous behaviour, but something more needs to be said about this. When Gallagher writes that the infant is aware of the distinction between the self and non-self from the earliest moment on, he describes this awareness as a prereflective, non-conceptual self-consciousness. Here Gallagher is not completely in disagreement with Merleau-Ponty because, after all, for Merleau-Ponty '[p]rimary perception is a non-thetic, pre-objective and preconscious experience' (PhP 242/289). The curious thing is that for Merleau-Ponty primary perception is precisely anonymous (as was shown above) whereas for Gallagher it is both prereflective awareness and awareness of self and of non-self. Merleau-Ponty describes anonymity in relation to sense perception as the lived-experience of a primary sensation that cannot be objectified in reflection because to reflect on what *I as a self* am experiencing right now is to disrupt that experience. This does not mean that I do not have any awareness of this experience; however this self-awareness can only be tacit. This also means that there is a certain failure of the perceptual consciousness because *I as a reflective subject* cannot see the self as an object except by distancing it into the past. Nonetheless, Gallagher's remark about the possibility of being pre-reflectively aware of oneself should not too easily be discarded. There is a certain complexity to anonymity that is overlooked in both the

straight out denial of an anonymous world and the explicit affirming of the anonymous collective world. In this section I discuss some phenomenological challenges that, at first sight, imply that the *own* is always the centre and locus of the living consciousness, i.e., that there is a level of ownness even in the anonymous life. To formulate this challenge, I first discuss arguments taken from Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty in order to argue later that affirming that the subject is the central locus of her own perception does not necessarily mean that the notion of anonymity has to be abandoned. Instead it means that our understanding of anonymity has to be complicated.

An initial question can be formulated when scrutinising the Husserlian phenomenological method as a reduction to egology. If the 'I' is phenomenologically more immediate, does this not also mean that the 'I' is *always* the locus of our perception, and if that is true, is the notion of anonymity developed here insufficiently complex? Below I explore what remains of anonymity when it is always already pervaded with the experience of the 'I'.

In *Being and Time* Martin Heidegger makes the distinction between (i) an *authentic* being of Dasein, when Dasein is something of its *own* culminating in one's ownmost possibility [*eigensten Seinkönnen*] which is one's death; and (ii) an *inauthentic* being of Dasein in terms of everydayness.[61] The everyday being of Dasein is a being immersed in the inconspicuousness and averageness of the crowd.[62] In a crowd, we see as the crowd sees and we feel as it feels. There is no primacy of *my* perception

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61. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 42, 250. *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1993 [1927]), 42, 250. Page numbers always refer to the original German pagination (found in the margins of the English translation).
62. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 127.

anymore but rather a primacy of the average perception of the 'they' [*das Man*] in the crowd.[63] The 'they' of everydayness is quite similar in description to what Merleau-Ponty calls the 'anonymous life' in the sense that in our everyday interactions we do not experience the self as the agent of our actions and the other as the non-self receiver of the actions. Instead, actions and routines, feelings and perceptions are operating in a general manner that goes beyond my experience of ownness. Heidegger writes that "in Dasein's everydayness the agency through which most things come about is one of which we say that 'it was no-one'"[64] and that, while being immersed in the 'they', "everyone is the other and no one is himself."[65] What is described here as the 'they' is what before we have called 'anonymous life'. Heidegger calls this everyday being of Dasein an *inauthentic* mode of being: "a failure to stand by one's Self."[66] Authenticity then is to have a being of one's *own* whereas inauthenticity is to be lost in the no-one of the 'they'. However, Heidegger specifies: "as modes of Being, authenticity and inauthenticity…are both grounded in the fact that any Dasein whatsoever is characterised by mineness."[67] Heidegger thus suggests that both in the being one's Self and the being no-one there is a certain characterisation of mineness. Dasein is never completely lost in the crowd, but remains a locus of experience. Heidegger repeats this claim on several other occasions emphasising that Dasein is, or has, in each case mineness [*je meines*;

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63. The German *Das Man* is difficult to translate in English. Translators Macquarrie and Robinson have chosen to name it the 'they' but it has to be stressed that *das Man* is an impersonal pronoun. Thus the 'they' as discussed here is closer to what I have called the impersonal "We" [*On*] (see 2.2).
64. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 127.
65. Ibid., 128.
66. Ibid., 128.
67. Ibid., 43.

Jemeinigkeit][68] and thus "one must always use a personal pronoun when one addresses it: 'I am,' 'you are.'"[69] He repeats this claim when he discusses the living body in the Zollikon seminars and argues that it belongs to the phenomenon of the living body to be in each case mine, not because the body is a thing that Dasein owns but because the "*bodying forth [Leiben] of the body*…is a way of Da-sein's being…[as] my own way of being."[70] Heidegger's observation is an important one: not only in the reflective phenomenological reduction do I find the 'I' as the centre and constitutive force of my world, but also in unreflective living the *mineness* of experience is in effect. Earlier I argued that both in the separation of bodies and in the community between bodies there are elements of solipsism present. In separation we find the solipsism of the 'I' alone, whereas in community we find the solipsism of the anonymous life alone. Now, Heidegger reminds us that the 'I' turns up as a pervasive mode *both* in the reflective aloneness of the ego *and* in the anonymous aloneness of the 'they'.

Merleau-Ponty is not unaware of the pervasiveness of the 'I'. In the *Phenomenology* he takes up the Heideggerian concept of being-towards-death when he claims that the thought of my death introduces an individualisation into adult life; therefore, just as my life has a sphere of sociality, it also has "a flavour of mortality" (PhP 364/423) as a flavour of ownness. This ownness surfaces in the realisation that even in the interchanging of patterns of behaviour between the other and me, even in being "submerged in generality," I am always located "on the hither side of the

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68. Ibid., 41, 42, 114, 118.
69. Ibid., 42.
70. Martin Heidegger, *Zollikon Seminars (1963)* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1987), 113.

acts" since "I am the one by whom they are experienced" (PhP 357-8/415-6) and it is *me* who lives the phenomena (PhP 363/422). In Merleau-Ponty's later work one also finds evidence for this return to the sphere of ownness: in 'The Philosopher and his Shadow' he emphasises that "the prepersonal life itself is still one of *my* views of the world" (*Signs* 174/220, emphasis mine) and in *The Visible and the Invisible* he returns to the "very fact that this vision is mine" (VI 5/19). Now the question is whether one can take seriously the phenomenological observation that one never completely loses the sphere of ownness, without having to abandon the sphere of the anonymous life.

2.2.2.1 Double anonymity

Given that Merleau-Ponty does return to the sphere of ownness, it does not mean that he is ready to abandon the notion of the anonymous life. This can be concluded from the following passage in "The Philosopher and his Shadow":

> Every man [*sic*] reflecting upon his life does have the fundamental possibility of looking at it as a series of private events of consciousness, just as the civilized white man does. But he can do so only if he forgets experiences which bestride this everyday and serial time, or reconstitutes them in a way which caricatures them. The fact that we die alone does not mean that we live alone…we must conceive of a primordial *We* [*On*] that has its own authenticity. (*Signs* 175/221)

In this statement Merleau-Ponty argues that to turn every experience into a completely private event does not do justice to our everyday experiences.[71] While we

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71. It is unclear what Merleau-Ponty's curious reference to the 'civilized white man's reflection' intends. An interesting interpretation would be to read it as a critical comment on the domination of imperialist or patriarchal perception. Reflecting on one's life as a 'civilized white man' would be to see one's life as fully one's *own*. But then the civilized white man truly forgets the social everyday experience through which he belongs to a primordial 'we' and which includes subjects who are non-white, not 'civilized' and not men. If he has not fully forgotten about those others, then he might

experience our life as truly *our own* through reflectively living towards our own death, there remains an authenticity to the anonymous life as a life of everyday interactions with others. But what is this 'authentic' anonymity?[72] After having conceded that there is a sphere of ownness also in anonymity, Merleau-Ponty cannot simply mean to return to an anonymity which does not take that anonymous ownness into account. He has to account for the shadow that the *self* casts on all experience.

Merleau-Ponty says remarkably little about a possible reconciliation between the *anonymous* life in which the self is lost and the *subjectively* embodied life. His most clear statement that addresses this problem is found in the *Phenomenology* in his discussion on freedom:

> The For-Themselves—me for myself and the other for himself [*sic*]—must stand out against a background of For-Others—I for the other and the other for me. My life must have a significance which I do not constitute; there must strictly speaking be an intersubjectivity; each one of us must be both anonymous in the sense of absolutely individual, and anonymous in the sense of absolutely general. Our being in the world is the concrete bearer of this double anonymity. (PhP 448/512)

There are thus two senses of the anonymous, the one is based on an underlying generality that I experience in the world as an anonymous 'we' [*on*]. This kind of anonymity was explained above in terms of the generality of the undifferentiated body, and this depiction of anonymity was used mainly in describing the anonymous world of an infant. However there is a sense in which even the infant is tied to its *own* body. Individual anonymity refers to the *particular being of one's body* in the world.

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still not acknowledge his direct relation with these others by caricaturing them. Through stereotyping them and the relation between himself and others, he avoids having to acknowledge how by virtue of his embodied belonging to a world he is already dis-possessed of himself and being shaped and affected by others. Instead he (again) takes up possession and sole power over this intersubjective relation. See also chapter three (3.3).

72. I do not intend here to imply that this question of authenticity is meant in a Heideggerian manner. The question could also read: what is the accurate understanding of the anonymous life?

From both Heidegger's and Merleau-Ponty's remarks above it can be inferred that every conscious experience has an individualised lived quality that is the experience of a particular body that has a way of being in the world: this body has a certain sensibility, it has its habits or a style. Even when living in the anonymous present the unreflective life is lived in a particularly unique and located style. It is in this way that our anonymous subjectivity in the present moment is always also *individualised.*

In relation to the Merleau-Pontian notion of sedimentation, Edward S. Casey understands habit or style as the generalisation and depersonalisation of particular individual acts.[73] Habit as a style is a settled practice,[74] it is a sedimented pattern of behaviour that has lost a certain willful quality as it has settled in the anonymous patterning of the body. The way we are in our bodies is the result of the particular structure of our body (e.g., how we walk might be the result of the way that our muscles can or cannot flex), of our continued interaction with our environment (e.g., it matters in which environments we walked and what we were asked to do while walking), of socialisation (e.g., gendered walking),[75] and of voluntarily learned patterns of action (e.g., whether or not we purposefully learned to walk in a particular manner). In all these cases the actual act of walking happens on a pre-reflective level without being experienced as a particular personal event. More generally the way that my habitual body speaks and responds to the world is not informed by a voluntary decision and reflection starting at the level of the 'self'. Nevertheless, at the same

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73. Edward S. Casey, "Habitual Body and Memory in Merleau-Ponty," *Man and World* 17 (1984): 248.
74. Ibid., 280.
75. Women generally take smaller steps and keep hips close. This is learned behaviour but not voluntary. For an interesting photographic study about male and female postures and gesture in the 1950s to the 1970s see Marianne Wex, *Let's Take Back Our Space: 'Female' and 'Male' Body Language as a Result of Patriarchal Structures,* trans. Johanna Albert (Berlin: Frauenliteraturverlag Hermine Fees, 1979).

time styles and habits also function as the *particular characteristics* of the person that exhibits them: I recognise my grandmother in the distance by the way she walks. Thus Casey argues that the habitual takes up a middle position between the anonymous generality of the body and the personal expressiveness of style.[76] We as subjects can never grasp our own individual style as we are involved in it: we are not aware of our style of walking or our style of speaking (our accent) at the same moment that we walk or that we speak. To try to become aware of these two modes simultaneously would break the execution of the pattern (i.e., reflecting on the particular style of my walking would interrupt its natural flow and its style).

Although an infant has had little experience with being in the world there does not seem to be a reason to suggest that it is not also already behaving in a particular style.[77] An infant lives generally in an undifferentiated world and individually as a particular body or style in that world. Being necessarily embodied means that I necessarily live in my individual body; however, in this moment of living through my body I am *not* "necessarily aware of it *as* my own."[78] So while it is true that the infant necessarily lives and perceives through its *own* body it is not obvious that this also means that the infant experiences its own body as *'mine'*.

It is possible to defend Gallagher and Stawarska by claiming that this individualised anonymity is precisely what is described by them as a prereflective

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76. Casey, "Habitual Body and Memory in Merleau-Ponty," 290.

77. These infant styles and habits might be easily overwritten by other styles and habits, i.e., I suggest that the sedimentation of body patterns in infants might be more easily disrupted. For an example of the individual styles of infants reaching, see Thelen, "Time-scale Dynamics and the Development of an Embodied Cognition."

78. Gallagher writes: "when I am proprioceptively aware of a body, I am necessarily aware of only my own body, and necessarily aware of it *as* my own" (*How the Body Shapes the Mind,* 105). It is unclear to me how the necessity of being embodied in my own body also implies a necessary phenomenology of that body *as my own*.

"rudimentary differentiation"[79] and a "minimal distinction"[80] between self and other. However if this is the case, then this claim is rather weak and does not challenge Merleau-Ponty's thesis of anonymity to the extent that it should be rejected, but rather it complicates the notion of anonymity to include its double role as individual and general. I am not sure whether Gallagher and Stawarska would commit to holding this weaker position. At times both make rather strong claims about the knowledge the infant has about herself and others. Stawarska suggests that "the infant knows that the other looks 'like me'" and that she looks like the other.[81] In addition, when Gallagher writes that the infant is aware of her body *as* her own[82] a similar suggestion is made as to the infant objectifying and *knowing* herself rather than just experiencing herself. I suggest that Gallagher and Stawarska's worry about anonymity and their consequent emphasis on the self-*knowing* of the infant is a result of a failure to grasp the full complexity of double anonymity. Their interpretation of anonymity is too restricted and they depict anonymity too much as a total symbiosis of self and other. Gallagher and Meltzoff describe Merleau-Ponty's state of precommunication as "a complete lack of differentiation between itself and the other" by which they imply that the anonymous life of the infant is a life in which there is absolute sameness between myself and another.[83] In the following section I show how anonymous life does not mean a life of sameness and non-difference, but

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79. Gallagher, *How the Body Shapes the Mind,* 84.
80. Stawarska, "Merleau-Ponty in Dialogue with the Cognitive Sciences," 91; "Anonymity and Sociality," 306.
81. Beata Stawarska, "Facial Embodiment in 'Invisible' Imitation," *Theoria et Historia Scientarium* 7, no. 1 (2003): 148.
82. Gallagher, *How the Body Shapes the Mind,* 105.
83. Shaun Gallagher and Andrew N. Meltzoff, "The earliest sense of self and others: Merleau-Ponty and recent developmental studies," *Philosophical Psychology* 9, no. 2 (1996): 211. http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail?vid=4&hid=21&sid=32dd9a5d-e511-4967-a388-306bc598b121%40sessionmgr3.

instead within the doubly anonymous life there is space for a sense of difference.

2.2.3 Anonymous life and difference

Having complicated the anonymous life as both general and individual I need to say something more about this in relation to difference. Speaking about an anonymous community does not mean that we speak about a community in which everyone is the *same* or *identical*, where a strange sort of fusion and annihilation of bodies and styles has taken place and where these bodies and styles are now dissolved in the uniformity of the original anonymity of life. Therefore, Scheler's images of *Eingeschmolzenheit* and *Ineinandergemischtes* might not be the best to capture the anonymous dimension of experience.[84] These images emphasise too much a total breakdown of the own and annihilation of the self in a third term that is a fusion and symbiosis of the self and the other. When Stawarska rejects the initial anonymous phase of infant life it is this kind of symbiosis and fusion that she has in mind and finds problematic.[85] Both Gallagher and Stawarska follow a trend in contemporary cognitive science to be critical of an earlier Piagetian psychology that claimed that infant life was marked by complete indifferentiation and fusion with its environment.[86] I share these worries and I agree that when anonymity implies an

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84. See 2.1.

85. "Merleau-Ponty's presentation of psychogenesis, which resolves the problem of the *alter ego* via the thesis of original indistinction between self and other, faces the challenge of how the relations to other [*sic*] could ever be derived from the initial stage of *fusion*." Stawarska, "Anonymity and Sociality," 304-5 (my emphasis).

86. Dan Zahavi is also critical of a Piagetian psychology as claiming that there is not yet *any* distinction between the self and the other in infant life. He quotes Piaget as claiming that the infant exists in a "'state of undifferentiation, of *fusion* with the mother...' This state of *symbiosis* has then been assumed to be the milieu from which the infant gradually learns to separate itself" Jean Piaget in Dan Zahavi, *Self-awareness and Alterity: A Phenomenological Investigation* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1999), 175 (my emphasis).

absolute loss of self then it is difficult to think how the self can be formed or regained from this moment of annihilation. As argued above Merleau-Ponty does not hold on to such an absolute undoing of the sphere of ownness; both the infant and the adult remain tied to their individual bodies and perspectives. To claim that the origin of difference lies in anonymity is not to ground difference in the *same*. I suggest that anonymous life is not characterised by sameness but instead by *indifferentiation*. By using the word *in*differentiation I emphasise that anonymity makes everyone *count* as the same [*gleich-gültig*] without it necessarily being the case that one is non-different (i.e., the same). Bernard Waldenfels is helpful when he argues that others are like me [*meinesgleichen, mon semblable*] but at the same time incomparable to me [*unvergleichlich, hors de série*].[87] When others are like me this does not mean that they are absolutely the same, i.e., that *they are me*. Instead they cannot be compared to me because I and the other still take up different standpoints. In indifferentiation the differences of the own and the others are not annihilated, but rather they *do not matter*, they are not taken into account, they have no force. This also implies that individual differentiations *are* there and *can* take on force or *can* be made to matter when an act of reflection interrupts the moment of anonymity. Thus when I am immersed in watching someone throwing a ball and raise my arm in attunement with hers, a sudden self-reflection can interrupt this movement and embarrassed, I quickly lower my hand. In raising my arm I lost myself but not permanently; I was *with* the other person, her body and intentions extended into mine, but I did not *become* her, and neither did she become me. Silvia Stoller echoes my point when she writes:

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87. Bernhard Waldenfels, "Bodily Experience Between Selfhood and Otherness," *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 3 (2004): 244.

> 'Indifferenz' is not the same as 'non-difference.' Whereas 'nondifference' indicates that there is no difference at all or a negation of difference, 'Indifferenz' indicates a not yet realized difference. Merleau-Ponty's important remarks on early childhood syncretism illustrate very well that 'difference' is based on the collective anonymity of partial in-difference and relies on a process of differentiation.[88]

The non-realisation of differences in the indifferent state of anonymity does not imply that we do not care about the others, i.e., as anonymous subjects we are not necessarily *indifferent* to others when it means that we are of no concern to each other (which is the usual meaning of the word 'indifferent'). We can only be indifferent in this common sense when the others first stand-out as different from ourselves. This is because indifference as 'no concern' says '*I* don't care what *you* think', which is an interruption of the attunement to the other body and a confirmation of my concern for only myself. Instead, in anonymous life the 'I' and the 'you' are not named, that is, they recede in the interplay of attunements. Moreover in anonymous life the concerns of others extend into my body and my concerns are transferred over to others; in anonymously tuning into bodies 'no concern' is not a possibility.

2.2.4 The absolute presence of origins

The anonymous life is not an asocial life from which others are precluded. As Stawarska recognises: "the thesis of 'true and transcendental solitude' is the source of a positive insight which makes evident…that self and the other are intertwined and co-dependent in such a way that the former cannot lay any claim to precedence or

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88. Silvia Stoller, "Reflections on Feminist Merleau-Ponty Scepticism," *Hypatia* 15, no. 1 (2000): 181n5.

primacy over the latter."[89] I suggest that precisely because of this non-precedence of the one over the other, a notion of the anonymous needs to be preserved. The origin of our social life is found in this anonymous life in which the other is already included not as a duplicate of myself but as a different other whose differences are not yet made explicit. Thus, rephrasing Merleau-Ponty's claim in the 'Philosopher and his Shadow' (*Signs* 175/221),[90] I can reach out to the other person's body from the origin of my body because: (i) through our intentional bodies we can reach out to and harmonise in this original community, in this world that we share; (ii) in anonymous existence our bodies extend into each other but do not blend and as such we can transfer our intentions and emotions onto the other's body; (iii) the other echoes my incarnation as we are both part of a general anonymity in which the 'I' and the 'you' are not yet differentiated, but that does not mean that we are not also separated through our individual styles; and (iv) as non-realised differences we are substitutable in the origin of our co-constitution, but this neither implies that we are grounded in the same nor that our differences cannot ever be realised.

Irigaray worries that Merleau-Ponty's claim that I relate to others through the intermediary of my body would lock me up in my own world; however, the discussion of anonymous life has shown that this world in which I meet others is not my world, but rather *our world*. The initial observation that the relationship between the subject and the other annihilates the other and leaves a lonely subject in its place is transformed into the observation that the solitude of the subject is fully social, in the sense that it is both without the self and the other. In this sense my body is not

89. Stawarska, "Anonymity and Sociality," 305.
90. See 2.1.

only mine and hers is not only hers, but rather our bodies extend into each other and are pervaded with a social being which enables us to feel into each other [*einfühlen*]. Anonymity does not offer me only other me-s, but rather it offers us a communal life. Thus the body as measurant and zero-point of my perception has presented me with an anonymous communal life in which neither I nor the other has primacy.

3

Temporality and birth:
the rhythm of institution

The anonymous life, I wrote in the last chapter, is a life of rhythm and exchange between bodies, it is a life that is not yet differentiated but already personalised through habit and sedimentations. In this chapter I further investigate and add depth to this notion of the sedimented body which is open to the body of the other. Merleau-Ponty takes up the Husserlian notion of institution to overcome the problems that were still evident in his earlier work. In his later work Merleau-Ponty recognises that his project in the *Phenomenology of Perception* has failed insofar as its problems cannot be resolved "because I start there from the 'consciousness' - 'object' distinction" (VI 200/250). Consequently in his summary of his lecture course on institution (1954-1955) Merleau-Ponty writes:

> If the subject were taken not as a constituting but an instituting subject, it might be understood that…the other person does not simply exist as the negative of myself…my relation to another person would not be reducible to a disjunction: an instituting subject could coexist with another because the one instituted is not the immediate reflection of the activity of the former and can be regained by himself or by others without involving anything like a total recreation. Thus the instituted subject exists between others and myself, like a hinge, the consequence and the guarantee of our belonging to a common world. (*Themes* 40/IP 123-124)[1]

In this chapter, I explore this important remark of Merleau-Ponty in order to see

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1. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *L'institution dans l'histoire personelle et publique : Notes du course au Collège de France (1954-1955)* (Paris: Belin, 2003), 123-4. Hereafter cited in text as IP. The summary of the lectures have appeared in English in: *Themes from the Lectures at the Collège de France 1952-1960,* trans. John O'Neill (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970). Hereafter cited in text as *Themes*. When I refer to the summary I use this translation. All other translations of the institution lectures are my own. Later, in *Husserl at the limits of Phenomenology* Merleau-Ponty writes similarly: "The *fortstiftung-nachstiftung* relation 'the solution of the present-past problem, me-others, me-my future" (HLP 20/23).

whether replacing constitution with institution really opens up the solitary life of the subject to the other as a co-existence. I argue that through institution the problematic Husserlian egology of the constituting subject is overcome and instead the subject presents herself as a temporal historical subject who is marked by rhythm and the traces and sedimentations of the world.[2] Institution is interpreted in the context of the body's rupturing rhythmic relation to its own past and future. A main concern in this chapter is how a body that is always related to its own past can encounter something or someone that is truly new or different than oneself. Going beyond Merleau-Ponty's own writings, I suggest that the new can rupture the historical rhythm of the body when it is understood through the notion of the leap of birth. A Merleau-Pontian view of birth is distinguished from Hannah Arendt's concept of *natality* and related to a more Levinasian sense of responsivity, which is not yet ethical in Merleau-Ponty. This chapter initiates an investigation into origins and brings to the foreground the original ecstasy from which both the other and I are born.[3]

3.1 Historical traces and origins of the notion of institution

Before applying the notion of institution to the discussion of my encounter with another subject, this chapter starts by discussing two origins of the notion of

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2. One might want to argue that Husserl in his later work opens up the ego to historical constitution. See for example: Dan Zahavi, *Husserl's Phenomenology* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2003); and Don Welton, *The Other Husserl: The Horizons of Transcendental Phenomenology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002). Notably, Merleau-Ponty's notion of institution is based on Husserl's later notion of *Stiftung*. However I maintain that Merleau-Ponty radically rethinks Husserlian 'institution' through his notion of reversibility (see section 3.1.2).

3. In chapter two (2.1) I quoted Merleau-Ponty: "The constitution of others does not come after that of the body, others and my body are born together from the original ecstasy" (*Signs* 174/220) This quote will receive more depth in the following chapters.

institution: (i) the Hegelian dialectic, and (ii) Husserl's discussion of *Stiftung* in the "Origin of Geometry."[4] Although, as the following discussion shows, there are clear parallels between the historical dynamics of the dialectic and institution, Husserl himself does not explicitly relate institution to the dialectic, nor does he generally relate his own phenomenology to Hegel's phenomenology of spirit. I do not want to suggest that the two phenomenologies are identical or even directly related. However, I do claim that it is productive to read institution through the dialectic. First of all, reading the dialectic as a prologue to *Stiftung* helps to clarify the particular historical movement of institution. Second, it shows that Husserl's notion of *Stiftung* does not come out of nothing which is important for the general notion of institution understood as a continuous movement of meaning over generations, i.e., the notion of institution assumes from the beginning that no concept develops in a vacuum but always already has a relation to its historical past.[5] For Merleau-Ponty the Hegelian dialectic is an important account of the temporal historical embeddedness of the living body. His lectures on the Husserlian notion of institution are "intended as a revision of Hegelianism" (*Themes* 44/IP 126). Since dialectic and *Stiftung* take an important place in the discussion of how to understand the subject as a temporal historical being it makes sense to discuss them both before addressing the main question of this chapter of how this notion of institution will give us a better account

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4. Edmund Husserl, "The Origin of Geometry," appendix VI in Husserl, *Crisis,* 353-378. "Die Frage nach dem Ursprung der Geometrie," Beilage III in Husserl, *Krisis,* 365-386. In all references the English page number precedes the German.

5. This also means that it is not the case that Hegel's dialectic is the only precursor to the Husserlian notion of *Stiftung*, or that Husserl discusses Hegel explicitly when introducing '*Stiftung*'. Contrary to Husserl, Merleau-Ponty does extensively read and comment on Hegel. In Merleau-Ponty's lectures on institution he discusses Husserl's phenomenology side by side with Hegel's (see for example IP 105-108).

of the relation between myself and the other. It is therefore from a Merleau-Pontian perspective that I include here a discussion of both the Hegelian dialectic and Husserlian *Stiftung* to explicate the ground on which I will further discuss the notion of a rhythmic exchange that was set up in the previous chapter.

3.1.1 Hegelian dialectic as rhythm

In the introduction to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* Hegel uncovers the dialectical structure of consciousness through an investigation of the experience of consciousness. This investigation uncovers consciousness as a reflective (self)consciousness that is continually modified. The Hegelian naïve consciousness discovers that it lives in the world by projecting expectations and conceptions on the world. In its constant movement of modifying its initially naïve conceptions of the world, consciousness is involved in a process of negating what it previously thought to be true. Hegel writes:

> the result of an untrue knowledge must not be allowed to runaway into an empty nothing, but must necessarily be grasped as the nothing of that from which it results—a result which contains what was true in the preceding knowledge…Herewith a new pattern of consciousness comes on the scene as well, for which the essence is something different from what it was at the preceding stage. It is this fact that guides the entire series of the patterns of consciousness in their necessary sequence.[6]

Through this preservation of the past in a new pattern, the consciousness in the present can never become a nihilating consciousness in a Sartrean sense, i.e., a nihilating relation from the present towards the past or the future is not possible.[7]

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6. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 56/20.
7. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay of Phenomenological Ontology,* trans. Hazel, E. Barnes

What has passed is not simply overcome or nihilated, but rather the present has come out of this past and is negated as 'the nothing *of that from which it results*'. This negation of the past is the *origin* of the new present and as origin the now untruth carries within itself the seed of a new and modified truth. In addition, as its origin the rejected truth is contained in the new truth. In the modification of its conceptions, consciousness constantly transforms itself and discovers an ever more detailed structure to its experience (a structure that according to Hegel is rational and has a completion). Hegel describes this succession of the moments of consciousness as a "slow moving…gallery of images,"[8] but it would be better to stress that it is a layering of images in which each new covering preserves but conceals the past image. One could also liken it to a palimpsest in which the overwritten texts are present to greater or lesser detail underneath the newly written text that covers it. In this manner an inward trail of images is created which endow the consciousness with a complicated depth at each moment in the present. The Hegelian consciousness is essentially historical because it acquires a memory of the temporal depth of consciousness while it reflects on itself.

It is particularly useful to think about the dialectic in terms of rhythm. Rhythm is precisely rhythmic because of a recurrence of its previous elements. These recurring elements are never something completely new, but they are also not merely monotonously reiterated. Rather the elements keep recurring in a different fashion which leads to new rhythmic structures and a movement [*beweglichkeit*] of the original

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(New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), 34.

8. Ibid.*,* 492/764. Merleau-Ponty writes: "the stages passed through are not simply passed, like the segment of the road I have traveled; they have called for or required the present stages and precisely what is new and disconcerting in them. The past stages continue therefore to be in the present stages" (VI 90/121).

pattern.[9] It is this combination of *reiteration in difference* that describes the dialectic so well. In the dialectic, the previous stages recur in a new (negated) shape and press towards the future which will open up new patterns that will contain what is now actual in a modified form as past. Understanding the dialectic as rhythm also pushes Hegel's philosophy beyond its teleological boundaries. That is, a rhythm does not just press forward but is also a coming back to a previous element, transforming it and from there pressing forward again in order to be able to return anew and thus to continue the rhythmic movement.[10] Claiming that the dialectic is a rhythm thus leads me towards exploring a modified conception of Hegel's dialectic. My aim in doing so is to open up the Hegelian dialectic to Merleau-Ponty who defines dialectical thought in terms of a back-and-forth (i.e., rhythmic) movement.

Merleau-Ponty claims that the 'bad dialectic' is a dialectic which gets trapped in the progressive accumulation of ever new positing theses by advancing through the thesis-antithesis-synthesis pattern (VI 94/127). He rejects this now stereotypical characterisation of the Hegelian dialectic because it ends up in a new positive claiming of a position, i.e., a *logic*, and as such, Hegel's philosophy turns out to be a dogmatism (PnPH 43/308-9). Merleau-Ponty criticises Hegel's teleological understanding of the dialectic. Hegel claims that the layering of the patterns of consciousness is hierarchically structured and finite, the one layer following and surpassing the other, containing the complete previous layer and adding something to it in order that the layers can be progressively ranked and completed in Absolute

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9. I use the German *Beweglichkeit* as it speaks of a movement that is flexible and playful. See also Husserl's use of this word in the "Origin of Geometry" (*Crisis* 355/367) and Merleau-Ponty's use of it in *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology* (HLP 30/35).
10. This means that there is no past-in-itself.

Consciousness.[11] According to Merleau-Ponty, it cannot be the case that in the surpassing movement everything that has passed will be retained, because the dialectical movement is always deficient and partial (VI 95/127-8). Because of the partiality of this movement, because of our forgetfulness, a complete conservation in the Hegelian sense cannot take place (HLP 81n69/37n1). Instead Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the dialectic, what he calls 'good dialectic' or 'hyperdialectic' (VI 94/127), is without complete conservation and without final synthesis and therefore forever unstable in its surpassing of the past; it forgets and reassembles the past without ever becoming a stable position again.[12] Merleau-Ponty writes that the dialectical movement is: "that which admits that each term is itself only by proceeding towards the opposed term, becomes what it is through the movement, that it is one and the same thing for each to pass into the other or to become itself that the *centripetal movement and the centrifugal movement are one sole movement*" (VI 90-91/122, my emphasis). It is by including both a centrifugal and *centripetal* movement in the dialectic that Merleau-Ponty diverges from Hegel and turns the dialectic into a crossing, a movement *back and forth*. Merleau-Ponty explicates that this movement is part of one sole movement which is circular.[13] While it is useful to think about the circle as a shape in which a forward and backward movement are united, nevertheless the image of the circle is problematic as it suggests that a 360° turn can be made which brings one back to *exactly* the same spot where one was before. The

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11. The consciousness that has reached its goal of self-knowledge. See Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit,* 492-3/764-5.

12. "The point to be noted is this: that the dialectic without synthesis of which we speak is not therefore scepticism, vulgar relativism, or the reign of the ineffable. What we reject or deny is not a surpassing that reassembles, it is the idea that it results in a new positive, a new position" (VI 95/127).

13. "Opposite directions coinciding in the circular movement" (VI 91/123).

image of the circle prefigures a movement in which the same is reiterated again and again. Alternatively, a rhythm does not lend itself easily to such spatial imagery but it can express the temporal returning and renewing dimension of the dialectic.[14] In the dialectical movement a rhythm is expressed between the terms of the dialectic, e.g., between the past and the present. Rhythmically enfolding, the negated past is present in the new moment while at the same time the present folds back onto the past such that the past acquires new meaning in light of the present. The implication of thinking the dialectic rhythmically is that it can no longer be a linear movement but that it is a *crossing* or a movement that goes simultaneously back and forth. The dialectic as rhythm is unstable in so far as it never settles itself into one thesis without also immediately overcoming and destroying that thesis.[15]

While the Hegelian Absolute Consciousness has completed the investigation into its own depth, generally this layering and preservation of the past within consciousness happens without consciousness itself having knowledge of it, as such it is an anonymous process: "the origination of the new object…proceeds for us, as it were, behind the back of consciousness."[16] Merleau-Ponty reads this historicising

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14. When one overlays the spatial image of the circle with the temporal image of rhythm, one could think of a coil-like shape that symbolises a constant spiralling movement (see also 3.2.3).

15. This does not mean that stability is an illusion; stability is after all a phenomenologically real experience. The dialectic as rhythm is stable in its sedimentation or solidification of a general rhythmic pattern, but this general stability "does not mean at the same time that there are no cuts, changes, gaps" (« Ceci ne veut pas dire en même temps qu'il n'y ait pas de coupures, de changement, d'écarts » IP 114). At this place I will not further discuss the intricate details of this dialectical movement which is both stable in its sedimentation and unstable in its renewal. Both the (un)stability of the dialectic and its temporal crossing over will be discussed in more detail after having introduced Merleau-Ponty's reading of the Husserlian *Stiftung* and the structure of temporality that this reading implies (3.2.2). For now I only mention the complexity of the dialectic-as-rhythm as it suffices here to understand that for Merleau-Ponty the dialectic does not take place solely in a linear progressive movement but is rather a folding back unto the past as much as it is the opening up of the future.

16. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit,* 56/20.

movement of the dialectic as a mark of consciousness' inability to *own* the dialectic (PnPH 47/313). I interpret this statement as indicating (i) that consciousness does not possess the dialectic, rather the dialectic possesses consciousness, and (ii) that it is not consciousness' individual ability; the dialectic is not marked by consciousness' unique *ownness*. In other words, the individual consciousness itself is not the active constitutor of the depth of meaning and the dialectic is not just a movement that takes place within the genetic development of a sole individual. Over and above the genetic developmental dimension, the dialectic opens up a historical dimension and we discover a depth that takes place over *generations*.[17] While Hegel emphasised this historical dimension that goes beyond the individual, his adherence to a transcendental *idealism* lessens the full force of history as history is ultimately contained *in* the Hegelian individual. On this account it seems that the Hegelian historical consciousness is bound to remaining genetic (developmental) rather than generative (historical). In the next section I show how the notion of *Stiftung* adds the necessary generative dimension to the Hegelian dialectic and consequently the dialectical movement of the historical consciousness truly becomes the movement of history itself.

To summarise, according to Merleau-Ponty the rhythm that the dialectic presents to us is a movement between consciousness and its historical world that is not within consciousness' own power, that is forever open and that in a partial manner retains the past but not in its absolute original form, but rather the past itself

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17. The Greek *gignesthai* means 'to be born' and is often interpreted in terms of development, particularly the development of an individual. Steinbock reserves this term for the phenomenological enquiry into the intra-individual origins of sense. The historical broadening of the phenomenological horizon he calls 'generative phenomenology', emphasising the passing of generations (Steinbock, *Home and Beyond,* 49-51).

will continue to be changed. The Hegelian dialectic, read through Merleau-Ponty's discussion of it, becomes a rhythm that is not merely a forward moving teleology but is precisely a *back-and-forth*, a crossing that never ends in an absolute synthesis. This bi-directional reading is Merleau-Ponty's contribution to the Hegelian dialectic and postdates the development of the notion of 'reversibility' in *The Visible and Invisible*.[18] This insight into reversibility leads him to modify Hegelian philosophy: "this is precisely what Hegel will say: consciousness is this reversibility, this exchange" (PnPH 33/298). This understanding of the dialectic as a rhythm of reversibility is the lens through which Merleau-Ponty reads the Husserlian notion of institution and through which he continues to elucidate the historical dimension of intersubjectivity.

3.1.2 From Husserl's genesis of sense to generativity

In *The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* one finds the short text "The Origin of Geometry" in which Husserl writes with a rather Hegelian insight: "[f]rom a historical perspective, what is in itself the first thing is our present"[19] and as such he broadens his scope from the pure ego in his early writings to include the historical horizon in which this ego finds itself. At each moment, he claims, the ego finds itself in a deep present in which the historical past exerts itself. For Merleau-Ponty this means that the Husserlian solipsism of the ego has now been left behind and thus he comments: "this isle is not to be thought of enclosing us"

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18. The lecture notes "Philosophy and Non-Philosophy since Hegel" were written in 1961, the year of his death, and thus coincide with his very last working notes of *The Visible and the Invisible*. See also Hugh Silverman's footnote (PnPH 306n52). For reference, Merleau-Ponty's lecture notes on institution, *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology*, were composed in 1959-1960.
19. Husserl, *Crisis*, 373-4/382. "Das historisch an sich Erste ist unsere Gegenwart," Merleau-Ponty reacts: "*an sich* and not only for us" (HLP 15/15).

(HLP 15/15), the insularity of our perception has been opened and now admits of others.

In a critical evaluation of the Husserlian project, Merleau-Ponty worries that the Husserl of the complete reduction and the Husserl of the essences gets stuck in essentialism and egology (e.g., PhP xiv/14; VI 109-8/144-145). In spite of Husserl's constant endeavours and concern to open the world of the pure ego to intersubjectivity, his earlier writings are strongly criticised for not being able to account for the notion of a true other, irrespective of his discussion of intersubjectivity in these writings.[20] In these earlier writings Husserl is concerned with uncovering the world as sense. As he writes in the *Logical Investigations* and expands in *Ideas I* and *Ideas II,* we discover that objects and relations between objects (as they are for us as thinking beings) are always objects of *sense.* In these works the constitution of sense is investigated, by way of the phenomenological reduction, through a close examination of the individual constituting ego. As shown before, the problem of the reduced ego is that it is precisely 'reduced', i.e., the individual's historical and cultural connection is bracketed and does not take part in the analysis. A constituting consciousness as the sole zero-point of its own perception is a static consciousness and cannot acquire any other perception since, as Merleau-Ponty writes: "there is nothing in the objects capable of throwing consciousness back towards other perspectives" (*Themes* 39/IP 123). These objects, (i) do not really exert an influence on the consciousness but are determined in their sense by consciousness, and (ii) do

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20. On Merleau-Ponty's confrontation with Husserl's notion of intersubjectivity see also: Renaud Barbaras, *The Being of the Phenomenon: Merleau-Ponty's Ontology,* trans. Ted Toadvine and Leonard Lawlor (Bloomington: Indianan University Press), 26-33.

not speak to me of others and as such there is no place for a real interaction between the consciousness and its object.[21] The attempt in the *Cartesian Meditations* to introduce another person into my world fails because this other is still constituted by me and remains an alter-ego and a copy of me.[22]

Looking ahead, in his lectures on institution Merleau-Ponty will replace the notion of the *constitution* of the other with the *continued institution* of another. He explains that the relation that I have with the other is not a relation that is *posited* as if it were a pact or a contract. If this were the case, he explains, our relationship would be one-sided and my being bound to the contract would not be dependent on another, rather it would depend on my own decision to keep to the contract, my decision to posit the other at each moment (IP 37). Merleau-Ponty's rejection of the so-called *bad* form of constitution is an implicit critique of Husserl's references to a constituting consciousness in his earlier works. In contrast, Merleau-Ponty claims that there is constitution in a *good* sense, which is a continued institution, that is, a constitution that is never finished and has meaning without me (IP 37). This 'good constitution' is what hereafter will be called *institution*. Whereas the constituted subject is being held by me, finds its ground in me and is forever linked to the instant in which I constitute her, the instituted subject does not depend on me and the instant. She has her temporality, her relation to the past and her own future. She

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21. In the *Analyses Concerning Passive and Active Synthesis: Lectures of Transcendental Logic (1918-1926)* Husserl widens the field of investigation and includes a passive dimension to the ego which now does feel the pull of the object (trans. A.J. Steinbock [Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001], 196).

22. See also the introduction to chapter two. This consciousness does not really interact with other consciousnesses whose existence means either the duplication of oneself or "the negation of itself" (*Themes*, 40/IP 123-4), both of which fail to describe otherness as they describe others only with reference to oneself (*my* double, *my* negation).

bridges both future and past and thus has a truly temporal dimension (IP 37).[23] One could say that through introducing institution into phenomenology the pure ego regains its temporal and historical horizon.

The road which will lead us to this instituting/instituted subject takes us first to Husserl's continued concern with the uncovering of the world as sense. In "The Origin of Geometry," Husserl is concerned with the uncovering of an *original* sense of geometry that is the foundation of the present concept of geometry. This discussion is the example of *all* cultural sense and thus should not be taken as peculiar to the concepts of mathematics.[24] After stepping away from the static phenomenology of egology it is necessary that we inquire both into the *genetic* origins of sense, which lie in the passive receptivity of the individual, and we should regressively inquire [*Rückfrage*] into the generative history of sense in order to find the *foundation* of sense. That is, what has to be uncovered is the *primal institution* [*Urstiftung*] of a cultural concept.[25] Reaching backwards over generations, Husserl shifts from a phenomenology of constitution that is mainly located in the pure ego pole to a generative phenomenology of the social world.[26] Since in "The Origin of Geometry" Husserl's focus has shifted from a constituting and reduced ego to a consciousness which has a historical horizon, the assumptions that ground the argument have also changed. In order for there to be a historical preservation of

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23. In *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time,* Husserl argues that the ego is time-constituting and is not a-temporal. As I show in section 3.2.1 Merleau-Ponty finds this notion of temporality still problematic as it is too linear. For a more generous reading of Husserl's notion of constitution see for example Zahavi's *Husserl's Phenomenology.*

24. Although mathematics might be a special case of a unified transferral of sense.

25. Husserl, *Crisis,* 354/366.

26. In his excellent analysis *Home and Beyond*, Steinbock argues that Husserl's generative phenomenology escapes the problems that were present in the constitutive phenomenology of the *Cartesian Meditations.*

sense, the original intra-personal constitution of sense should be transferable into the *inter*-personal realm. When a concept that takes a certain shape in *me* has to be preserved over time, then it is necessary that in some manner I can share this concept with other people *outside of me* who can maintain it even when I am no longer around. In other words, there must be around me a *horizon of humanity* and of (written) *language* in order that the concept that was once originally instituted can be re-instituted [*nachstifted*] by others.[27] According to Husserl a concept can remain 'alive' through re-institution: virtual communication (i.e., documentation) is able to carry it beyond a single life or single community. Successively, the concept can either be *passively* reawakened or actively given sense. Passively we "receive the news"[28] when we read the paper or watch television, i.e., we do not actively make it our own but a moment later it already informs our opinion. When we are then asked to explain our opinion we can *actively* reawaken the concept that was received and turn it into a reasoning (or a logic) which reawakens the original sense but not without transforming it. Although Husserl does not present this reawakened sense of an original constitution as a Hegelian historical dialectic one can detect the Hegelian traces in the presentation of the argument. According to Husserl, the newly explained concept is based on the original one and gives rise to even newer conceptualisations of the same. Husserl calls this process a "propagated process of transferred sense [*sinntradierenden Fortpflanzung*]."[29] This transferral of sense echoes the succession of patterns of consciousness in the Hegelian dialectic. The Hegelian

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27. Husserl, *Crisis,* 360-1/371.
28. Ibid., 361/371.
29. Ibid., 363/373.

reference seems especially evident when Husserl writes: "since sense is grounded upon sense, the earlier sense gives something of its validity to the later one, indeed becomes part of it to a certain extent."[30] For Husserl the mark of every cultural notion and artefact is that it was once constructed by human activity, that it was consequently propagated into a new sense and that it can be explained according to this new sense. However since the present sense is grounded on the original institution which is 'part of it,' it also should be possible to make explicit this original sense as it is concealed in the present sense. Thus every explanation of a new sense becomes at the same time a historical disclosure of the origin.[31] In his essay, Husserl shows great faith in the possibility of such a disclosure. Husserl continues and concludes that the highest inquiry is an inquiry into the "universal teleology of reason."[32] These Hegelian traces in Husserl lead me to interpret Husserl's concept of *institution* as an introduction of a Hegelian rhythm of sense into a Husserlian genetic and generative phenomenology. In this rhythmic process the original, instituted sense is continually re-produced while remaining the same.[33]

According to Husserl, this rhythm of sense gives history its coherence and continuity.[34] He writes that the rhythm of institution connects the past seamlessly to the present in a "continuity of pasts," each past is a tradition which produces a

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30. Ibid., 363/373.
31. Ibid., 370/379.
32. Ibid., 378/386.
33. Husserl writes: "[t]he productions can reproduce their likenesses from person to person, and in the chain of the understanding of these repetitions what is self-evident turns up as the same in the consciousness of the other" (Husserl, *Crisis,* 360/371). Husserl suggests that were we to have unlimited capacities then we could recover the original sense in its true form (ibid., 365/375).
34. History has an "inner structure of meaning" (ibid., 371/380).

"tradition out of itself" which is the structure of all that we call history.[35] This structure does not only imply that history is marked by continuity but also that there is "a historically *coherent and unified humanity*, coherent through its generative bond and constant communalisation in cultivating what has already been cultivated before, whether in cooperative work or in reciprocal interaction."[36] It is through the generative structure of humanity that sense can be transferred from the one generation onto the other while maintaining continuity and coherence. The image of history that Husserl sketches for us is a highly ideal image of a history that is continuously being developed and soaring to higher levels of sense. That is, through humanity's internal coherency, the concepts that are propagated from the one generation to the other share in this coherence. The re-institution of sense is a continuous and progressive accumulation of different coherent layers of meaning.

I want to recall here Linda Alcoff's concern about the phenomenologist's assumption that the situation and the culture of a subject is always consistent and internally coherent.[37] I worry that Husserl's argument in the "Origin of Geometry" is open to such a critique as it lays particular emphasis on the continuity and coherence of a historical world. Is there really such a strong sense of continuity and coherency in history? While it cannot be denied that there is constancy in history we should not lose sight of the fact that historical development is marked also by forgetting and inconsistent transformations of sense. In the unfolding of history, there are lacunae of sense and 'set backs' to an older and maybe less useful sense. It is with this

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35. Ibid., 374/382.
36. Ibid. 374/382 (my emphasis).
37. See my introduction, section (i).

concern about forgetfulness in mind that Merleau-Ponty asks:

> Can we recuperate the totality of the *Urstiftung*? If forgetfulness ('the overcoming) constitutes the life of the tradition, is my reconstruction 2—possible—1—necessary, and, consequently is intellectual possession ever complete?…could there be a complete intellectual possession of what was created? (HLP 30/35-6)

A couple of pages later he answers this question in the negative: "we cannot reactivate everything" (HLP 58/70), which is an answer that he reads in Husserl's own example of how scientific, linguistic and logical structures are put in place of complex concepts in order better to maintain the absolute validity of an original concept. However, Husserl recognises that the putting in place of these logical structures actually obscures the original institution and makes one forget it in exchange for recollecting the empty logical structure.[38] In addition Husserl writes that the complete reactivation of the *Urstiftung* assumes that we have limitless capacities to retrieve this *Urstiftung*; however this is not so.[39] Normally we do not possess the original sense of a concept and many of our traditions are merely empty formulas because our (bodily) being is marked by an 'I cannot'.[40] In addition to these particular examples of our limited capacities that make us prone to forget, Husserl refers to a larger and much more fundamental form of forgetting. Philip Buckley argues that the *Crisis* should be understood as a description of the present-day *forgetting* of the origin

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38. Husserl, *Crisis,* 366/376. One has only to think of formulas such as E=mc2, which most of us remember from high school physics but the meaning of which is lost to most of us non-physicists. Another example of an empty tradition is the persistence of a certain (social) ritual without remembering its original motivation.

39. Ibid., 366/376.

40. I take the 'I cannot' from Iris Young in "Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility, and Spatiality," in *On Female Body Experience: 'Throwing Like a Girl' and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 27-45. Husserl himself does not refer to the 'I cannot', but since Husserl's 'I can' refers to a human impossibility, it is illustrative to use this expression here. Young, of course, uses this expression to describe the particular phenomenology of the female body. Here I use the 'I cannot' in a much wider sense, referring to the (pre)reflective impossibilities of bodies in general.

of the human sciences which grew out of an original "philosophical scientific rationality."[41] Husserl's notion of forgetting in the *Crisis* should be understood as a *productive* forgetting, but his text is ambiguous with respect to our ability to overcome this forgetfulness. As Buckley argues, Husserl seems afraid of the possibility that there is a forgetfulness that can never be overcome. As a result Husserl's *Urstiftung* is always open to be reinstituted in *Nachstiftung*.[42] This fear of forgetting might be the reason for Husserl to insist that the reductive investigation into sense is a worthwhile endeavour. That is, he does not dismiss his project after he has recognised that the human capacities are only limited. At the end of this text he goes so far as to present a possible origin to geometry (reached through free variation) which is the historical invariant to geometry.[43] Therefore, Husserl remains wedded to the claim that by uncovering the essential and original structure of what is human we will discover history as a universal teleology of reason. In *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology*, Merleau-Ponty does not critique Husserl on these teleological and essentialising

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41. Philip R. Buckley, *Husserl, Heidegger, and the Crisis of Philosophical Responsibility* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1992), 82.

42. This means that "the original meaning of geometry, of science, of Europe, of philosophy can always be recovered" (Buckley*, Husserl Heidegger and the Crisis,* 86). Merleau-Ponty differs from Husserl in this respect. As I argue below, for Merleau-Ponty there is neither absolute beginning nor an end that clarifies the truth of the original institution. Merleau-Ponty argues that the immemorial past is not "'a secret lost and to be rediscovered' (VI 122/160), it is neither an empirical past, once present and now forgotten, nor a layer of positivity, underlying experience but hidden from view (VI 158/207). The immemorial is, Merleau-Ponty says, an 'impossible past'—one that has never been present and that cannot be made present in a representation or act of recollection (VI 123/161). It registers within experience as an original forgetting or blindspot that does not derive from, and cannot be overcome in, direct perception." Alia Al-Saji, "The Temporality of Life: Merleau-Ponty, Bergson, and the Immemorial Past," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 45, no. 2 (2007): 184. For the productivity of forgetting, see also section 3.2.2 in this chapter and Bernhard Waldenfels, "Time Lag: Motifs for a Phenomenology of the Experience of Time," *Research in Phenomenology* 30 (2000): 115.

43. Husserl, *Crisis,* 375/383-4. For an analysis of Husserl's anticipation of the *infinite* ideal of the absolute manifestation of reason see Buckley, *Husserl Heidegger and the Crisis*, 106.

tendencies as severely as he critiques Hegel for his teleology.[44] In her postscript to the institution lectures, Bettina Bergo picks up on a tension between two Husserls, one which never ceases to search for a unifying ground or essence that can be revealed through the proper application of the phenomenological method, and one who claims that the search for such a ground will turn out to be ultimately impossible.[45] She takes Merleau-Ponty's reading of Husserl to fall on the latter side. She concludes that Merleau-Ponty "set about to clear any idealist residue from the path of the later Husserl and, in so doing, pushed numerous concepts of his own."[46] Thus in Merleau-Ponty's later lectures and working notes one finds numerous Husserlian notions that are being rethought in ways that diverge from Husserl's own presentation of them (i.e., they are re-instituted, not reiterated).

Merleau-Ponty argues that what matters about *Stiftung* is not the forward movement alone. That is, the dialectical rhythm of *Ur-*, *Nach-* and *Endstiftung* is not the only dynamic [*beweglichkeit*] of institution. Bringing in Merleau-Ponty's notion of reversibility, history is not a teleological forward movement and an original sense does not only open up to a future in which a reinstitution of the origin is possible, but reinstitution also opens up the past while transforming it. *Reinstitution is an opening of the living past* which is thus continuously being changed. At each moment we

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44. A reason for this might also be that Husserl's *Endstiftung* is not a Hegelian *end* of history. Such an 'absolute manifestation of reason' is only an infinite ideal (Buckley*, Husserl Heidegger and the Crisis,* 106).

45. Bergo, "Philosophy as *Perspectiva Artificialis,*" 159.

46. Bergo, "Philosophy as *Perspectiva Artificialis,*" 162. Merleau-Ponty writes in the summary of his course on Husserl: "but even when everything of Husserl is published, are we right to assume that the 'objective' method would restore to us 'the thought' of Husserl?" (HLP 5 [this text is not included in French edition]), and in "The Philosopher and his Shadow" he remarks that "at the end of Husserl's life there is an unthought-of element in his works which is wholly his and yet opens out on something else…we should like try to evoke this unthought-of element in Husserl's thought in the margins of some old pages" (*Signs* 160/202).

recreate the present by transforming the sense of the past.

Merleau-Ponty continues to remove the teleological direction from Husserl's *Stiftung* by claiming that institution is real but never finished (IP 61). Thus on the one hand we can perceive actual changes, beginnings, and endings in (personal and public) history. For example, when a person enters puberty obvious physical and behavioural changes happen in that person's life. Just as she enters puberty, she also leaves it to enter into the mature life. On the other hand Merleau-Ponty reminds us that each *Endstiftung* is not really an end, but rather the institution of a new beginning that springs from what just came to a close. The end of puberty is the beginning of maturity. Each *Endstiftung* is thus always an *Urstiftung* and each *Urstiftung* is an *Endstiftung*. Merleau-Ponty does not feel the same pressure of uncovering an absolute beginning as Husserl does as he writes that there is "no end of history, neither even of prehistory, it opens another history that will be another 'searching'" (IP 61).[47] Instead of there being an absolute beginning or end what remains is this constant opening which is a departure from what came before it.[48]

For Merleau-Ponty the Husserlian notion of institution comes to the foreground when he discusses the indirect language that characterises painting. The painter brings forward a line that was an "already opened furrow," a trace from an earlier time, and consequently the painter herself will not be able to tell what in the line was her own and what was already there waiting to be traced again (PW 67/95). While painting the painter recommences and continues the old lines that are left as

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47. Merleau-Ponty writes in the context of institution and puberty: « Elle n'est pas fin de l'histoire, ni même de la préhistoire, elle ouvre une autre histoire qui va être encore une 'recherche' »
48. See Claude Lefort in the introduction to the lectures, IP 7.

traces while all the same going beyond them, she interprets the furrows left by others by deviating from it and thus she destroys the old furrow while conserving it in her new line.[49] The new line now has a different meaning that was nevertheless already present in the old grooves as it was called for and anticipated. What has taken place is a metamorphosis that is in accord with the past. The link to the past means that nothing is created in absolute isolation but as a *response* to the horizon of the perceived, historical, and social world. It is in the Husserlian term of *Stiftung* that Merleau-Ponty finds the best expression of this "unlimited fecundity of each present" (PW 68/96). The horizon of the world together with the painter's own style (the sedimented attempts of painting) create:

> a tradition, that is, Husserl says, the power to forget origins, the duty to start over again and to give the past, not survival, which is the hypocritical form of forgetfulness, but the efficacy of renewal or "repetition" which is the noble form of memory. (PW 68/96)

I have interpreted the Hegelian dialectic in terms of rhythm which led me to push the dialectic beyond Hegel's teleology towards Merleau-Ponty's conception of the dialectic as a back-and-forth. Following Merleau-Ponty's reading of institution, I extend this interpretation now to Husserl's historical notion of *Stiftung* in order also to push Husserl to his limits and to emphasise the dialogical character of the movement of institution. As above with Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of the Hegelian dialectic, here again it is not an issue of the past surviving and being repeated over time. This would be a 'bad' sort of repetition which is an exact reiteration of the original. If this were the case, then there would be no real past,

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49. I describe here Merleau-Ponty's wonderful paragraph on institution in "The Indirect Language" (PW 68/95-6). A similar passage is found in "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence" in *Signs* 59/74.

because the past is precisely a past because it is not present in its original manner. What does matter is that the past is renewed and repeated in the 'good' sense as a repetition of difference, a repetition that transforms the past in each present.

The historical exploration of institution above has shown the importance of the preservation of the past in the present. Thus, Merleau-Ponty follows both Hegel and Husserl and argues that the past is not left behind as a trail that is never visited again. The past is more than a point of origin because the past remains active and should be understood as the power of renewal that *pushes forth* in the present. In a dialectical movement this past is *renewed from* the present. Consequently past and present are never apart from each other in the instituting movement. Through the back-and-forth of institution the past remains with us and gives our lives a depth that goes beyond the instant. Therefore institution is essentially temporal and historical.

3.2 The 'unlimited fecundity' of institution

The following section explores in more depth Merleau-Ponty's own notion of institution and the dialectic of temporality. First I discuss the temporality that is the rhythmic structure of institution after which I investigate how in the ever-renewal of the past something new can appear. This leads me to go beyond Merleau-Ponty and to uncover in his notes on institution traces of a philosophy of natality. The section ends with a maternal reading of institution in an effort to feminise Merleau-Ponty's philosophy.

3.2.1 Temporality: past and future in institution

Institution is exemplified by the historical movement of time that goes beyond my own life, my own temporality. As Claude Lefort describes it succinctly, institution speaks about a temporality which is not a complete rupture with the past but rather a "departure from."[50] In the *Phenomenology* Merleau-Ponty still largely adopts Husserl's phenomenology of time.[51] This is evident in his taking over of the Husserlian time-diagram in which the 'now' of time is presented as points on a line: each present moment sink away in the past and becomes more distant with each new present. These moments or punctualities are not isolated but project around them protensions to the future and retentions to the past. Time is this flow of points in time that sink away in the past. When one reads Merleau-Ponty's later conception of the temporality of institution as the creation of a 'sequel' and a 'series', one might have the impression that Merleau-Ponty continues to hold on to such a flowing view of time.[52] In this section I show how this is an incorrect reading of the institution lectures. As I argue, there is a *rhythm* to institution that fails to fit into a simple line drawing.

The discussion so far has presented institution mainly from the perspective of a subject who finds within herself a link to a past that can never be completely

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50. Lefort, IP, 7.

51. PhP 416-420/278-482. See also Husserl, *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time*, 27-8 (§10). However he also begins to deviate from this schema when he discusses the past that was never present in the context of sense experience. Thus at times the *Phenomenology of Perception* follows Husserl (in the chapter on temporality) and at other moments it deviates from him (in the chapter on sense experience). This indicates a struggle in Merleau-Ponty's own thought that is left behind in his later work when he rejects the Husserlian time diagram (VI 195/245).

52. Merleau-Ponty summarises these insights into the temporality of institution by writing: "what we understand by the concept of institution are those events in experience which endow it with durable dimensions, in relation to which a whole series of other experiences will acquire meaning, will form an intelligible series or a history – or again those events which sediment in me a meaning, not just as survivals or residues, but as the invitation to a sequel" (Themes 40-41/IP 124).

severed, that keeps being transformed, and is given new meaning through the turning of the present towards this past. However by presenting institution as a folding back unto the past, one risks overlooking a particularly important aspect of institution, that is, its opening of a *future*. For there to be a past that leaves its trace, it is necessary that the future gives me a present that "is productive after itself" (IP 35).[53] In this context Merleau-Ponty refers to Goethe who speaks of the "posthumous productivity" of the present that opens a future (IP 35; 38).[54] This posthumous productivity transforms the 'present that has passed' into a past that has the power to renew itself. This means that what receives a certain meaning *now* will at a time *in the future* still affect me, although how I will interpret this moment in the future is not yet known, instead it remains open. An example might make this clear: when listening to a melody that unfolds for the first time, my ear anticipates the notes that are to follow and I am directed to the unknown future of the melody. Listening to the music I am at service to the unfolding melody which carries me to new possibilities, such that "having reached a certain point from which [one is] preparing to follow it…abruptly it chang[es] directions and in a fresh moment…it [bears one] off with it towards new vistas."[55] This present moment reaches out beyond itself and with the expectation coming out of what has passed before, it produces a possible future of notes in succession. Being directed to the future of the unfolding notes, each passing note leaves a trace that affects both the new futural possibilities and the past memories of the melody. Eventually, the final chord of the musical piece will have

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53. « un événement, l'initiation au présent, qui est productif après lui »
54. « productivité posthume »
55. Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time: Swann's Way,* 251.

given me a new conception of the melody as a whole in the past. Of course it is not the case that this change happens only after the last note. Instead, at each moment the passing tone cries out for another and opens up new vistas for me from which I can anticipate its new future and reassess its past.

This description of the temporal movement between past and future is still a Husserlian description in line with his notion of retention/recollection and protention/expectation in the *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time.*[56] It also resonates with Husserl's claim in the *Analyses concerning Passive and Active Synthesis* that the future is the realm of the unfamiliar and indeterminate, which can be made determinate in expectation.[57] The past appears together with an expectation toward the future and is consequently transformed into an anticipation. In this sense the past notes of the melody press towards the future, anticipating their fulfilment in the completion of the melody. While this pressing towards the future of the past and the becoming richer of the past through the future signifies a movement back-and-forth, this is not yet a back-and-forth in a full Merleau-Pontian sense. Instead, Merleau-Ponty questions the Husserlian notion of the closed present moment which fulfils part of the future by pushing the previous present into the past. This would lead, he claims, to there being individual and enclosed *times in succession* rather than one notion of time as "embracing everything."[58] He argues that there is no "segment

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56. For example Husserl writes: "Recollection is not expectation, but it does have a horizon directed toward the future, specifically towards to future of what is recollected…as the recollective process advances, this horizon is disclosed in ever new ways and becomes richer and more vital" (*On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time,* 53 [§24]).
57. Husserl, *Analyses Concerning Passive and Active Synthesis*, 381.
58. "Is it the new present, in its individuality, that pushes the preceding one into the past and that fills part of the future? In that case there would not be time, but *times— —*Time must be understood as a system that embraces everything" (VI 190-191/241).

of time with defined contours that would come and set itself in place. It is a cycle…with indecisive contours—a swelling or bulb of time…time is not an absolute series of events, a tempo—not even the tempo of the consciousness—it is an institution" (VI 184/235).[59] Time as a swelling is not neatly divided into past, present and future, but rather past, present and future spread out and overlap into each other. Proust writes poetically about this folding-over of past and future in a musical phrase:

> Doubtless the notes which we hear at such moments tend…to *spread out* before our eyes over surfaces of varying dimensions, to trace arabesques, to give us the sensation of breath or tenuity, stability or caprice. But the notes themselves have vanished before these sensations have developed sufficiently to escape submersion under those which the succeeding or even simultaneous notes have already begun to awaken in us. And this impression would continue to *envelop* in its liquidity, it ceaseless *overlapping,* the motives which from time to time emerge, barely discernible, to plunge again and disappear and drown.[60]

The notes which I hear in the musical phrase can no longer be separated between those I heard, those I am hearing and those that I anticipate. Instead each new note spreads out before me and overlaps the previous note onto which I have no longer a hold, while opening my perception and awakening me to this new vista. But the new note does not overlap the previous note to make it disappear forever, such that the new note would come to appear as being there by itself, delineated and separated.

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59. The image of the cycle is not the clearest one as it suggests an endless repetition without renewal. The notion of time as a swelling or a bulb, like Proust's "iridescent bubble" (*In Search of Lost Time: Swann's Way,* 424), is better. In chapter four I discuss the notion of the horizon and connect it to the notion of 'spread' (or *écart*).

60. Proust, *In Search of Lost Time: Swann's Way,* 251, my emphasis. Merleau-Ponty is very much drawn to Proust's descriptions of time. Proust, he claims, was able to show: "the way the past is involved in the present and the presence of times gone by." Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Nonsense*, trans. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1994), 26. *Sens et non-sens* (Paris: Nagel, 1964 [1948]), 45. Hereafter cited as SNS. See also: Mauro Carbone, *The Thinking of the Sensible: Merleau-Ponty's A-Philosophy* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2004), especially chapter one: "The Time of Half Sleep: Merleau-Ponty between Husserl and Proust" (pp. 1-13).

Instead the passed note is still productive (though no longer present) and also spreads out, it reaches beyond and over the new note, enveloping it and giving it depth. This enveloping movement between the future of the melody and its past takes place continuously, giving the melody a complicated depth that spreads out both into the future and into the past.[61]

As I later show, the note which I hear 'now' is never really at this now-point in time, it has at once already passed and is becoming new, and thus it 'misses' the present moment.[62] Merleau-Ponty's critique of Husserlian time hinges on this apparent impossibility of perception coinciding with the now-point. What matters in this context is no longer the notion of 'event'. The event shows itself as a happening within neatly closed boundaries: an event is over and a new event can begin. Instead we live through *advents*, through moments that already transcend themselves and open up to a future of renewed beginnings. Time as an adventing is an awaiting of what is to come.[63] The opening of a future is therefore not only the taking up of a direction but rather it is an urgent interrogation that is called for by the past. That is, each note in a melody interrogates the following note which is not yet actual while it

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61. Merleau-Ponty writes: "past and present are *Ineinander* enveloping enveloped, flesh and chiasm, no conservation and continuity (VI 268/315). Here again one might also think of the palimpsest document. Through the newly written texts the old texts appear as visible traces that contribute and give the new words a complicated depth. Even more importantly, the words that are written over (that are passed) do not neatly sink away in the past. Instead at times it is as if *they* overlap the new words such that the new words can no longer be seen in isolation from what was written before.

62. "The new present is itself a transcendent: one knows that it is not there, that it was just there that one never coincides with it" (VI 184/235).

63. Merleau-Ponty writes in "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence": "each [advent] is both a beginning and a continuation which, insofar as it is not walled up in its singularity and finished once and for all like an event, points to a continuation or recommencement" (*Signs* 68/85; see also PW 80) and he argues that "the advent does not leave time behind: it is a promise of events" (PW 82, see also *Signs* 70/87).

also floats "like an iridescent bubble…for a while unbroken"[64] joining with the past.

The above discussion indicates that while developing the notion of institution Merleau-Ponty changes his notion of temporality. In the institution lectures this is evident when he writes that the past and the future are simultaneous (*Themes* 41/IP 124) and, as above, that there is a "swelling or bulb of time" (VI 184/235). Thus Merleau-Ponty rejects the view that time is a flow, an orderly, serial and linearly unfolding tempo where the one segment of time follows the other and then sinks neatly back into the past on its way to oblivion.[65] This also means that the present can no longer be grasped or immobilised as with forceps because the present "oscillates around itself,"[66] it slips out and goes beyond itself towards a past and a future. Merleau-Ponty writes that "history flows neither from the past not from the future alone: it *reverses* its course and, when you get right down to it, *it flows from all the presents*" (HLP 80n52/31n4 my emphasis). When the present is slipping forth and away, it might be better understood as a *passage* which is a movement and never an instant.[67] The present *is* this rhythm of passage in which the past and the future erupt. The rich depth of temporal passage is well expressed when Merleau-Ponty writes: "the *Urtümlich,* the *Ursprunglich* is not of long ago. It is a question of finding in the present, the flesh of the world (and not in the past) an 'evernew' and 'always the same'" (VI 267/320). Thus both the familiarity of the past and the novelty of the

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64. Proust, *In Search of Lost Time: Swann's Way,* 424.
65. "Husserl's diagram is dependent on the convention that one can represent the series of nows by points on a line" but "the phenomenon of flow is faulty" because time "does not comprise *points, lines*" (VI 195/248).
66. Barbaras, *The Being of the Phenomenon*, 223.
67. See also Barbaras, *The Being of the Phenomenon*, 224; and Alia Al-Saji, "'A Past Which Has Never Been Present': Bergsonian Dimensions in Merleau-Ponty's Theory of the Prepersonal," *Research in Phenomenology* 38, no. 1 (2008): 41-71.

future are found in the rhythm of the present. He makes a similar point elsewhere calling this present a movement that escapes measurement and is a continual birth.[68] Institution when understood as the rhythm of passage thus gives us two things, it grounds us in a continuity of pasts and it opens up a future of renewal.

3.2.2 The evernew re-newal of the old

An important aspect of renewal of the past has to do not only with the reflective remembering of particular mental *concepts*, but rather the past is most present with us precisely through the pre-reflective sedimentations that form the *habit body*. There is sedimentation in the 'weight' of our body, our movements, our social interaction and our language. For example my way of sitting in my room behind my desk has been solidified in familiar movements of picking up books and writing. So while I might not always know *what* to write my body 'knows' *how* to do it and has acquired a particular style of writing. Similarly, speaking to a friend we are familiar with each other's gestures and phrases of speech. Our speech has settled into patterns and typical expressions that have become an apparent intransigent part of our manner of speech. I can rely on these words and these movements, they carry on the conversations that we started long ago, without having to recollect each detail of those conversations. The memory that my habits make possible is thus not one of recollection which requires a conscious re-collecting of a situation, of an event. Instead my habits carry forward my past precisely because it is forgotten. This is the

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68. "It is then that Bergson perceives that we do not draw near to time by squeezing it between reference-points of measurement as if between pincers; but that in order to have an idea of it we must on the contrary let it develop freely, accompanying the *continual birth* which makes it always new and, precisely in this respect, always the same" (*Signs* 184/231, my emphasis). See also section 3.2.3.2 point (ii).

peculiar productivity of forgetfulness that institutes our habits and traditions. Forgetfulness as such is the very structure of institution. The memory of the body through habit is a pre-personal, anonymous, memory which comes about through a repetition of behavioural patterns. Because this habit memory is anonymous, i.e., forgotten, it can carry forward an *active* past without the necessity that this past is conscious for me. So both my body movements and my language sediment into habits that give my world temporal depth, familiarity, and a sense of generality and continuity before I know it.[69] When I perceive the world, my perception already forms the world through the familiarity of my sedimented life. My perception is affected with a common deviation such that "everything I found…will be subject to a secret principle of distortion" which is a "coherent deformation" (PW 60/84-5) that gives my life regularity and consistency. The 'secrecy' of this principle is what above I call the forgetfulness of our anonymous, pre-personal life. While this is a positive aspect of Merleau-Ponty's account of perceptual life because it allows us to inhabit new situations, it is also an aspect that is at times suspect. This is because this deformation appears to dominate all that one perceives in such a way that nothing would appear truly *new* to us. The weight of my sedimentations is tacitly experienced by my body and though it might not be explicitly known to me, it is there and my body moves accordingly, repetitively and habitually. Through sedimentation my world appears to be an 'always the same' because the coherent deformation of the body makes it so.

At this moment I take a step back in order carefully to discuss this critique that

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69. See PhP 129-130/162-3.

my habit body bars me from perceiving the new. Up until now the discussion of the renewal of the past has been put in terms of a *re*-newal, which generally indicates either a re-turn to a previous condition or a continual coherent modifying effect from the 'secret' past to the future. Thus, a sceptic might say, this notion of temporality is too much grounded in the past and in the repetitive cycle of embodied habituation. One might wonder, is this link with the past such that all that happens is a continued repetition that is 'always the same'? The 'evernew' then would be a mere *ever*-new that is already *old* because of the ever-repetitive nature of the body and thus it misses out on the fresh newness of the ever-*new*. Consequently, I wonder, do we find ourselves joining in with the lamentation: "[v]anity of vanities! All is vanity…A generation goes, and a generation comes…there is nothing new under the sun. Is there a thing of which it is said, 'see this is new'? It has already been, in the ages before us?"[70] This *re*-newing past presents us with tacit patterns of bodies and of words that cover up and modify the new, pulling us down into a repetitive circle out of which we cannot escape. These patterns are the sedimented residues of the moment of passage which cannot be overcome. While the future seems 'new' to our generation, 'it has already been, in the ages before us'. I suggest that *re*-newal implies no real renewing but rather a *re*-visiting and *re*-exercising of the past. What needs to be added to the above is an account of re-*new*al which explains how the new can appear within the habitual familiarity of the 'always the same'.

Giving an account of newness is important in the context of this thesis since

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70. Ecclesiastes 1:2-10 (New Revised Standard Version). Hannah Arendt responds to these verses in *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 97. See also Lisa Guenther, *The Gift of the Other: Levinas and the Politics of Reproduction* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2006), 37.

the new is generally understood to be *different*, whereas the old is the *same*. A phenomenology of difference should be a phenomenology that can make sense of the new. It should be a phenomenology in which I can meet another embodied person who is genuinely different from me and who can thus decentre me and force me out of my habitual manner of dealing with the world. Hannah Arendt writes about the new that it needs to disengage from what came before it: "it is in the nature of beginning that something new is started *which cannot be expected from whatever might have happened before.*"[71] The unexpected is something that appears abruptly, without warning and creates a rupture with the past. I use Arendt's notion of the new as 'that which cannot be expected' in order to compare and evaluate the manner in which Merleau-Ponty accounts for the new.

As should be evident from the first half of this chapter, Merleau-Ponty does not espouse a similarly strong sense of new beginnings as does Arendt, because for Merleau-Ponty sedimentations always connect us to our past. Nevertheless, when he writes about the renewal of the past, he intends to give room to a newness that is disengaged from the old in so far as it is not a *mere* reiteration of the old. He writes that while change might be hard or hardly noticed, this does not mean that genuine change does not happen. Thus, he concedes that there are indeed cuts, changes and gaps in the seemingly endless repetition of pasts. In his lecture on institution he writes:

> At the same time this does not mean that there are no cuts, changes, gaps. Simply they are not always the most pronounced. They are dialectical mutations, turns, changes that need to be appreciated in the context. There is the weight of all that is there, tacitly accepted,

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71. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 177-8.

congealed in language, the mental equipment. But it does not impede
that which is grown there and what prepares changes in the equipment.
(IP 114)[72]

This assertion does not yet suffice to win over the sceptic; it is not sufficient to claim that change is *possible*, it also needs to be explained *how* something new can gestate within the sedimented habitual life.

Already in the *Phenomenology* Merleau-Ponty warns that the sedimentations should not be understood as "an inert mass in the depth of our consciousness" (PhP 130/163) because sedimentations are only maintained with respect to the present. In other words, as long as habits are presently acted out by my body, they endure. This makes sense when one realises that it is a contradiction in terms to speak of habits that are no longer part of my repertoire. This also means that the way that my body presently moves through this room relies on these habits but also modifies these sedimentations. Possibly my body may even lose some sedimented behaviour through the way I act now. What Merleau-Ponty hints at here is that while my habits give me a characteristic style, I am myself not a caricature who routinely and customarily acts and speaks always the same. Sedimentation is therefore not a static and passive conservation of the past. Instead, one should take this term in its geological sense, i.e., the sediment that is deposited by a river does not only accumulate but usually *shifts*, it pushes the river in different directions and in return gets washed out by the current, building new sediment. This means that there is a

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72. « Ceci ne veut pas dire en même temps qu'il n'y ait pas de coupures, de changement, d'écarts. Simplement ils ne sont pas toujours les plus déclarés. Ce sont mutations dialectiques, virages, changements à apprécier dans le contexte. Il y a le poids de tout ce qui est là, tacitement accepté, figé par le langage, l'outillage mental. Mais il n'empêche pas qu'il y ait poussée et qui prépare changements de l'outillage »

mutual integration between the river and the sediment.[73] Thus, returning to the habit body, one has a general style precisely because the body is able to adapt to new situations and change its habits in such a way that a new situation can be integrated in it. Consequently, the sediment of a habit always has a relation to the present moment in which the body moves and speaks and interacts with its environment. The modifying direction that runs from my sedimented body to the world can be reversed and those aspects of the world which I cannot inhabit now in turn modify my habit body. This change in my habit body, however, was not possible without the original sedimentations. This discussion of the habit body finds it equivalent in Merleau-Ponty's description of institutions when he writes:

> As long as these institutions last, they never cease to grow and to transform within themselves the events that confront them, until the movement begins imperceptibly to reverse itself and the situations and relations which the institutions cannot assimilate alter them and give rise to another form which, however, would not have been possible without them. (PW 92/129-30)

While sediments are not inert masses and they are subject to change themselves, their secrecy and their place in the structure of perception also means that any changes will not be "metamorphos[es] in the fairytale sense of a miracle or magic, violence or aggression" (PW 68/96).[74] Based on this structure of institution, Merleau-Ponty

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73. Merleau-Ponty writes: "Sedimentation is not only the accumulation of one creation upon another but also an integration" (PW 100/142).

74. I suggest that imperceptible modifications of my habit body might eventually overcome the sedimentations of my life while a too deliberate counteraction against these sedimentations might sometimes be least free from them. I call to mind here Frantz Fanon's claim that a reaction always fails because as a re-action it still takes its departure from that which it reacts against (*Black Skin White Masks,* trans. C. Lam Markhamm [New York: Grove Press, 1976], 222). Merleau-Ponty writes in a similar manner: "Today's painting, even though it was possible only through the whole past of painting, denies this past too deliberately really to be free of it" (PW 99/139-40). However this does not mean that I propose to stop reacting against the events and the patterns in the world which we think are wrongly guided. Reaction is after all important in addressing issues that call for change. The point I want to make here is that one should not think that this reaction does not involve the

would have to concede to Arendt that he cannot account for *radical* new beginnings, but rather that the new is always new-in-context of sedimentations. Merleau-Ponty thus positions himself in the middle between the Ecclesiastical lament that the past is completely conserved in a cycle of repetitiveness, and the Arendtian demand that the new beginning should be completely unforeseen and unexpected.

While our habits shape a familiar world for us through our forgetting of the origin of these habitual movements, giving the 'secret' past a fecund power, there is another kind of forgetfulness which warrants discussion. It is Merleau-Ponty's suggestive use of a forgotten or little known gestation within a congealed and weighted structure that leads me to turn in the next section to institution understood as *pregnancy and birth*.[75] By critically evaluating and thinking beyond Merleau-Ponty's birth metaphor for institution I present birth as an exemplar of the rupture of the ever-*new* in the familiarity of the same. In addition I sketch a possibility for a feminist reading of Merleau-Ponty's notion of institution as always already being in relationship. This discussion reveals that the new *can* erupt out of the past which is an integral part of a phenomenology of difference.

3.2.3 The rupture of birth

The concept of birth is rich in its metaphoric use. Jean-Luc Nancy expresses this when he writes that "to be born is…to transform, transport, and entrance all

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past and sets one completely free from it (see also the final remarks of this chapter).

75. Remember that Merleau-Ponty writes: "this does not mean that there are no cuts, changes, gaps. Simply they are not always the most pronounced…There is the weight of all that is there, tacitly accepted… But it does not impede that which is grown there and what prepares changes in the equipment" and prepares "active mass" [*masse active*] (IP 114).

determinations."[76] Birth signifies a coming to be that is more than a re-production of the same. Arendt recognises the importance of birth and introduces the human passage of birth, *natality,* as the condition for the possibility for new beginnings.[77] She sees the (rectilinear) human life as an interruption in the cyclical, changeless, deathless repetition of biological patterns.[78] While Merleau-Ponty's notion of temporality is very different from Arendt's conception of it, her remark is helpful for emphasising that birth is a true inter-*ruption* in the movement of time. Similarly, I suggest that birth in Merleau-Ponty's writings is that which ruptures the present, opens a new future and creates space for change. Birth is a rupture and discontinuity that, as Lisa Guenther points out in her response to Arendt, disrupts *both* the circle and the line.[79] Guenther writes that the rhythm of reproduction is neither line nor circle but rather a spiral which "turns back on itself without returning home…to the point of departure; it reproduces a pattern without making an exact copy."[80] I agree that the figure of the spiral is a better spatiotemporal image for both the notion of birth and for the temporality of institution. My slight uneasiness with using this image is that it still emphasises *continuity* and does not adequately depict the possibility of rupture. The temporal image of rhythm works better to include both the recurrence and continuity of patterns and the gaps and ruptures which break apart the rhythm. In what follows I claim that the disruption of birth is the exemplar

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76. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Birth to Presence*, trans. Bryan Holmes et al. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 2.
77. "The miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal, 'natural' ruin is ultimately the fact of natality…It is, in other words, the birth of new men [sic] and the new beginning, the action they are capable of by virtue of being born" (Arendt, *Human Condition,* 247).
78. Ibid*.,* 97. She comments on the repetitive cycle sung about in the lament in Ecclesiastes 1:2-10.
79. Guenther, *The Gift of the Other,* 47.
80. Ibid. 116.

of the discontinuity of the temporal rhythm and the possibility of the new to rupture the present and enter within a context of familiarity.

Merleau-Ponty uses the image of fertility and birth to describe institution when he writes that *Stiftung* is the "unlimited fecundity of each present" (PW 68/96), in which the present moment is "productive after itself" and opens a future (IP 35). Even more clearly Merleau-Ponty writes in the lectures on institution that institution and birth are reciprocally related: birth as an institution is not an act of constitution but a traversal towards a future (IP 38); institution as a birth is the opening up of the future. Consequently, institution and birth belong in the same genre (IP 38). Merleau-Ponty writes about birth directly after introducing the notion of institution in his lectures. He writes: "Consciousness is not conscious of being born. Birth: [it is] the passage from a moment where nothing was for X to a moment where all is *also* for X" (IP 37, my emphasis).[81] The passage of birth itself is not remembered by the one who is born. This is significant because it brings passivity into one's existence. While one's birth marks the beginning of one's own existence this birth is not in one's power, not even in one's memory. Guenther writes that "[b]irth contests any absolute possession of one's own existence" because it has already happened and was never a moment for me other than being "before me."[82] In this sense birth is a "slipping away of presence through which everything comes to presence."[83] Slipping away, my birth makes it possible that I have a world.

Interestingly, Merleau-Ponty opens the *intersubjective* horizon of the world when

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81. « La conscience n'a pas conscience d'être *née*. Naissance : [c'est] passage du moment où rien n'était pour X au moment où tout est aussi pour X »
82. Guenther, *Gift of the Other,* 3.
83. Nancy, *Birth to Presence,* 4. He also writes: "Birth effaces itself" (ibid.).

he writes that after birth 'all is *also* for X'. Thus he implies that at the moment of birth there is another person also present who *already has a world* in which the new-born now will participate. Consequently, birth is a passage in which I am initiated into a world that is present as already there *also for others*. This intersubjective aspect of birth is exemplified in the need to ask others about the details of one's birth. And thus one's birth is revealed as a narrative of another person's experience. Like Nancy and Guenther, Christina Schües argues that my being born withdraws from being subjectively given to me and she concludes that "my birth is conscious for me just as historical incident through another" and through this recourse to another a "narratively conveyed generativity of my existence" is shaped.[84] Because one is forgetful of one's birth, the *genetic* questions about one's own life can only be addressed through questioning the person(s) who came in the generations before oneself (e.g., by asking one's parents or grandparents about one's own birth). Thus birth, like institution, involves a relation with a generative past that is handed down to us through narratives, customs, and traditions. Therefore both institution and birth cannot be thought from the position of the isolated ego but rather they require an intersubjective dimension in which existence is always already in relation to another human being.[85]

In what follows I first sketch a feminist reading of birth which draws attention to this maternal other who is present at one's birth. Then I re-read Merleau-Ponty's notion of institution through this feminist critique. While this topic warrants its own

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84. "narrativ vermittelten Generativität meiner Existenz." Christina Schües, "Generative Phänomenologie in feministischer Perspektive," in Silvia Stoller, Veronica Vasterling and Linda Fischer, *Feministische Phänomenologie und Hermeneutik*, 56.
85. Ibid. 63.

thesis, here I will do no more than to push Merleau-Ponty's notion of institution towards a maternal origin that lies in the original presence of the relationship.

3.2.3.1 *Feminist critique of birth as metaphor*

While birth introduces us into a world in which there is always already another person present, the philosophical reading of birth has generally neglected to address this other. The problem with the slipping away of birth is that what is forgotten is not just the experience of my birth but what is overlooked at the same time is the maternal body from which one is born. This forgetting of the maternal body is not only a personal forgetting and consequent amazement that once I was carried inside the body of another person. Rather this forgetting runs as a general trace through all of Western philosophy. Thus Imogen Tyler writes: "[p]hilosophy has thrived upon using metaphors of gestation for the renewal of masculine models of being and creativity, while simultaneously and repeatedly disavowing maternal origin in its theories and models of subjectivity."[86] By erasing the original maternal body, the philosopher gives the one who is born a fictitious "self-possession by imagining his birth as an autochthonous miracle."[87] Christine Battersby argues that Continental philosophers are especially guilty of this forgetting of the origin of one's birth, which is exemplified in Heidegger's emphasis of Dasein's *thrownness* into the world, thrown

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86. Imogen Tyler, "Reframing pregnant embodiment," in *Transformations: Thinking Through Feminism,* ed. Sarah Ahmed et al. (London: Routledge, 2000), 291. There is a large body of literature on this forgetfulness of the feminine in the history of Western philosophy. See for example: Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman,* trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), e.g., p. 133ff; Michèle Le Dœuff, *Hipparchia's Choice: An Essay Concerning Women, Philosophy, Etc* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998); Michelle Boulous Walker, *Philosophy and the Maternal Body* (London: Routledge, 1998).

87. Guenther, *Gift of the Other,* 10.

from no specific position or person.[88]

Merleau-Ponty's discussion of institution and birth seems vulnerable to this criticism when he writes initially: "birth…rises from nothing" (IP 37).[89] Similarly, when Merleau-Ponty reveals to us our natal secret he overlooks the maternal body from which we are born. He writes: "Natal secret: body unites with things through its own ontogenesis, by welding onto another its two lips [*lèvres*]: the sensible mass it is and the mass of the sensible wherein it is born by segregation and upon which as seer it remains open" (VI 136/177, translation modified). He thus explains that the sensible body is born *into* and *from* a sensible mass from which it is segregated. Because the sensible mass that the subject is born *from* is also the mass that the subject is born *into,* it does not seem plausible, on a first reading, that the sensible mass here is meant as signifying the body of a mother i.e., the body of another subject. Born from and into a sensible flesh, it is the *flesh* which, folding over itself, reproduces *itself* in the body of the subject. The body, as a variant of the flesh (VI 136/177), is not born into a relation with another but into a relation with *itself.* This image of the flesh reproducing itself thus perpetuates the masculine miracle of birth as self-possession.

Pointedly Irigaray wonders about these sensible masses of the flesh, these two lips that are not "unlike the lips of our 'body.'"[90] In this suggestive manner Irigaray leads us back to the maternal body and the lips through which, literally, the subject is

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88. Christine Battersby, *The Phenomenal Woman: Feminist Metaphysics and the Patterns of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 18. By way of another example, Jean-Paul Sartre's approach also needs to be challenged. He claims that one is responsible for one's own birth by assuming it. Consequently he takes possession of his own birth and ignores the interesting dis-possession that lies at the heart of existence (Sartre, *Being and Nothingness,* 556).

89. « La naissance… surgit de rien »

90. Irigaray, "The Invisible of the Flesh," 166.

born. Following this lead, in the following section I aim to return to the maternal body and retrace and *reclaim* the image of the flesh reproducing itself as a maternal metaphor.

In chapter two, I argued that neonatal life cannot be a life of fusion while also not yet being a life of differentiated existence. Now I extend this argument to the prenatal life.[91] The prenatal life is at times presented in philosophy as a kind of paradisal state of fusion with the maternal body. To be born means to be separated from this state of fusion which generally leaves the individual abandoned. This separation and abandonment is then interpreted as the condition for the possibility for the development of a (solipsist) individuality. Notwithstanding her feminist reading, even Schües misconceives this in her paper "The Birth of Difference," as she aims to draw the attention of her reader to the being-with of prenatal existence. Trying to show how Dasein is natal [*geburtlich*], she presents the child in the womb as living in an undifferentiated "symbiosis with the mother."[92] From this undifferentiated life, she claims, one is born through a leap into differentiation, and thus birth is the "first difference" which grounds all difference.[93] *Identity* (the subject as an individual) is formed through this leap, and *difference* is precisely this tearing apart of the individual from the initial fusion. Thus, she argues, one is an individual because one differs from the initial fusion; and, the passage of birth as a segregative leap is the coming into being of difference. My worry with this interpretation of pregnancy as undifferentiated symbiosis is that it does not take into account the

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91. I do not intend to claim anything about the (non)existence of prenatal experience.
92. Christina Schües, "The Birth of Difference," *Human Studies* 20 (1997): 246.
93. Ibid*,* 147. "Birth thought as the fundamental leap from the *undifferentiated* in to the differentiated world of objects, gives the human the possibility of being confronted with the differences of the world of objects *for the first time* and to direct her senses to it" (ibid. 246, my emphases).

mother as *subject*. That is, Schües turns the 'being-with' into a symbiotic life of undifferentiation and thus annihilates the mother who is part of this 'fusion'.[94] Since there is no mention of the actual presence of the mother, this notion of 'leap from fusion' fails to account for the generativity of life. While I recognise that there is a leap or rupture in birth, I argue that this leap neither breaks from nothing nor from a fusion, but rather, birth leaps from *a subject*. If birth is to have meaning for our discussion of the generativity of institution, then we need to account for a genuine generative dimension of birth.

To do justice to this personal aspect of birth, I claim that for both the mother and the foetus there is no real sense of fusion in pregnancy. On her side, the mother does not live her pregnancy as a state of undifferentiation and fusion, but rather she feels another living being moving in her own living body. Young describes pregnancy as the 'splitting' of her body in which she witnesses exclusively the movements in her body that are 'hers' but belonging to another.[95] This movement in her is not just any internal movement (e.g., a stomach rumble), but instead it is the spontaneous and responsive movement of a sensing body that is the foetus.[96] On 'the foetus' side', Irigaray uncovers in an interview with biologist Hélène Rouch how the intrauterine

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94. Iris Marion Young writes: "we should not be surprised to learn that discourse on pregnancy omits subjectivity, for the specific experience of women has been absent from most of our cultures' discourse about human experience and history." "Pregnant embodiment: Subjectivity and Alienation," in *On Female Body Experience: Throwing like a Girl and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 46.
95. "Then I feel a tickle, a little gurgle in my belly. It is my feeling, my insides, and it feels somewhat like a gas bubble, but it is not; it is different, in another place, belonging to another, another that is nevertheless my body. The first movements of the foetus produce this sense of the splitting subject" (Young, "Pregnant embodiment," 49).
96. For this point I am indebted to Sara Heinämaa's excellent discussion at the Nordic Society for Phenomenology in Copenhagen April 2007.

life is also not a life of fusion.[97] Rouch explains how the embryonic tissue is not

fused with the maternal tissue. Even the placenta as the mediator is not a fusion of

tissues, but rather, as *embryonic* tissue the placenta remains separate from the mother's

body. Rouch explains that in order for embryonic placental factors to be produced,

which maintain the maternal hormone levels, there first needs to be a reaction from

the mother's body.[98] Thus, she concludes, a *bodily negotiation* is always already taking

place between the mother's body and the embryonic tissue.[99]

Speaking about negotiation in the context of intrauterine life can be ethically

and philosophically dangerous because it could imply that there is a more or less

conscious dialogue between the two parties. I do not think that either Irigaray or

Rouch intend to suggest such a conscious negotiation. Instead I suggest that this

negotiation takes place on an embodied *anonymous* level. I refer here to the notion of

double anonymity that was introduced in chapter two. While the negotiation between

two different biological systems suggests that the mother and foetus are never really

'one' body, it does not suggest that the foetus is *consciously* aware of the difference

between its body and the other's body. Both the pregnant woman and the foetus are

thus engaged in anonymous negotiations between their particular bodily situations.

Irigaray and Rouch's account of the embodied relationships between two

different bodies is helpful because it undoes the assumption that the pre-natal life is a

life of paradisal fusion, while it nonetheless honours a special closeness and

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97. Luce Irigaray, *Je, tu, nous: Toward a Culture of Difference,* trans. Alison Martin (New York: Routledge, 1993).

98. Ibid. 41.

99. This means also that the embryo falls neither in the category of transplants, which are *recognised* by the body as foreign tissue and can be rejected, nor of cancerous tumours which are *not recognised* by the body as foreign tissue, which enhances the possibility of a tumour to do its destructive work (ibid, 41).

envelopment of these two bodies. Even so, Irigaray and Rouch's discussion fails to account for the mother's *reflective* awareness of her own pregnancy and labour. The negotiations between the foetus and the mother take place on the level of the exchanges between biological systems and thus they are anonymous experiences. However, as mentioned above the mother is clearly *personally* aware of the other body within her,[100] while the foetus' experience remains unknown and forgotten. In the next sections I flesh out in more detail this peculiar asymmetry between the woman and the foetus.

Notwithstanding my rejection of an initial undifferentiated fusion between mother and foetus, there is in birth a genuine sense of separation. Guenther writes: "even while sustaining the rhythm or cadence that links the generations together, the maternal body also opens up a continuous separation…that lets the child—and…the mother—emerge as an Other."[101] Following this remark I suggest that the maternal body is both the rhythmic sustaining body, the biological cycles of which negotiate with the biological cycles of the foetus *and* it is the body that creates the possibility for a rupture in the present which opens up the future.

3.2.3.2 A maternal phenomenology of rupture and renewal

Having problematised the notion of birth, I now revisit Merleau-Ponty's discussion of birth and institution. This requires me to search in the shadows of Merleau-Ponty's writings to reveal what is hidden there. I argue that the maternal can be

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100. Pregnancy and child birth are not generally experienced similarly among women. Women can experience widely different moods as alienation, involvement, strength, productivity, passivity, or weakness. Pregnancy and childbirth are thus very much *personal* experiences.
101. Guenther, *Gift of the Other,* 117.

fruitfully thought through Merleau-Ponty's philosophy and that this will help to make sense of the significance of institution and birth as re*new*al. My rethinking of Merleau-Ponty finds inspiration in Guenther's excellent feminist reading and critique of Levinas' account of birth.[102] That means that in the following pages I rely closely on Guenther's argument, without however wanting to imply that Merleau-Ponty and Levinas have similar accounts of birth and intersubjectivity. They do not and I make this clear in my analysis. I use Guenther's description of birth in order to develop this thought in Merleau-Ponty and to reorient his philosophy.

As possible elements of a feminist rereading of Merleau-Ponty's writings, I place on the foreground the following four aspects of the relation between the child and her mother:

(i) Guenther argues that being born exemplifies a 'feminist past', which is a past that is not simply conserved but rather it is a past which tells me that I am not my own origin, but have a "a past that was never present."[103] This means that while I have a past in which the advent of my birth occurred, my 'being born' was never present for me. As early as the *Phenomenology* Merleau-Ponty has already referred to a "past which has never been a present" (PhP 242/289).[104] Here I want to reorient and 'feminise' the 'past which has never been a present'.

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102. I turn to Guenther rather than to Levinas himself because she purposefully rereads and reorients Levinas' concepts in a way which he might not have chosen (*Gift of the Other,* 129).

103. Guenther, *Gift of the Other,* 88.

104. This notion of the past appears in the context of sense experience [*le sentir*] and describes the past of our unreflective, prepersonal experience. Contrary to Husserl, Merleau-Ponty denies that one coincides with the present 'now' moment. Consequently he accepts that there is a dehiscence in the centre of perception. Our recalled past has been present to us only pre-personally. In chapter two, I argued that one is able to attune to other bodies and rhythms in the world through this prepersonal life which is never really 'present' to our reflection. The idea of a past that has never been present as a graspable instant returns in Merleau-Ponty's later writings.

The present, I argued above, cannot be grasped as an instant because it is a moment of *passage* which is a movement. Now I add that the present is exemplified in the passage of being born which is never present to the newborn and to which she has access only through others. The mediation of the other with respect to my own past becomes relevant as soon as we leave the genetic dimension of experience and enter the generative dimension. Remember that Husserl, while introducing *Stiftung,* specifically emphasised that there need to be (writing) others around such that *Nachstiftung* and *Endstiftung* of a concept will be possible.[105] Merleau-Ponty adds that, "ideas that are too much possessed are no longer ideas" (VI 119/156), but instead ideas need to be shared and open to others. In a very literal sense others are needed to make ideas and traditions carry over to the generations that follow. An idea about shapes would never have become geometry if there were no others to pick up on this idea and to propagate it towards the future. Thus historical renewal requires for one to be born into a 'horizon of humanity'.[106] Both Guenther and Schües point out that our own birth connects us to the *generations,* to the mothers of our mothers,[107] and as such we are grounded in a past that has born us and that, from its own time, has productively given rise to us. Although for the child her birth is a past that was never present (because this passage was never a presence for her), for the woman in labour this passage is very much present. To understand the relation between the mother and the child, it is important to draw attention to this fundamental asymmetrical relationship. At the root of the notion of a past that is only present to the child

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105. Husserl, *Crisis,* 360-1/371.
106. More on the horizon of humanity in chapter four (4.1.2).
107. Guenther, *Gift of the Other,* 129; Schües, "Generative Phänomenologie," 66.

through *others* lies the realisation that the birth of the child was in some manner present to another subject such that the past can possibly be revealed. Thus as ones who are born we are generatively connected to those who came before us. In addition, as ones who witness birth, we relate to those who have yet to come: those who will never coincide with us and whose coming to presence is already being prepared.

The generative dimension is important when discussing the passing of the different generations in history. However, the same generativity, or fecundity, is present in our day to day perceptions and habitual interactions. Above I presented the 'secret' past as having a fecund power, transforming our futural perception through a set of 'coherent deformations'. This is the *birthing dimension* of our sedimentations.

This birthing dimension of our sedimentations gives rise to the question whether we can understand this also from a maternal perspective. To explain, in birth there is the actual mother, in historical institutions there are the mothers of our mothers, the generations of humanity that went before us. In perception, where and who is this forgotten other who gives birth to my seeing? I suggest that the maternal origin in perception can be found in Merleau-Ponty's notion of reversibility. Reversibility is beautifully described through the words of the painters André Marchand and Paul Klee: "In a forest, I have felt many times over that it was not I who looked at the forest. Some days I felt that the trees were looking at me, were speaking to me" (EM 167/31). Later Merleau-Ponty expands this artistic vision to include all vision when he writes in the context of discussing the generality of the

flesh that "I feel myself being looked at by the things" (VI 139/181).[108] With this he means to say that to my activity as a perceiver belongs a passivity of being *visible*. For Merleau-Ponty this connection between the seer and the seen is so pronounced that I can only see by virtue of being visible. It does not do justice to Merleau-Ponty's depth and precision of thought to take the artist's claim in its most literal interpretation (the trees *really* look at me). How we need to understand the 'look of the trees' is explained in "Eye and Mind" when Merleau-Ponty unpacks this notion of reversibility in terms of *birth*. He writes:

> It can be said that a human is born at the instant when something that was only virtually visible, inside the mother's body, becomes at one and the same time *visible* for itself *and for us*. The painter's vision is a continued birth. (EM 167-8/32 my emphasis)

The important point is that birth introduces the seer into a *human world that perceives her* and in which she can perceive herself, making her part of this human world. Significantly, Merleau-Ponty refers to this seer as being born from a maternal body. Nevertheless he fails to grasp the full implication of being born from a mother by mentioning only her pregnant body while overlooking her subjectivity as a seer.[109] After having been born from the maternal body that child becomes at once visible for *us* (and for himself). From this quote it is not evident that Merleau Ponty includes the maternal gaze in this gaze of the 'us'. Consequently, he presents himself in the problematic philosophical tradition of depicting the maternal body as the carrier of human life while 'we', the cultural intersubjective (masculine) gaze, turn the newborn

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108. See also VI 273-4/321.

109. It is good to remember here that Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is after all not a feminist phenomenology. Instead in this chapter I *rethink* and *rework* his philosophy to reveal productive but 'unthought' traces of birth and maternal embodiment that can lead to developing feminist phenomenologies and ontologies.

into a human subject. Critical of this tradition, I again emphasise Schües' insight in view of our "narratively conveyed generativity"[110] and argue that the mother in Merleau-Ponty's quote should be given a central place in our understanding of reversibility. The child is born from the maternal body, and the *maternal* look and her speech connects the child to the child's forgotten birth and emphasises the child's visibility. This also means that the condition of possibility for seeing things and feeling oneself being seen is foremost found in the maternal gaze. It is on the basis of such a gaze that we should understand the wider intersubjective gaze which turns us into visible seers.[111]

Through a feminist reorientation of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy I have opened up 'the past that has never been present' as bringing to the foreground a *generative* dimension of institution which requires that the subject has a relation to a (maternal) other. This need not be a face to face relation. What matters is that for institution to make sense there cannot be just one single person all alone; at the centre of this intersubjective relation one finds the relation with the maternal other.

(ii) Guenther writes that the pregnant subject is confronted with a time that exceeds her own time and disrupts her present as it opens up a future that cannot be contained. Thus, she continues, pregnancy does not mirror gestation. Gestation "refers to a time before the beginning, without presence or origin,"[112] while

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110. Schües, "Generative Phänomenologie," 56.

111. In chapter five (5.1.2), I again discuss the importance of being visible to others, but then I do so in the context of the mirror stage in child development.

112. "Gestation refers to the anarchy of the past—a time before the beginning, without presence or origin—pregnancy suggests the anarchy of disruption, a time that exceeds and breaks up any continuity with the present" (Guenther, *Gift of the Other,* 100). Guenther explains that for Levinas 'an-arche' refers to a time before the origin (ibid, 4) in which one finds oneself already responsible for the Other. See also Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay of Exteriority,* trans.

pregnancy implies a failure to predict the future because the present is ruptured and opened by the unforeseeable. That is, in pregnancy and gestation the woman and the child do not share the same temporality.[113] In birth these different temporalities cross when "the immemorial past of the child yields to the unforeseeable future of the maternal body without passing through 'the present of coinciding with oneself.'"[114] This means that there is another asymmetrical relation that underlies the advent of birth: (i) being born is a passage that does not have a presence for the child and through which she enters into an open future; and (ii) giving birth, one's own time is disrupted by the unforeseeable time of another subject.

I first discuss the former side of the asymmetry, i.e., I explore being born as a missing of the present. I combine this insight with Merleau-Ponty's writing on birth in order to 'feminise' the temporal traversal of being born in Merleau-Ponty. Merleau-Ponty writes in his lectures on institution: "since conception and even more so after birth, there is a traversal towards a future…Birth is not an act of constitution, but the institution of what is to come [*à-venir*]" (IP 38)[115]. Being born is this traversal between two temporalities and so the child traverses to an unforeseeable future while missing the actual moment of birth. There is in birth this great *leap over* the present towards the future, which leaves the present behind as a gap that can only indirectly be filled by a witnessing other. The weight of the

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Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 223. In *The Visible and the Invisible* Merleau-Ponty speaks about a 'time before time' (VI 243/296) in a context of a past that was never present and that maintains a continued efficacy (VI 24/43, see also section 3.2.1 in this chapter and Al-Saji's paper "The Temporality of Life: Merleau-Ponty, Bergson, and the Immemorial Past"). Contrary to Levinas, Merleau-Ponty's discussion of this 'time before time' is ontological rather than ethical.

113. Guenther, *Gift of the Other,* 99.

114. Ibid*,* 128.

115. « depuis la conception et plus encore après la naissance, il y a enjambement vers un avenir… Naissance [n'est pas acte] de constitution mais institution d'une à-venir »

maternal body does indeed not "impede what is grown there and prepares changes" (IP 114), but instead the weight of the maternal body, the tightness of the child in her womb and the tightness of her skin, actually forces out what is grown there and casts it towards the future.[116] Comparing institution and constitution, Merleau-Ponty writes: "the instituted spans [*enjambe*] its future, has its future, its temporality, the constituted holds on" (IP 37).[117] The instituted, the one who is born, leaps to its future, not holding on to its present. In addition, the newborn is born through someone who is already living, and as such the new life literally comes out of the old. Leaping to the future, there is a connection to the past which carries the new and in that sense anticipates it.

The other side of the temporal asymmetry is the time of giving birth. Pregnancy, Merleau-Ponty writes, is the "power to break forth, productivity (*preagans futuri*), fecundity" (VI 208/258). In accordance, Merleau-Ponty emphasises generally that the future can really be anticipated (IP 99), but not determined in advance. This is exemplified in giving birth; there is, after all, a real sense of *expectation* in pregnancy and in giving birth (or in the continued efficacy of the past). Reading institution in conjunction with giving birth makes it clear that the new can very much be expected but not foreseen by the pregnant body (or the fecund past) because the future that is expected is an *open* future. The pregnancy that leads to giving birth is an 'openness to' without being able to determine its fulfilment in advance. This also means that Arendt's assertion that the new is a complete *un*expectedness is not warranted when

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116. This a feminised reading of thrownness, being cast from the weighted body towards the future. See also "my body is body is bursting at the seams of a skin that is never big enough to contain both of us" (Guenther, *Gift of the Other,* 111).

117. « L'institué enjambe son avenir, a son avenir, sa temporalité, le constitué tient tout de moi qui constitue » (See also my reading of emjambment in chapter five [5.3.2]).

it is read in conjunction with the pregnancy that makes birth possible. Instead birth signifies an expectation of someone new, carried by someone who came before, but without a possibility to predict this new life. Consequently birth does not arise out of nothing but involves a leap or rupture with the present towards an open future that cannot be foreseen. It is in birth as an institution of life that the infant is initiated into the rhythm of renewal that opens up towards a future.

What I discuss above in terms of a present that is leaped over, is the same as that which I referred earlier as a present that is no longer an instance but rather a passage. Referring to Bergson, Merleau-Ponty writes:

> It is then that Bergson perceives that we do not draw near to time by squeezing it between reference-points of measurement as if between pincers; but that in order to have an idea of it we must on the contrary let it develop freely, accompanying the *continual birth* which makes it always new and, precisely in this respect, always the same. (*Signs* 184/231, my emphasis)

The present as a continual birth is a passage in which there is a continual opening up to what cannot be predicted while it is at the same time already expected from out of the pregnant past. In the maternal body, in the productivity of the past, or in our congealed sedimentations, the new is growing, it is called for, and expected as openness. The new is the *Sprung* (leap) of a 'past that was never a present' towards a future, and thus it is true that the "*Ursprunglich* is not of long ago" (VI 267/315) it has just happened in the renewing jump of the 'continual birth' of institution. The *present as the passage of birth* encompasses both the forward motion to an open future and the backward motion to a past that is accessible to us through others.[118] It is in this

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118. "The present…is ungraspable from close-up, in the forceps of attention, it is an encompassing" (VI 195/246).

passage of the present that the 'evernew' and the 'always the same' can be simultaneously found. Re*new*al is possible precisely as this oscillation, the back-and-forth of the rhythm of institution. As an image of temporality, this jump or *Sprung* most emphasises the rupturing in the rhythm of institution, more so than the image of a spiral which is still a continuous flow. The two sides in the asymmetry (the disrupted time of giving birth and the skipped present of being born) come together at the moment of birth. The leap signified in birth truly brings out the discontinuity of the temporality of institution in which the past and the future intersect in an asymmetric simultaneity.

(iii) Pregnancy and gestation are (partly) marked by passivity. The gestating foetus cannot posit or choose its own existence and the woman is prevented from halting her initial bodily exchange which of itself *already has responded* to the foetus growing in her: Merleau-Ponty remarks that "my body *obeys* the pregnancy, it 'responds' to it" (VI 209/259).[119] The gestating foetus and pregnant woman are as such both vulnerable and passive. Here I do not want to imply that passivity is the only way to describe the relation between the pregnant woman and the gestating child. I merely point out that passivity is part of this relation. Guenther writes: "as gestated in the body of a woman, I am passive, sensible and exposed to the other

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119. See also Guenther, *Gift of the Other,* 99. This initial response of my body does not mean that I could not justifiably choose to then abort the pregnancy. At issue here is my prepersonal bodily response and attunement to the rhythms in the world. This attunement does not mean that it is harmonious, my prepersonal response to another subject, or my initial bodily reaction to a pregnancy, might be a counter reaction. In this sense *I do not take attunement to be similar to harmony*. While attunement does not mean agreement, it does mean that there is a form of interplay, that even my disharmonious initial response to another is directed at her. For this reason attunement might be better understood as at-tunement which emphasises the possibility of breaking the harmony. See chapter five (5.3.2).

before I have a chance to find myself,"[120] while as pregnant I find myself as already having responded to what is growing in me even before I have decided whether or not this pregnancy is welcome. Here the notion of the responsivity or affectivity of the body is crucial. In the *Analyses on Active and Passive Synthesis* Husserl writes that before something can become meaningful, it has to have affected us, such as when we turn toward a melody of which we are suddenly aware while at the same time realising that that melody had been playing in the background all the time while we were sitting in this cafe.[121] Similarly, in the *Phenomenology* Merleau-Ponty writes that the sensible is a "vague beckoning" (PhP 214/259) to which one must find the reply. Through one's response to the call from the sensible it will show up as a determinate something. What is essential is that the determination of the sensible is neither based on the sensible alone, nor is it the consequence of my attitude (PhP 214/259). Instead it is the *relation* between a body which is affected and a sensible thing to which the body is responding. In *The Visible and the Invisible* this relation is worked out in terms of reversibility. There is a *mutual responding* taking place in which my response to the beckoning other makes her visible whereas her response to me makes of me a seer who is visible.[122] In the context of this chapter, it is the maternal response or gaze that transforms me into a subject who is both seer and seen, responder and responded to. Thus what matters is not only the responsivity between two persons who attune their bodily rhythms to each other (as in chapter two), but in addition this relation of responding to each other takes place as the *very condition* for

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120. Guenther, *Gift of the Other,* 125.
121. See Husserl, *Analyses Concerning Passive and Active Synthesis*, 196, 203.
122. As I indicated above, for Merleau-Ponty this reversible relation also takes place between a subject and a thing in the world.

perception. In chapter four I explore the ontological depth of my response as giving to the other the resonance that is required and demanded.

Part of this argument finds inspiration in the following quote by Guenther. She writes in a Levinasian manner that when encountering another, I "become like a maternal body for the other by responding to her before I know who she is or what she does."[123] Discussing Merleau-Ponty's account of responsivity, Bernhard Waldenfels writes similarly that "a bodily being…responds to something other before this other gets a particular sense."[124] While I agree with both of these statements, one needs to be careful not to turn Merleau-Ponty into Levinas. For example, I question Waldenfels' further argument as he assumes that the responsivity of the body is already an ethical response (or responsibility) to an ethical demand. Consequently Waldenfels interprets Merleau-Ponty to be more Levinasian than is warranted. For Merleau-Ponty the response is a reaction to a *perceptual* demand and this is not yet ethical.[125] The maternal body when read into Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is not yet an ethical or responsible body, but rather it is a reversible, perceptual body that gives birth to the perceiving/perceived other.

(vi) Merleau-Ponty makes an interesting and suggestive remark towards the end of his working notes: "Do a psychoanalysis of Nature: it is the flesh, the mother" (VI 267/315). He leaves this idea further unexplored and thus the reader is left guessing whether this implies that he recognises that there is a maternal ground

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123. Guenther, *Gift of the Other,* 106.

124. Bernhard Waldenfels, "Responsivity of the Body: Traces of the Other in Merleau-Ponty's Theory of Body and Flesh," in *Interrogating Ethics: Embodying the Good in Merleau-Ponty,* ed. J. Hatley, Jamice McLane and Christian Diehm (Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, 2006), 95.

125. See also Diane Perpich's response to Waldenfels' paper: Diane Perpich, "Moral Blind Spots and Ethical Appeals: A response to Bernhard Waldenfels," in J. Hatley, Jamice McLane and Christian Diehm, *Interrogating Ethics: Embodying the Good in Merleau-Ponty,* 107-131.

within his ontological notion of the flesh, or that he falls into the mistake of metaphorically adopting the mother metaphor within a largely masculinist philosophy. I refer to another section in *The Visible and the Invisible* that supports the suggestion that the flesh has a genuine maternal sense. Merleau-Ponty writes that the flesh is: "cette masse intérieurement travaillée" (VI 147/191) which I translate as "this interiorly *laboured* mass." By changing this translation from Alphonso Lingis' translation of *travaillée* as "worked-over" I uncover the two-fold meaning of the word 'labour' and *'travail'* which both in English and in French can mean the labour of birth. That this interpretation of the flesh as being-in-labour is not at all farfetched is shown earlier in the same paragraph, where Merleau-Ponty explains this interior labour of the flesh: "through a labour [*travail*] upon itself, the visible body provides for the hollow whence a vision will come, inaugurates the long maturation at whose term suddenly it will see" and thus "the seer is premeditated in counterpoint[126] in the embryonic development" (VI 147/191). Merleau-Ponty's language, which speaks of a *hollow of expectation*[127] and of a *maturation* which comes to *term*, is suggestive of the maternal metaphor. In the next chapter this hollow of expectation that is the flesh is further explored. There also I give a critical reading of the possibility that the flesh is the mother. For now it suffices to note that there is a rich ground from which to develop a feminist reading of the flesh.

To conclude, institution or temporality can be read through birth in these four

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126. The multiple meanings of this term 'counterpoint' are in this context especially interesting. Counterpoint means: simultaneous sounding of two or more melodies; a contrasting or interacting element; the use of a stress that differs from the regular metrical stress.

127. I come back to this notion of the flesh as a hollow in chapter four (4.2.3).

manners (i) as a withdrawal of the instantaneous moment, (ii) as a leap that ruptures the present and casts it towards the future, (iii) as a relation that has already begun since one has always already responded, and (iv) as the being-in-labour of the flesh. This section has shown that it is helpful to read institution together with birth because it shows that the new does not arise out of nothing and is not unexpected, but rather the new is expected without being determined, and comes to presence through a rupture from within the generativity and fecundity of the maternal body.

3.3 The institution of others

Institution has in an important way broadened the scope of this investigation. That is, the individual beings who encounter each other have been given a depth and a historical background. Institution teaches us several things including that our relation with the other is not an instantaneous relation existing from event to event. Rather our relations with others take place in the broader adventing passage of institution which I do not have in my own power. I do not possess the other, but instead the movement of time and institution has a hold over both of us. Additionally this discussion has shown how institution implies a notion of temporality that is no longer linear and ordered. Instead time is this rhythmic recurrence of patterns that is a back-and-forth in which the past is fecund and the future folds back unto the past. This rhythm is continually being disrupted by the present which is the leap of birth and in which, from the original relationship between myself and another, the new gets to be instituted.

Feminising Merleau-Ponty's account of institution has shown the importance

of asking the question of the *origin,* the *Ursprunglich* that is not of long ago. In a genetic sense the origin refers to the maternal other. The forgetting of this origin (that is taking oneself to be magically thrown into the world from nowhere), misguidedly erases the original maternal body who has born the subject. Having taken actual birth as the ground for feminising institution one might well wonder whether speaking of 'the origin or the primal institution' always refers to the *actual* maternal body. I suggest that there is more to discover about the origin. Schües writes with insight:

> In generative phenomenology, the phenomenologist is thought as beginner, however s/he is not an absolute beginner because beginnings are never absolute but always relative to that which was before. Therefore beginning always means to have a relationship with someone…If one's own having been born is thematised, then the question about the feminine other and the relationships that surround her and me does not stay away. 'The relationship is the beginning', no matter how it then continued.[128]

The origin of the new is not just the relationship with the actual maternal body but rather the origin is found in the *relationship*. Our origin is the coming into a world that is *also* there for another and thus we already have a relation with a past. Merleau-Ponty refers to such an original relationship when he writes that intersubjectivity is an *Urgemeinstiftung* (VI 182/233). Referring to both *Urstiftung* and *gemeinsam,* this term indicates that the original institution is a *shared* institution. The original institution is shared in two senses: (i) it is an institution that can only take place because another is always already *also there*, sharing my world. I began this chapter with the following

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128. "In der generativen Phänomenologie is der/die PänomenologIn auch als AnfängerIn gedacht, doch sie/er ist nicht ein/e absolute/r AnfängerIn, weil Anfänge niemals absolut sind, sondern immer relativ zu dem, was vorher war. Deshalb bedeutet Anfangen immer eine Beziehung mit jemandem…Wird das eigene Geborensein thematisiert, bleibt die Frage nach der weiblichen Anderen und die sie und mich umgebenden Beziehungen nicht aus. 'Die Beziehung is der Anfang', egal wie es dann weiterging" (Schües, "Generative Phänomenologie," 64-65).

quote:

> If the subject were taken not as a constituting but an instituting subject, it might be understood that…the instituted subject exists between others and myself, like a hinge, the consequence and the guarantee of our belonging to a common world. (*Themes* 40/IP 123-124)

Thus it is expressed that the instituted does neither purely depends on me nor on the other, but instead the instituted subject or object exists between myself and another and as a consequence of the *relation* that already exists between us. And (ii) institution is shared because we are simultaneously instituting each other. Merleau-Ponty writes about "the *Urgemeinshaftung* of our intentional life, the *Ineinander* of the others in us and of us in them" (VI 180/231).[129] *Haftung* means 'adhesion' and thus Merleau-Ponty refers here to our relation as the original shared adhesion between myself and another. The other is *in* me as an expectation or a call to which I respond. Through this response to the other I am already a maternal *subject*. Reversing, I am born from a maternal *other* (I am *in* the other as she responds to me). The maternal dimension that I have uncovered has thus both a subject-dimension and an other-dimension. Through this reversible relation one can understand how "others and my body are born together from the original ecstasy" (*Signs* 175/221). The leap, or ecstasy, of birth is made possible because of this exchange of calling and responding and has already and simultaneously related us to each other before we knew each other.[130]

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129. As early as the *Phenomenology* Merleau-Ponty writes that "my body and the other's are one whole, two sides of one and the same phenomenon, and the anonymous existence of which my body is the ever renewed trace henceforth inhabits both bodies simultaneously" (PhP 354/411). This quote resonates with the discussion in chapter one about the way our bodies extend into each other and see in these bodies similar intentions and habits. Having worked through the notion of institution one can better understand this remark. The anonymous traces that run through us are neither mine nor yours; they are the instituted traces of a tradition that is productive.

130. Again I emphasise that I speak here about a perceptual calling and response which is not yet ethical.

When broadening our focus from the actual pregnant feminine body to include all particularly sexed and gendered bodies, one could say that as subjects we continuously give birth to each other and to the world. 'Giving birth to each other' means that we always already have responded to the other and that we give the other a future: that is, we *expect* the other as she was called for but we do not foresee her as she breaks forward to an open future.

Returning once again to Merleau-Ponty's example of the instituting movement of painting, I illustrate our embodied relations with others. When the painter meets her canvas she does not impose a painting on it but is receptive to the tradition (past traces) of painting. The canvas before her resonates with an active tradition to which she responds. Both my body and the body of the other are active traces of a history and a system of conventions and habits. We both participate in the rhythm of time and institution, re-calling the past of our lives and of the generations before us and calling for the future. Thus we stand on certain rituals and we have with our body a certain pattern of engagement with the world. The painter, faced with the invisible traces of the artists that went before her, approaches and responds to these traces with her own particular body and starts to re-trace and undo the past, while interrogating the traces she encounters. She is inspired by the tradition and by the vision she sees.[131] In this exchange of responding to the traces and interrogating

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131. This reading of painting as intersubjectively engaged is mainly based in Merleau-Ponty's account of painting in *The Prose of the World* and *Signs;* in these works Merleau-Ponty also begins a philosophical investigation into the notion of institution. His earlier account of painting in "Eye and Mind" is less involved with tradition. In this work the focus is on the moment of the painter's vision. Consequently the painter is depicted as not obviously historically engaged. For example Merleau-Ponty writes: "precocious or belated, spontaneous or cultivated in museums, [the painter's]

them she gives birth to the painting[132] before she 'knows' the painting. The painter gives the painting a future which she has not fully in her power. Perception is this transformative opening up (birthing) of a vision which was prepared from within my own visible body (it was expected in it) while it simultaneously is a response to what it sees. This vision that is opened up in my body can neither be contained nor grasped by it.

Similarly, when I meet another person I encounter in her secret traces of a history, traditions and sedimentations of rituals and bodily rhythms which inspire me. Merleau-Ponty writes:

> [the body] clasps another body, applying [itself to it][133] carefully with its whole extension, forming tirelessly with its hands the strange statue which in its turn gives everything it receives…And henceforth movement, touch, vision, applying themselves to the other and to themselves, return toward their source. (VI 144/187)

In this imaginative quote Merleau-Ponty expresses how, like the artist, the person meeting another applies her own body to the other and starts to retrace this body. I encounter in her a calling that makes my body already respond to her. My body traces and interrogates this other body. But the other's body is not passive, just as the line that the painter traces is not totally passive either. Instead the other body also already has actively responded to me. It is the other body that *gives to me* as I give to her. Consequently the sculpting of the other body with my own movement, touch and vision resists, reverses, and changes also *my* movement and vision. This back-and-forth is the anonymous negotiation between the other and me. In this process of

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vision in any event *learns only by seeing and learns only from itself*" (EM 165/25).

132. "The painter's vision is a continued birth" (EM 168/32).

133. Inserted by editor Claude Lefort. These words had apparently been erased by error.

responding to the other, seeing her is giving her shape or giving birth to her. At the same time I am given shape (or I am birthed) by the other through her seeing of me. This co-birthing renews *both* our bodies.[134] Being a maternal body, the subject is faced with another's future that was expected from within her own body but can neither be contained nor foreseen. The other and I are present to each other as both an unpredictable future and a connection with the generative past.[135]

A final note on my endeavour to feminise Merleau-Ponty's philosophy: the notion of a maternal body that I introduce is not restricted to one's particular mother. That is, as embodied beings we can *all* be maternal bodies that respond to the other before we know her, even when we will never know her. This is not an uncontroversial issue. Tyler criticises the attempt to "propose…the pregnant woman, as a subjectivity which can serve as a model for both sexes" because it is in danger of reasserting "a paternal philosophical lineage."[136] She claims that adapting inherited philosophical models is adapting "*the same speech which has rendered women speechless.*"[137] I recognise this problem and the inherent difficulty of doing justice to the maternal subject without covering her up again under a generalist (masculinist) discourse. For example, it is important that the maternal dimension should not remain tied to the other alone, but instead it should also stress the subjecthood of the mother. We are all born from a

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134. Something similar happens to the painter. In an interview, Michel Foucault refers to such an experience of transformation when he asks: "why should a painter work if [s]he's not transformed by his [her] own painting?" Michel Foucault in conversation with Stephen Riggins in 1983. Published as "An Ethics of Pleasure" in *Foucault Live*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (New York: Semiotext(e), 1989), 379.

135. One might want to read this quote as describing a narcissistic body that shapes the other as her own. However to do so would overlook the response of the other. I discuss Narcissism in more detail in chapter five.

136. Tyler, "Reframing Pregnant Embodiment," 298.

137. Ibid. 298.

mother's body and to present her exclusively as 'the other' is to make her strange and to create a distance between all of us who are born from mothers and those 'creatures' who have actually given birth. I present the maternal dimension as a dimension of a pre-personal response, but also as a dimension of perception:[138] i.e., the maternal dimension is found in the gaze of the birthing subject that turns me into a *seen*-seer. Thus it is important also to discover the maternal *subject* who gives birth to and perceives the other. When speaking about the mother one has to recognise that the subject and the other can no longer be understood through easy to separate categories. With this in mind, I suggest that it is useful to rethink masculinist philosophies according to the maternal subject/other. First it importantly uncovers the maternal origin and *debt* of the particular philosophical theory; second it pushes the (masculinist) philosophical theory beyond its own boundaries and subverts, transforms, and renews them according to a feminist perspective; and finally, it also shows that we cannot *completely* disengage ourselves from this masculinist tradition. In this chapter I have shown that rejecting a tradition does not necessarily lessen its power to rupture the present. Consequently, it is useful to include, interrogate, and work with the tradition because this will give more opportunity to transform it.[139] This transformation will be continued in the next chapters.

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138. See section 3.2.3.2(i).

139. This is a hermeneutical point and similar to Gadamer's claim that "the hermeneutically trained mind…will make conscious the prejudices governing our own understanding, so that the text, as another's meaning, can be isolated and valued on its own" (*Truth and Method,* 299) but "a person who believes [she] is free of prejudices…experiences the power of prejudices that unconsciously dominate [her] as a *vis a tergo* [force acting from behind]" (ibid. 360).

The horizonal ground as flesh: ontological connections

The horizon is between me and other individuals. It is not object (HLP 35)[1]

To encounter another subject means that one takes part in a rhythmic negotiation between differing bodies. The subject speaks and listens, looks and feels being looked at, connects or disconnects to another body. Attuning to these other living bodies we are already in a relation with those others. Adding to the temporal rhythm discussed in the last chapter, this chapter begins with a discussion of the spatial rhythm of perceiving others, that is, I explore the *Gestalt*-structure that is central to Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of perception. This exploration begins with discovering the hidden horizons of our lives that can only become fully objects of our perception when they rise to the foreground as *figures*, which means that they lose their hidden dimension. I worry that Merleau-Ponty's early formulation of the *Gestalt* undoes some of the work that was already done in this thesis with respect to moving away from the subject-object structure of perception. In the first part of the chapter I argue that the *Gestalt* structure endows the subject with a possessive gaze on others. In the second part of the chapter I consider a more compelling reading of the *Gestalt* through uncovering its ontological structure. From the horizonal dimension that keeps withdrawing into invisibility (i.e., it is never in our grasp), I enquire into the ontological depth of experience. Doing so allows me further to explore Merleau-

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1. In the French edition this sentence is omitted.

Ponty's later and sometimes elusive ontology of the *flesh* through which he seeks to supplement and correct his earlier phenomenological account of perception.

This chapter is illustrative of Merleau-Ponty's search for the right concepts with which to open up the invisible structure of experience. As might be expected from Merleau-Ponty's critique of Hegel's dialectic, this search does not give us neatly divided categories and final concepts. Instead the invisible structure of perception will remain precisely (and fundamentally) secluded from our investigative look. I trace this hidden dimension by presenting in the second part of this chapter four major connections through which I tie Merleau-Ponty's complex ontological notions to each other: first, with Husserl's aid the withdrawing and hidden horizon is understood as a founding ground (4.2.2); second, Merleau-Ponty locates this foundation in the restless hollow [*écart*] of openness and divergence which makes perception possible (4.2.3); third, this opening is not a Sartrean nothingness but a 'fleshy' in-between of me and the world, or me and others (4.2.4); and finally, through a dialogue with Heidegger I present the flesh as an abyss which places us in an indecisive milieu from out of which differentiation becomes a possibility (4.2.4.2). From this ontological middle point of the flesh, in the final part of this chapter I return to the perceptual-ethical structure of the intersubjective encounter.

4.1 Limiting horizons

I am rooted in temporal and historical depth. I feel the solidity of my place, the horizon reveals to me my world, the earth supports me, and my roots are deep and keep me in place and connected to my cultural history, to the trunk of my ancestral

tree. I see her. She stands at a distance from me, her strong figure clad in green stands out against the grey townhouses. She paces, movement against the solid stone, she pauses to think while she almost disappears against the still lush bushes on the corner. Her movement cuts her loose and she walks back again, sharp outline against the grey. I meet her at this place, this location which is my city in which I have grown my roots and whose skyline frames all my thought. Now she is part of this horizon too. What does my city do to her and to my perception of her?

Perceiving the other, she appears in the temporal and spatial horizon of my life. Anthony Steinbock helpfully points out that the Greek origin of the word horizon can be found in the noun *horōs* and the verb *horízein*[2] which means respectively: boundary or limit, and, to divide, separate, to mark boundaries, to determine, or to define. These Greek meanings are telling because they signal that to have a horizon is not the same as having an unrestricted view. Instead, to have a horizon is already to have a limit, a boundary. That is, it already assumes that one is restricted in some sense. Because being in the horizon imposes a certain limit on us and binds us precisely to our place, the horizon also is what determines or defines everything that is with us in this horizon. It is because of our particular horizon that we interpret or define the world around us. Thus, I pose the problem of the first chapter anew. As living bodies we cannot soar over the world and have a bird's eye point of view of it, i.e., we cannot encompass in our perceptual field the whole of the world horizon because we are precisely *in* the horizon.

In the last chapter, the rhythm of institution was introduced as a temporal

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2. Steinbock, *Home and Beyond*, 109.

structure, the term 'horizon' used in this chapter carries a stronger *spatial* dimension. We find ourselves always already with*in* a horizon as something that *surrounds* us. This spatial notion of a horizon elaborates and complements the temporal notion of institution discussed in chapter three. However, it is not the case that the horizon should be thought in uniquely spatial terms and institution in uniquely temporal terms. For example, the spatial horizon is governed by the instituting rhythm of temporality because each institution is the opening up of a new horizon.[3]

The concept of the (spatial) horizon plays into the general question of this thesis: if by virtue of being embodied I am always already in a horizon, if in addition there is "a horizon in my body" (82n82/42n4), then can I ever meet other people within my horizon who are not already marked by my (bodily) definition or determination of them as "'my' others?"[4] In the last chapter, this question was partly answered in the assertion that replacing the constituting subject with the instituted subject opens up an indeterminable future for us and for others. No matter how I shape you with my horizonal habit body, I still cannot contain and determine you fully. However Merleau-Ponty's frequent use of the painting metaphor for institution indicates that one has a certain power over what one shapes and models. Thus while you might be present to me as an open future, that does not prevent me from seeing you now as a certain someone, i.e., as 'the provincial visiting my city'. This shaping of the other through the (limiting) horizon of my body and my life-world is discussed below.

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3. According to Merleau-Ponty, time and space are not to be thought apart from each other because space is temporalising and time is spatialising and *both* time and space are *Urstifted* simultaneously (VI 259/307).

4. Husserl, *Crisis*, 258/369.

4.1.1 *Gestalt* horizons

From the *Phenomenology* to his later work, Merleau-Ponty uses the terms horizon and background interchangeably in the context of discussing the relation of the figure to the ground. He writes for example: "The horizon [*l'horizon*] or background [*fond*] would not extend beyond the figure or round about it, unless they partook of the same kind of being as the figure, and unless they could be converted into points by the transference of the gaze"(PhP 102/132). In his 1961 lecture on Hegel he writes that consciousness carries with it "a horizon or a 'background'" (PnPH 44/310). He argues that the *Gestalt* notion of the figure-ground is the "very definition of the phenomenology of perception…[t]he perceptual something is always in the middle of something else" (PhP 4/26). This background, in the middle of which the 'perceptual something' is perceived, has a revealing function. As a revealing dimension the *Gestalt* determines or defines the figure in the full meaning of *horizein*. For example, in the well known vase/face illusion, the figure that is revealed changes depending on whether one takes the background to be solid white or black. Another example, Hering's optical illusion reveals a slightly crooked square against a background of circles. Changing the circles for a blank background reveals the *same* square as being composed of straight lines.
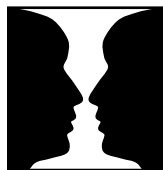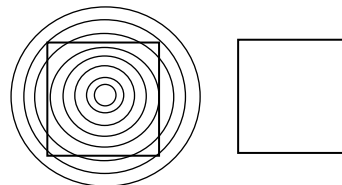

Fig. 1 Face/Vase Illusion   Fig. 2 Hering's Optical Illusion

Peculiar to the *Gestalt* notion of a background is that with a shift of attention, 'the transference of the gaze', it can be made an object of perception as it moves to the foreground of my perception. One glance can be enough to make the horizon be the *figure* of our perception. I might not now be aware of the abundance of flowers on my desk, but with a simple shift I can make them the object of my attention. The same happens with sound (the dripping melting snow, the gawking geese) or memory (the weather-report I just saw). Being in the background, these items exert a pull on me to which at anytime I can give in and make the flower, the sound, the memory, the focus of my attention.[5] In this way the background can be objectified and described, it can be named and through my ability to shift my attention, the effect that the background might have on the foreground can be explained. For example, if my writing now is experienced as a much more pleasant process than yesterday, then maybe the background that predicts the coming spring adds that typical springlike hope and excitement to my writing. On a related note, if I see a particular figure, such as the square in Hering's optical illusion as slightly distorted and fail to see it otherwise, then I can understand and theorise why my perception is restrictively and manipulatively tied to one perspective by paying attention to the background of circles. Even if the influence of the background is so strong that I cannot perceive the initial foreground outside of that which is prefigured by the background, I can theoretically still reflect upon and conceive of the mechanism in play.

That this *Gestalt* structure has a rhythm is evident when one attends to the temporal oscillation between the figure and the ground: shifting my gaze to another

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5. See also Husserl's *Analyses Concerning Passive and Active Synthesis,* 196.

location foregrounds the previous background and creates a new horizon against which this new figure stands out. Retaining the previous horizon as a temporal/historical horizon from which the new figure-ground structure stands out, there is an ever renewing trail of horizons of experience. There is rhythmicity to this background-foreground exchange in which things withdraw into the background and appear into the foreground in an ever changing temporal oscillation between my gaze and my surroundings. The horizon is subject to this temporal rhythm, but it also has a certain spatialising rhythm *within* itself when "figure and ground turn around one another."[6] The horizon is the background in the middle of which something stands out to me. The background reveals the figure when it retreats from it. The figure in the focal point of my attention rises up from its background. Moving away from each other, background and figure *belong* to each other and should not be understood as an oppositional pair. The figure indicates that it is present from within a background, the background points to the figure such that my gaze finds it. The figure and the ground are rhythmically related when they turn about one another, a to-and-fro rhythm of the spatial configuration of my perception. The horizon as background thus forms a whole together with the figure, such that they are always present together. To separate them would be to cut apart perception and to render it blind; it would paralyse the perceptual world such that nothing would stand out any longer.[7]

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6. Barbaras, *Being of the Phenomenon,* 179.

7. Interestingly, when determining the return of a rudimentary sense of awareness in patients in a vegetative state, one assesses precisely their ability to pick out a figure from a ground. One assesses whether a patient is able to pick out a differing tone from a background of monotonous beeps. This is a prepersonal/automatic reaction which is detected through measuring electrical brain potentials (ERP's), in particular the Mismatch Potential (N200), which comes 100ms before the 'recognition'

4.1.2 Communal horizons

As indicated by Merleau-Ponty, my life is essentially structured according to the *Gestalt* structure. Thus it should not come as a surprise that my encounter with the other is also based on a *Gestalt* structure. In the previous example, the woman in green is a *Gestalt* in the simple understanding of being a body that stands out or disappears against a grey or green background. In addition she is a *Gestalt* standing out as a subject against a social, historical and cultural horizon. In both these notions of the *Gestalt* the horizon has a limiting and determining effect on the figure that is revealed. The horizon as background reveals a figure, a living body, in its particularity as 'such and such', for example as 'a provincial in an unknown city'. These examples show that what we normally call a 'background' can take on diverse forms. That is, a background can be sensory (visual, auditory, olfactory, or tactile), it can be a memory, a social convention, or a cultural sphere, and all these backgrounds overlap and fuse in revealing a figure to me. Thus the horizons which are the background of my life are multiple and not necessarily independent of each other. Living in the world I am usually engaged and interested in the figure to such an extent that the different backgrounds do not enter into my explicit awareness of the world. The different horizons of our lives describe me as a child of such and such era, such and such a geography, such and such a class, as a particular gender, nationality, etc. All these different bodily, social, public, and personal backgrounds can be named, studied, and schematised more or less easily. This thematisation of 'horizons' or backgrounds is

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potential (P300) that is associated with *conscious* recognition only. See for example R. Näätänen, *Attention and Brain Function*, Hilsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1992; and R. Näätänen and K. Alho "Mismatch negativity: A unique measure of sensory processing in audition," *International Journal of Neuroscience* 80 (1995): 317-337.

precisely what is the subject area of many academic disciplines as they bring to the foreground a horizon in order to make it the object of a study. For example, with respect to the past lives of others, one could determine such horizons, enclose these in conceptual chains, and theorise about the manner in which these horizons have affected the life of this person. This also means that thematising a background is possible but it is not necessarily and usually easy to carry out such an analysis.[8]

Most important for our perception of others is the background that is formed by the community in which I live. In the previous chapter I argued that we are always already in relation to other human beings, instituted in a world that is always already there also for others. Husserl expresses a similar thought when he writes that in order for *Stiftung* to be possible the horizon of my life needs to be a horizon of fellow humans, a horizon that places me in the world already demarcated by the social dimension of belonging to a community. Husserl's description of the horizon in "The Origin of Geometry" functions here as a background. I quote Husserl at length:

> Before even taking notice of it at all, we are conscious of the open horizon of our fellow men [*Mitmenschen*] with its limited nucleus of our neighbours, those known to us. We are thereby coconscious of the men on our external horizon in each case as 'others'; in each case 'I' am conscious of them as 'my' others, as those with whom I can enter into actual and potential, immediate and mediate connections of empathy; [this involves] a reciprocal 'getting along' with others; and on basis of these connections I can deal with them, enter into particular modes of community with them, and then know, in a habitual way, of my being so related.[9]

This horizon of *Mitmenschenheit* comprises of the actual human beings who are in our

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8. See also Husserl on the "single indivisible, interrelated complex of life" (*Crisis,* 149/152).
9. Husserl, *Crisis,* 358/369.

direct surroundings (our neighbours and acquaintances), who co-determine my communal world, and who can be thematised and made to be the object of my perception. While I might not notice it, they are the background of my perception and of my habits in the world on the basis of which I enter into relationships. I expand on Husserl's observation by connecting it to the discussion in the last chapter. In chapter three I emphasised the importance of thematising origins and in particular, I brought to the foreground the maternal origin of our birth. Born into *Mitmenschenheit* from our mothers, it is particularly important to recognise as real the (m)others who are already there and to whom I have already responded, even if they might no longer actually be around. Having already responded to these others, my body has been habituated to them. Thus while I might not yet be able to reflect (as an infant) or I might not *now* reflect on it (as an adult involved in the world), my world is always already 'also for others'. I 'know' this through having a habit body which is above all social, which smiles and nods, which imitates, attunes, and utters customary greetings to others before I have even thought of interacting with the other person. To be born from the maternal other means that one is born into a social horizon that shapes the horizon through the formation of habits.[10]

4.1.2.1 The Gestalt as objectifying structure

Up until now, the reading of the *Gestalt* is based on a relatively straightforward but problematic account of the *Gestalt*. The problem is that this notion of *Gestalt* relies strongly on the subject-object distinction. The ground that lets a figure stand out and

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10. Merleau-Ponty describes the horizon as familiarity and style (HLP 35/41).

thereby determines or limits it, is not beyond the subject's gaze as it can be transformed into an object of her perception. Thus this ground can be *objectified, known* and *possessed* by the perceiving subject. This also means that both the figure and the ground are subject to my ability and willingness to divert my gaze and make something the object of my attention. For example, both the woman who is pacing up and down and the city backdrop can at any time become objects of *my* probing perception. There is no longer a significant difference between the figure and the ground because both of them are possible objects of perception: the figure is an *actual* object and the ground is a *potential* (not *yet* actual) object of perception.

In addition, according to this reading of the *Gestalt*, meaning would be created in my world by a frontal and constitutive intentionality that places me at the centre of this world. Through objectifying the background I can explore and give full meaning to how the different objects in my perceptual field appear to me. By moving my gaze back and forth between the figure (the pacing woman) and the background (my city)[11] I would acquire a fuller understanding of how she appears to me as 'provincial': I could locate it in the way in which she is different from the city dwellers, in her posture, in the way she moves and in the manner in which she is dressed. One could say that the city has produced her as 'a provincial', but since this city is also an object of my perception (it is *my city*), it is better to say that it is my gaze that has apprehended (or grasped) her as provincial.

In what follows I suggest a more complex and compelling reading of the

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11. The 'city' in this example refers to a complex totality of buildings, infrastructures and urban dwellers who have settled into this urban structure, their style of living, their culture, the way they move around, etc. Drawing on Edward Casey and Elisabeth Grosz, Gail Weiss explores the "dynamic relationship between bodies and cities" in her chapter "Urban Flesh," in Olkowski and Weiss, *Feminist Interpretations of Maurice Merleau-Ponty,* 164.

Gestalt, which makes me lose control over the play between the background and the figure. This complex reading emerges from an important phenomenological question which is well recounted by David Michael Levin who writes that the question for a postmetaphysical phenomenology is: "can the perceptual field, the ground of perception, be *released* from our historical compulsion to represent it in a way that accommodates our will to power and its needs to totalize and reify the presencing of being? In other words: Can the ground be experienced *as* ground?"[12] The problem of the objectifying vision is that the *thematised* background ceases to be a founding ground once it is drawn forward to become the focal point of my probing vision. When I can always grasp the background, then am *I* not truly the founding power of my world? Levin reminds us that a background is only really a *back*ground when it continually draws *back* from my totalising gaze. Together with Levin I ask the question: how do I experience this ground that constantly retreats from my gaze? In order to formulate the beginning of an answer to this question it is necessary to leave behind the possessive gaze of the subject that holds onto the figure. Consequently this requires us to rethink the *Gestalt* beyond the centrality of the perceiving subject.

In *The Visible and the Invisible* the *Gestalt* remains an important concept for Merleau-Ponty. He writes that "the figure on a ground…contains the key to the problem of the mind" (VI 192/243) but he now adds that the *Gestalt* places us *outside* the philosophy of subject and object (VI 207/260). This dis-possession of the Gestalt is accomplished on the level of ontology when he writes:

My body *is* a *Gestalt* and it is co-present in every *Gestalt*…it is flesh…The

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12. David Michael Levin, *The Philosopher's Gaze: Modernity in the Shadows of Enlightenment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 175.

> *Gestalt* therefore implies a relation between the perceiving body and a sensible, i.e., transcendent i.e., horizonal i.e., vertical and not perspectival world…There remains to understand precisely what the being for itself of the *Gestalt* experience is— —It is being for X, not a pure agile nothingness, but an inscription in an open register, in a lake of non-being, in an *Eroffnung*, in an *offene*. (VI 205-6/255-6)

In this rich quote Merleau-Ponty describes how the *Gestalt* signifies the relation between my body which sees and that which is seen, but this time he means more than to say that my body has a perspective and thus brings with it a horizon from which it perceives a figure as standing out. As he writes this in his final work, he has moved away from a phenomenology of the body to the ontology of the *flesh*. Consequently the *Gestalt* now refers to the transcendental, vertical, and horizonal flesh that goes beyond the perceiving body. In the second part of this chapter, I explore this notion of '*Gestalt* as flesh' by passing through some of Merleau-Ponty's main articulations of the ontological field. Initially widening the scope beyond our determining gaze in order to make the 'horizon of horizons' reveal itself, the discussion traverses towards the hidden depth of being which retreats into a fundamental openness and grounds all experience. Throughout this discussion I revisit the notion of the *Gestalt* in order to unearth what the '*Gestalt* as flesh' means for understanding encounters between subjects.

4.2 Thinking towards the flesh

4.2.1 The horizon of horizons

The notion 'horizon', I argue, has two different senses: (i) as argued above, our perception has a figure-background structure in which the horizon can be

understood as an objectifiable background; and (ii) as argued below, these figure-background structures are made possible through the fundamental ground that remains in retreat, and thus remains hidden. This is the 'horizon of horizons'. Dillon's discussion of Merleau-Ponty's notion of the horizon is helpful here. Dillon makes a distinction between different horizons, some of which can be thematised and objectified while the 'horizon of all horizons' cannot be thematised. He draws here on a distinction that Merleau-Ponty makes as early as the *Phenomenology* when he writes that the natural world is "the horizon of horizons the style of all possible styles, which guarantees for my experiences a given, not a willed, unity underlying all the disruptions of my personal and historical life" (PhP 330/381). The horizon of horizons is a general unifying dimension that is not in my own (will) power but instead it is the condition of possibility for the more personal and particular horizons or backgrounds of my life. While it is possible to thematise *some* horizons as my personal style or as my historical horizon, Dillon argues that these thematisations of past and present horizons "presuppose contextualisation within an encompassing horizon which remains relatively indeterminate and conceptually elusive."[13] These contextual horizons or backgrounds are revealed from within the 'horizon of horizons'. The notion of the horizon of horizons, Dillon argues, is Merleau-Ponty's most close adherence to something like an absolute.[14] It is the general and nonthematised condition of possibility for other horizons to stand out as backgrounds and styles. To use a Merleau-Pontian expression, the horizon of horizons is the *in*visible of the visible: it is what remains hidden from our gaze but at

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13. Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology,* 79.
14. Ibid.

the same time makes possible perception. In order to be clear and not conflate the two, in this thesis I refer to this general unifying horizon as the *horizon of horizons* and I refer to the subject-centred horizon either in conjunction with the notion *background or* as a *particular* horizon, e.g., the historical horizon, the political horizon, or the horizon of our fellow human beings.

The ground for making this distinction between 'horizon of horizons' and the horizon understood as a background is found in the later works of both Merleau-Ponty and Husserl. However both thinkers also conflate this distinction and apply the term 'horizon' to both the perspectival concept of background and the ontological notion of the horizon of horizons. This substitution of terms at times greatly confuses the explications of the more ontological notion of horizon in their work. In this chapter I do not intend to give a complete interpretation of each of Merleau-Ponty's references to the horizon in either of these categories. Rather my aim is to show first that there *is* a more general notion of the horizon as a 'horizon of horizons', and second to think through this notion to its ultimate ontological and 'fleshy' consequences.

Husserl argues in the *Crisis* that all conceptual backgrounds find their origin in the all-encompassing foundation of the world-horizon.[15] He adds that we can speak about several particular internal and external horizons that determine and thus reveal an actual figure to me as dark, small, beautiful, meaningful, etc. These different backgrounds can be thematised, discussed, and interpreted. Contrary to this possibility to objectify the background, Husserl argues that it is not possible for the

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15. Husserl refers to a notion that comes close to the 'horizon of horizons' when he speaks of a "*world-horizon*" (*Crisis,* 143/146) or a "universal unthematic horizon" (ibid., 145/148).

world-horizon to become an object for my perception. The world-horizon is the grounding soil or the subsoil of a general structure that was there before any objective, scientific, or otherwise thematisable horizon was constituted.[16] It is the unique dimension that *reveals* and grounds us in an anonymous realm of experiences.[17] Husserl stresses that it would not make sense to apply to the world-horizon grammatical forms such as the plural or the singular as it is an all-founding ground.[18] Thus while I can compare the effect of different backgrounds I cannot do the same for the world-horizon which is incomparable and subject-relative.[19] Thus to make the world-horizon an aggregate of others (as the horizon of our 'fellow human beings' would be an aggregate of the particular people who are around us, i.e., our neighbours)[20] would be to misconstrue it as something that (i) has certain objective properties, and (ii) is the plural form of a singular object because an aggregate of others is founded on multiplication of the *one* other. Therefore it would violate two of the aspects by which the world-horizon is described: that it cannot be objectified or thematised and that the categories plural or singular have no hold over it.

Merleau-Ponty follows Husserl when he writes that the ontological horizon cannot be an "aggregate of things or external beings" but rather that it is *prior* to the particular and thus "prior to the thesis of such or such humans, such or such communities, such or such *Einfühlung*" (HLP 35/42).[21] Contrary to Husserl who

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16. Ibid*.,* 121-2/124, 124/127, 131/134.
17. Ibid*.,* 112-3/115.
18. Ibid., 143/146.
19. Ibid., 131/133. See also Steinbock, *Home and Beyond,* 107.
20. Ibid., 158/369.
21. Merleau-Ponty speaks here of a 'horizon of humanity'. Because of the way he describes it one needs to keep in mind that the horizon of humanity is not the same as the horizon of our fellow human beings. In the latter case this does involve the particular people that are usually around us, in

presents the world-horizon as a subject-relative ground, Merleau-Ponty emphasises that the horizon of horizons is not my *own:* he writes that the ontological horizon is not an object but it is an openness to reality as a possibility[22] which is *not a "potentiality of consciousness"* (VI 149/193) itself. This horizon is no longer exclusively my own accomplishment, i.e., it is not my particular (constituted) horizon and it is not *my* history and geography as if I *owned* it. Instead I am myself included in this horizon, I *participate* in this being of generality which reigns over me and reaches to the furthest horizon unto the utmost depth of being.

In order better to understand what is the 'horizon of horizons', it is important to stress that the horizon which is never an object for our perception is still a *revealing* dimension. Steinbock argues that Husserl's world-horizon, which escapes substantial thematisation, indicatively points away from itself.[23] By making the world-horizon an *indication* Steinbock returns to Husserl's first logical investigation in which Husserl introduces the distinction between indicative signs and meaningful expressions. It is helpful to return to that text to make sense of the description of the horizon as indicatively pointing away from itself. Husserl writes that a sign [*Zeichen*] is a certain object or state of affairs "of whose reality someone has actual knowledge"[24] that indicates [*anzeigen*] and points [*zeigen*] away from itself to another object or state of affairs, but by itself, without this motivating relation it does not signify anything.

the former Merleau-Ponty refers to a general notion of a horizon that comes before the particular.

22. "*Möglichkeit an Wirklichkeit*" (HLP 36/42). Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty diverts from Husserl when he follows the horizon of horizons to its *ontological* consequences while Husserl sets aside the question of the ontology of the life-world in favour of unravelling the structure and the necessity of his phenomenological *epochē* (Husserl, *Crisis,* 142/145, 173/176).

23. Steinbock, *Home and Beyond*, 107.

24. Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations,* trans. J.N. Findlay (London Routledge, 1970), 270. First published in German, 1900-01. See also Steinbock, *Home and Beyond*, 270.

Steinbock argues that the horizon points in this same way. I add that while this analogy might be helpful for understanding the pointing function of the horizon, the analogy only goes so far. It should not be implied from this analogy that the horizon is an actual *sign* the reality of which we have knowledge about as we would have knowledge about an object. The horizon as sign assumes that it can be an object for our consciousness in the same way that a flag can be the object of our perception while at the same time pointing away from itself to the nation whose flag it is. While Steinbock discusses the horizon as having an indicative function he does not claim it is a sign in the way a flag is a sign. He writes that the horizon is that which *retreats* in order for the things, and their backgrounds, to be revealed. The shift of my glance therefore is not able to capture this horizon. Instead, in my attempt to reveal this horizon it has already retreated. This retreating horizonal dimension of experience is truly the invisible structure of the visible because I can never lay my eyes on it and make it the centre of my attention. I thus emphasise that as a retreating dimension the horizon of horizons is precisely not a sign but rather the horizon of horizons is the hidden condition of possibility of there being objects, i.e., foregrounds *and* backgrounds at all. The horizon of horizons continually points away from itself and in its retreating brings us back to the depth of being.

Twice now I have mentioned that the horizon of horizons brings us back to the *depth* of being. This ontological understanding of the horizon of horizons is summed up by Merleau-Ponty when he writes:

> no more than the sky or the earth is the horizon a collection of things held together, or a class name, or a logical possibility of conception, or a system of 'potentiality of consciousness': it 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 being.* (VI 149/193 my emphasis)

The horizon that reigns 'unto the depths of being' is no longer a limiting horizon that is the background (a thematisable 'collection'). Instead it is a dimension of being, a 'new type of being' in which the subject participates. In *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology*, Merleau-Ponty ends his discussion of institution and horizons with a discussion of precisely this theme. The theme of philosophy, he writes, is the 'horizon of horizons' which is not found in the height of the ideas but rather requires an archaeological search for the ground, a going into the *depths* (HLP 67/81). In the following section I continue to explore this ontological domain of generality connecting these two threads: the horizon of horizons and the depth of the earth.

4.2.2 First connection: from the horizon to the earth

The idea that there is always one encompassing horizon that includes all the other conceptualised horizons shows parallels with the Husserlian idea that there is only one earth that grounds all surfaces on which I live and move. Husserl expresses this notion of the 'one earth' in his essay "Foundational Investigations of the Phenomenological Origin of the Spatiality of Nature: The Originary Ark, the Earth, Does not Move."[25] Significantly, Merleau-Ponty concludes his discussion of the horizon by commenting on this text: "I am on a flying machine; it is my *Boden*. One day I discover it is not my true *Boden*…So be it. But then this is accepted in order to

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25. Edmund Husserl, "Foundational Investigations of the Phenomenological Origin of the Spatiality of Nature: The Originary Ark, the Earth, Does not Move," translated by Fred Kersten and Leonard Lawlor, in Merleau-Ponty, *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology,* 117-131.

carry the *Boden* function back to somewhere else: it is first my Earth; then it is something else; but there is always one Earth" (HLP 72/87). While there has been ample interest in Merleau-Ponty's reading of Husserl's geometry lecture, it is the reading of the earth lecture that leads Merleau-Ponty to unearth a foundation for his ontology. Consequently, I agree with Leonard Lawlor when he argues that "The Earth does not Move" is a crucially important Husserlian text for Merleau-Ponty.[26]

Steinbock understands this Husserlian 'earth' as a primordial home for the historical subject, a home made out of stories, traditions, myths and rituals. He writes that this earthly gravity is part of my body structure, my breath and my heart.[27] These references to breath and heart emphasise the rhythmic element of the earthly ground. My breath expands and reduces the capacity of my lungs, it rhythmically inhales and exhales oxygen; my heart similarly throbs and pushes blood rhythmically though my body. Steinbock argues that the cultural and historical rhythms get to be re-played in my bodily rhythm of breath and heart, which reciprocally means that "my historicity is structured by the rhythms of my body."[28] Below I challenge this interpretation of the earth. The earth, and by extension the horizon of horizons, I argue, is *not yet rhythm* and *not yet personalised* into my historical/geographical and embodied existence.

Husserl writes that the "earth does not move; perhaps I may even say that it is at rest"[29] and later he writes: "The earth is the ark which makes possible in the first place the sense of all motion and all rest as a mode of motion. *But its rest is not a mode*

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26. Leonard Lawlor, *Thinking Through French Philosophy: The Being of the Question* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 5.
27. Steinbock, *Home and Beyond*, 119.
28. Ibid, 119.
29. Husserl, "Foundational Investigations," 122.

of motion."[30] In order to understand the peculiar 'rest' of the earth, it is helpful to realise that rest and motion generally go together in the same manner in which the figure and the background of the *Gestalt* always go together and cannot be thought without each other: motion differentiates itself from rest, and rest is unmoving precisely because it is not in motion.[31] Husserl tells us that the 'rest' of the earth does not fit into this usual rhythmic exchange of rest and motion. I suggest that the earth is precisely *not rhythmic* in the same sense as the particular sedimentations, traditions, stories, and rituals that are part of the rhythmic institution of my life, instead it is 'at rest'. Merleau-Ponty further explains this peculiar notion of 'rest' when he writes that the primordial earth should not be understood as the physical earth but rather that it is "the source Being, the *Stamm und Klotz* being, in pre-restfulness" (*'pre-repos'*, HLP 76/92).[32] The earth is thus 'at rest' in '*pre*-restfulness' and consequently the earth is *before* rest. The rest of the earth is therefore neither the same as a passive restfulness nor as the activity of restless movement. On the contrary, pre-restfulness is also pre-rest*less*ness because it comes before any rest, or movement has yet begun. Pre-restfulness, as I use it here, is *neither rest nor movement* and thus it is beyond the simple rest-movement distinction that can only exist together.

It is helpful to connect the earth which is a 'pre-restful source being' to the notion of the horizon of horizons which reveals as it retreats. As argued above, the

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30. Ibid., 130, my emphasis.
31. The rest-motion structure is more than similar to the *Gestalt* structure of perception, it is part of the *Gestalt* structure as motion or rest can differentiate a figure from a ground
32. Earlier I showed that Merleau-Ponty does not think that we can find the absolute beginning, there is no "prehistory" (IP 61), but rather there is just an opening as departure from. The 'source being' which is mentioned here is not a pre-historical immovable source, or absolute beginning. It is a source that is neither the beginning nor the end, but instead it is a hovering, a suspension that takes place before the rhythmic relation of beginnings and ends has begun. See further in this chapter (4.2.5).

ontological structure of the horizon of horizons should be understood as a *retreat* that at the same time points *towards* the figure-ground structure of the *Gestalt*. This means that the horizon of horizons is also pre-restful (simultaneously retreating and pointing forwards) in order to be able to reveal the figure-ground structure of our perception. Now I deepen this insight by noting that the ontological structure of the primordial earth is the same as that of the horizon of horizons: the earth is pre-restful in order to be the *ground* of the rhythmic rest-motion structure of our perception; the horizon of horizons is pre-restful while *revealing* the rhythmic figure-ground structure of our perception. Both the earth and the horizon of horizons are thus *not yet* rhythmic or particular, but instead their pre-restfulness makes possible and reveals the rhythms of our perceptual life.

More needs to be said on how the non-rhythmic pre-restfulness of the earth and the retreating-pointing of the horizon of horizons should be understood. I suggest that 'retreating-pointing' and 'pre-restfulness' are related because they both signify a tension that is not yet movement/activity and not yet rest/passivity. This becomes clear when one notices that a 'retreat' implies a movement backwards or a going away, whereas a pointing implies a movement forward, a bringing of something before our attention. Due to these two movements, the withdrawal and the advance, the horizon or earth *remains* in its retreating-pointing and thus it does not really move away after all. The two movements that belong to it are at 'rest' in their opposition. A key point to understanding pre-restfulness is the following: the 'rest/passivity' of the horizon of horizons maintains a tension between movements which also means that this 'rest' is not completely passive, but rather it means that

activity already belongs to it. Merleau-Ponty notes that this belonging of activity to passivity should be understood as 'whirlwind', or 'hollow' (HLP 42/51). This description makes sense when one remembers that there is a peculiar hollow in the very heart of a whirlwind. In the core of the active flow, there is a hollow of rest which is not really restful because it extends into the extreme acceleration of the rotating winds. This 'restless-rest' is a passivity to which an activity belongs such that it is *neither activity nor passivity*.[33] Before passivity and activity, the horizon of horizons and the unmovable earth should be understood as the hollow in the whirlwind that is in pre-restfulness.

4.2.3 Second connection: from pre-restful foundation to hollow (*écart*)

To describe the foundation of experience in terms of a whirlwind is instructive in several ways. First it expresses well how activity and passivity belong together and it helps envisioning the ontological pre-restfulness which grounds all experience. Second it describes an extreme lack at the core of the whirlwind that is at the same time turmoil or excess. The whirlwind as an excess means also that the lack or the hollow at the centre of the whirlwind does not signify an absolute nothing, i.e., the hollow of the whirlwind should not be understood as a complete *absence*. Against Sartre Merleau-Ponty writes that "nothingness is hollow and not hole…there is no nichtiges nichts…The true solution: *Offenheit of the Umwelt, horizonthaftigkeit*" (VI 196/246-7, my emphasis). Merleau-Ponty underlines here that the foundational retreat does not signify the nothingness of the hole which is annihilation. Instead it

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33. Merleau-Ponty writes: "'gehört.' To be understood as 'whirlwind' as 'hollow'—therefore neither as passive nor as active" (HLP 42/51).

retreats into a hollow which is both openness and 'horizonality'. That is, the hollow has a *horizonal* dimension of drawing back into a lack (retreating) while opening up (revealing) towards an excess, or better, it is simultaneously lack and excess, i.e., it is a whirlwind of being. In a working note on Gurwitsch's philosophy Merleau-Ponty writes that "the horizon is not extension of the zone of clear vision where these structures are realised: it is the milieu of these crystallised structures, their pre-intentional *Worin*… it [the horizon] is the total being where differentiation arises and dedifferentiation falls back."[34] The horizon of horizons is the ontological in-between[35] which makes possible the particular and definite structures of our life, it is the hollow or the opening from out of which the sedimented (crystallised) backgrounds of my life are disclosed and differentiation becomes a possibility.

Now we can begin to understand better what is at stake here and why both notions, the horizon of horizons and the pre-restful earth, are important in the context of this thesis. They are ontological notions that describe a fundamental openness that is not yet sedimented and as such this openness makes possible for new being or difference to break forth. As openness, the nothingness of the hollow is "a possibility for separation [*écart*]…it is the advent of difference" (VI 217/266).

The negativity which is not a void is described by Merleau-Ponty as an *écart* which translates in English as: separation, gap, distance, spread, or divergence. The notion of the *écart* is of crucial importance in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological

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34. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Reading Notes and Comments on Aron Gurwitsch's *The Field of Consciousness,*" ed. Stéphanie Ménasé, trans. Elizabeth Locey and Ted Toadvine, *Husserl Studies* 17 (2001): 182. "Notes de lectures et commentaires sur théorie du champ de la conscience de Aron Gurwitsch," *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 3 (1997): 332-333.
35. It is the 'milieu'. Lawlor writes *mi-lieu* in *Thinking Through French Philosophy,* 33. A potential problem with this description is that *mi-lieu* implies a place where there is none.

ontology as he writes that "perception is spread [écart]" (VI 168/220). Notice that the phenomenology of perception was first foremost defined by the figure-ground structure of the *Gestalt* (see 4.1.1), now perception is defined by the 'spread', or the 'in-between' of the figure and ground. This spread makes possible both figure and ground by separating them. Vision is still based on the *Gestalt* structure of perception, but it has now obtained a deeper ontological dimension. The écart makes vision possible because it is the divergence and the distance that is required in order to see: "When the embryo's organism starts to perceive…it is that the vortex of the embryogenesis suddenly centers itself upon the interior hollow it was preparing— — a certain fundamental divergence, a certain constitutive dissonance emerges" (VI 233-34/282). The *écart is what brings distance* between the perceiver and the perceived and between the figure and the ground such that perception is possible. It is important to note that in this quote the divergence is not being prepared by the perceiver herself. Instead it is the vortex (the whirlwind) which does the hollowing out. More explicitly one reads: "This separation (*écart*) which, in first approximation, forms meaning, *is not a no I affect myself with*, a lack which I constitute…it is a natural negativity, a first institution, always already there" (VI 216/266).[36] Thus the ontological investigation in this chapter supports the phenomenological conclusion of chapter three that removed the subject out of the centre of the world: the hollow which reveals the world to me as difference and which is the condition of possibility for meaning is not an opening that I have created myself. I am not the trigger of the whirlwind and I have not dug the hollow in the earth. The hollow is always already

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36. This remark uncovers at last a first institution.

there as a 'natural negativity' in which I find myself. The first institution is a divergence that is the birth place of perception; it is the zero-point, or *milieu* (in-between) of perceptual experience that is not constituted by the subject in her own body.[37] What this exploration of the hollowing depth has revealed is that the zero-point that first was located in my *body*[38] has been relocated unto ontological grounds: the subject is no longer the zero-point of perception but instead the subject is instituted *within* this horizonal and earthly zero-point that is the hollow of being, or the whirlwind.

The renewed thinking of the *Gestalt*, I quoted above, is "not a pure agile nothingness, but an inscription in an open register, in a lake of non-being, in an *Eroffnung*, in an *Offene*" (VI 206/256). We now understand better what Merleau-Ponty means here. The *Gestalt* is no longer merely thought of as the grounding structure of object perception, but instead it is itself 'grounded' (inscribed) in the diverging openness of the hollow. In addition, the new notion of the *Gestalt* does not find its origin in the perceiving subject, but instead the perceiving subject finds her 'ground' in this structure of openness and divergence. The *Gestalt* still "implies a relation between the perceiving body and a sensible" (VI 205/255), but this relation is no longer understood as a perspective that can be varied at will by the perceiver. Instead the perceiver and the perceived are related by a disruptive distance that opens up between them and between the figure and ground of perception. It is important that this dimension is fundamentally imperceptible. If it were not so, then it would just be

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37. On the 'initial opening' as 'the zero of being', see also Daniela Vallega-Neu, *The Bodily Dimension in Thinking,* Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005; 70-73.
38. See chapter one (1.1.2).

another potential object of perception and thus it would lose its productive and disruptive power. Perception is destabilised by this hidden dimension because it is grounded on a volatile openness. It is also important that the perceiving subject is no longer understood as possessively grasping the other by shifting her gaze and making totally visible what was previously out of sight. The ontological Gestalt-structure remains hidden because it is the retreating distance (*écart*) through which the other is revealed to the perceiving subject. Because of this distance, the other is never totally visible for the subject and thus she can never be fully possessed by the subject. She always remains 'at a certain distance' from the subject and therefore she remains separated in difference.

4.2.4 Third connection: from the hollow to the folding of the flesh

Merleau-Ponty writes about the divergence that makes possible differentiation that it is "not a void, it is filled precisely by the *flesh* as the place of an emergence of a vision" (VI 272/320, my emphasis). This quote brings us to the next step in our explorations into the ontological dimension. That is, the separation that grounds perception is not an absolute empty severance, or an in-between that cuts two terms wholly lose from each other. The rhythmic flow of the world, of bodies slipping into each other, is still in play. The crucial point is that the hollow that separates is at the same time a connection, a place of union. Merleau-Ponty refers to the 'flesh' in order to describe this peculiar union that encompasses a separation.

Although the flesh is the principal term of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological ontology it has remained one of the most conceptually elusive and complex of his

terms. The work in progress that is *The Visible and the Invisible* shows how Merleau-Ponty searches to find a good name for that 'which "has no name in any philosophy" and is the "element of Being" (VI 147/191, 139/181). Merleau-Ponty struggles with explicating this ontological notion that should overcome the personalistic dualism that is firmly sedimented in traditional philosophical thought.[39] Initially he inadvertently ends up reaffirming dualism by proposing descriptions for the flesh that merely integrate two moments in one larger moment. For example, he writes about the flesh as "two halves of an orange," "two leafs", or two phases of a circle.[40] Later Merleau-Ponty describes the flesh more successfully in less binary terminology such as: a thickness, vortex, hollow, or fold, it is the 'in-between' that is the dimension of the hidden, the invisible of the visible, or the element of being.[41] In this list one recognises some of the notions and movements that were already discussed in this chapter and the previous chapters. Before complicating the understanding of the flesh in dialogue with Heidegger, below I introduce the flesh through one of the better known descriptions of it: the flesh as exemplified by my touching-touched body.

4.2.4.1 Double touching

The flesh is generally understood as Merleau-Ponty's alternative to a dualistic

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39. Merleau-Ponty notes: "say that I must show that what one might consider to be psychology (*Phenomenology of Perception*) is in fact ontology" (VI 176/228), and, "results of Ph.P.— —necessity of bringing them to ontological explication" (VI 183/234).

40. VI 133/174, 137/178, 138/180. For a discussion on these problematic images of the flesh see Galen A. Johnson, "Inside and Outside: Ontological Considerations," in *Interiority and Exteriority, Psychic Life and the World,* ed. Dorothea Olkowski and James Morley (Albany: SUNY press, 1999), 22-34.

41. See respectively, VI 264/312, 244/293, 151/195, 146/189, 219/268, 247/295, 139/182.

metaphysics. Through the flesh he aims to overcome the subject-centred phenomenology of the *Phenomenology of Perception*. In the *Visible and the Invisible* the subject is taken out of the centre of perception and is no longer a sole meaning constituting ego (or consciousness). I have argued this several times throughout the previous chapters. When my response to the things is a response that was already called for before I know it, then it is no longer clear who is the commander: my look or the things (or the others) that I look at. Consequently Merleau-Ponty wonders: "What is this prepossession of the visible, this art of interrogating it according to *its own wishes*, this inspired exegesis? We would perhaps find the answer in the tactile palpation where the questioner and the questioned are closer, and of which, after all, the palpation of the eye is a remarkable variant" (VI 133/173, my emphasis). Throughout his writing life Merleau-Ponty has been concerned with the double touching of the body, this appealing Husserlian example of the sensing-sensible body.[42] My kinship with the world, my relationship with the things that I can touch is based on this double touching because my body that can touch the things is *itself* touchable from the outside. Again the focus is here on taking the subject out of the centre because a perceiver cannot possess the tangible unless she herself is also "possessed by it, unless [she] *is of it*" (VI 134-135/175). Touching her exploring hand she finds that between herself and the things there is an overlap. While she touches, she *shares* in the tangible with the things, she is touched *by them*. On this basis the flesh is described as:

> the coiling over of the visible upon the seeing body, of the tangible on
> the touching body, which is attested especially when the body sees itself,

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42. See also chapter one (1.3).

> touches itself seeing and touching the things, such that, simultaneously, *as* tangible it descends among them, *as* touching it dominates them all and draws this relationship and even this double relationship from itself, by dehiscence or fission of its own mass. (VI 146/189, my emphasis)

The sensing-sensible body is split apart because its double relationship means that it belongs to the world and cannot detach itself from it while it is also a perceiver of the world. This split creates an openness within the body that is at the same time its unification because my touching body and my touched body are one and the same. Thus while my body changes from a touching into a touched and vice versa, the split in the body does not remain in dual (Cartesian) opposition. Rather this dehiscence is still part of the body because it is the connecting "hinge between them" that nevertheless remains "irremediably hidden from me" (VI 148/192). Here Merleau-Ponty describes the body as an exemplary manifestation of the productive but hidden distance (*écart*) that enables perception. Merleau-Ponty writes: "to touch *oneself*…is not to apprehend oneself as an ob-ject, it is to be open to oneself…nor therefore is it to reach *oneself*, it is on the contrary to escape *oneself,* to be ignorant of *oneself*, the self in question is by divergence [*d'écart*]" (VI 249/297). This inability to grasp and to overcome the divergence in myself, or the inability to touch myself touching,[43] characterises the hollow as a *dis*-possession or as a *letting go* of the hold that I have over things and over myself. Not only the things slip away from my grasp, *I* myself slip away from my grasp as I do not even succeed in possessing myself. The search for the foundation of perception therefore does not bring me to a positive consciousness (a Cartesian 'I think' or a Sartrean empty consciousness) but

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43. "in fact I do not entirely succeed in touching myself touching, in seeing myself seeing, the experience I have of myself perceiving…terminates in the invisible…it gives me a *Nicht Urpräsentierbar* (a non-visible, myself)" (VI 249/298)

rather it brings me to the hollow which is *invisibly* inherent to the things and to myself. As Merleau-Ponty writes, this search brings the subject to a fundamental ground or origin that is not a strong foundation but rather it is a falling away of the ground (it is an abyss in the Heideggerian sense of *Abgrund*) (VI 250/298).

4.2.4.2 Fourth connection: an 'abyssal' understanding of the flesh

Merleau-Ponty's endeavour to uncover the ontological dimension of the flesh finds inspiration in the later writings of Heidegger. Most importantly in the context of this chapter, at the end of *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology* and at a few places in *The Visible and the Invisible* Merleau-Ponty turns to Heidegger's notion of the abyss [*Abgrund*].[44] At this point I make a connection between Merleau-Ponty's notion of 'flesh' and Heidegger's description of the abyss [*Abgrund*]. All the same it needs to be kept in mind that Merleau-Ponty does not make explicit this connection. His references to the flesh are numerous, his references to the abyss are not. Below, I think together the hollow of the flesh with this peculiar abyss. An abyss is, after all, a rift or a hollow in the earth. There where the earth retreats, a hollow will be left. Both the *écart* and the abyss signify a splitting open, a folding, or a hollowing out of the flesh. I argue that the abyss is one of the many ways in which Merleau-Ponty tries to describe his own ontological foundation that is the flesh. The flesh was

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44. The notion of the abyss is taken from Heidegger's essay "Language" (1950) on which Merleau-Ponty comments in his lecture course on the "Origin of Geometry". Merleau-Ponty inserts a long quote of Heidegger right after he has discussed the notion of the horizon of horizons. The quote is interesting also with respect to the importance of language. At this point I do not take up the problem of language. In chapter three, language is mentioned as essential to the structure of institution (3.1.2); in chapter five, language is part of an echoing intersubjective exchange between subjects (5.2.2). Heidegger's essay "Language" is published in English in *Poetry, Language, Thought,* trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 187-208.

understood above through its *horizontal* retreating and revealing dimensions, now the notion of the abyss adds also a *vertical* dimension to the flesh as the "vertical (= abyssal)" (HLP 49/60).[45]

In his essay "Language" Heidegger quotes Johan Georg Hamann who writes in a despairing mood that his search for an ultimate foundation of reason is unsuccessful because he does not find solid ground but an abyss of unlimited depth and no key to understand it. Heidegger responds that in our human searching for a reasonable ground [*Grund*] we fail to find the ultimate ground, but instead the ground retreats into an abyss [*Ab-grund*].[46] Heidegger then specifies that the abyss is not a complete lack of ground or an infinite hole in the earth which vanishes into nothingness. The abyss is the hollow in which there is no lack of ground but *more* than a ground (HLP 49/60), i.e., the abyss is an *Urgrund* which supports from above. He writes:

> We speak of an abyss where the ground falls away and the ground is lacking to us, where we seek the ground and set out to arrive at a ground, to get to the bottom of something.[47]

> If we let ourselves fall into the abyss…we do not go tumbling into emptiness. We fall upward, to a height [*Höhe*]. Its loftiness [*Hoheit*] opens up a depth. The two span a realm in which we would like to

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45. Remember also the quote above (4.1.2.1): "The *Gestalt* therefore implies a relation between the perceiving body and a sensible, i.e., transcendent i.e., *horizontal i.e., vertical* and not perspectival world" (VI 205/255, my emphasis). This vertical dimension has a central place in the working notes to *The Visible and the Invisible* as it "bare[s] all roots" (VI 169/220), "[t]he essential is to describe the vertical or wild being as that pre-spiritual milieu without which nothing is thinkable, not even the spirit, and by which we pass into one another, and ourselves into ourselves in order to have *our own* time" (VI 204/254).

46. HLP 40/48. Speaking about the *Abgrund* I translate 'abyss'. This is the translation that is coined by Merleau-Ponty (*abîme*). However I am persuaded by Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly's argument that a more accurate translation would be 'ab-ground', as this would preserve the original grounding relation between the ground and the ab-ground (translators' foreword to Heidegger's *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999], xxx-xxxi). Merleau-Ponty often keeps the German term *Abgrund* to bring this relation to the foreground.

47. HLP 40/48; Heidegger, "Language," 189.

become at home, so as to find a residence, a dwelling place for the life of human beings [*Menschen*].[48]

In an attempt to find a solid foundation, what is opened up to us is a depth that is the abode of being human. Interpreting the excerpt from Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty notes that the abyss does not pull one down—one does not tumble to an unknown depth—rather one *falls upward to a height* and thus one remains supported and lifted up at this height. To express this same thought differently: the abyss is a hollowing out of the ground which retreats and by doing so it makes possible (i.e., it grounds, sustains or reveals) the height at which we are sup-ported (we are carried upwards). This shows that the notion of the abyss enables us to revisit the ontological pre-restful movement. As with the description of the whirlwind above, again we are faced with a tension between two movements that are in 'pre-rest': there is mention of a falling in a depth that is at the same time a rising to a height. This means that we *fall upward* and thus neither do we rise above the abyss to oversee it nor do we fall into it into nothingness. Instead we remain hovering within the abyss [*schweben*], while being supported by the abyss.[49] This notion of falling upward captures well our involvement and our volatile being in the hollow. In addition it illustrates that this hollow is neither created by us nor are we in charge of the hollow in any sense.

The notion of the abyss does not only revisit the discussion of the hollow, it also returns us to our analysis of the founding earth. Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the abyss is strongly influenced by Eugen Fink's rendering of the Husserlian

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48. HLP 41/48; Heidegger, "Language," 189-90 (translation modified).
49. HLP 52/64. In *Contributions to Philosophy* (notes from 1936-8), Heidegger writes that in the abyss the ground stays-away [*bleibt weg*] (265). This indicates a similar tension between movement and rest as the notion of 'remaining in retreat' which I used above with reference to the horizon.

'earth' in Fink's lecture "Die Spätphilosophie Husserls in der Freiburger Zeit."[50] Fink writes:

> Husserl wants to think back into the *Gestaltless* ground, from whence the appearances open up, he wants to grasp the *apeiron,* the unlimited…he wants to grasp it as origin, as the rift that tears the life ground, as the negativity in the most original Being.[51]

Fink describes how Husserl has already brought us to the abyss which is the rift that has torn open the original ground (*ursprunglicher Ur-grund*). As an original ground [*Urgrund*] the abyss has already opened up as an original beginning or institution [*Ur-sprung*]. This rupture is described as a boundless abyss that is *before* the figure-ground structure of the *Gestalt* (it is *Gestaltless*). This means, Merleau-Ponty claims, that this abyss is *openness* (HLP 47/58) and not yet sedimented meaning. Thus the *Gestaltless* ground of the abyss is where meaning (the separation of a figure from the ground) becomes a possibility. Combining the Heideggerian abyss as dwelling and Fink's interpretation of the original ground Merleau-Ponty writes that this is where our primordial home is: it is the abyss, the hollow: "*our locality is openness*" (HLP 49/60 my emphasis). The embodied subject dwells in openness and is included within the horizonal and vertical dimension of being (the horizon of horizons, the abyss, or the flesh). In addition, and as exemplar of the flesh the embodied subject includes this openness within itself. Consequently, I emphasise once more that this primordial home of openness is not the same as the phenomenological homeland of sedimented

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50. Eugen Fink, "Die Spätphilosophie Husserls in der Freiburger Zeit," in *Nähe und Distanz: Phänomenologische Vorträge und Aufsätze* (Freiburg: Verlag Karl Alber, 1976), 205-227. All translations are my own.

51. "Husserl will in den gestaltlosen Grund zurückdenken, aus dem die Gestaltungen aufgehen, er will das *apeiron,* das Unbegrenzte, fassen…er will er fassen als Ur-Sprung, als den Riß, der den Lebensgrund zerreißt, als die Negativität im urtümlichsten Sein" (Fink, "Die Spätphilosophie Husserls," 224).

traditions as Steinbock implies. My phenomenological homeland gives me a solid ground beneath my feet and roots in the earth, it gives me horizons/backgrounds or dimensions through which I encounter the world. The primordial home of the abyss gives us neither roots nor traditions but leaves us hovering pre-restfully, i.e., it turns our ontological locality into a precarious hovering in the openness of the porous flesh.

Speaking of the abyss as our locality does not mean to *place* this abyss somewhere and at some time. It is tempting to think of this primordial rift as a *place earlier* that *lies before* our own particular being and thus is our spatio-temporal origin. Here origin is not understood in the usual sense of a point or a place where something begins. It is also neither a limiting and determining horizon nor a first stage in an instituted series of events. Merleau-Ponty reminds us that "it is no longer a question of origins, nor limits, nor of a series of events going to a first cause, but *one sole explosion of Being which is forever*" (VI 265/313, my emphasis). Our original ontological locality is here described much more forcefully and explosively than the earlier notion of the pre-restful abyss implies. The images of the abyss and the explosion do not initially seem to have much in common especially because the image of an explosion relies on an outburst of vigorous activity which does not seem to include passivity. Moreover, an explosion is a release of tension rather than the tension itself. Consequently more needs to be said about this explosive origin in order to make sense of an explosion 'which is forever' and in order to understand it in the framework of an ontological dimension which is pre-restful and thus active-passive.

Merleau-Ponty indicates that the explosion is not spatio-temporal and thus it is never 'now' and 'here'. Nevertheless the term 'explosion' usually refers to a vigorous movement bringing something with force from a 'here and now' to a 'there and then'. Notwithstanding the speed and force with which an explosion takes place it is still a dislocation that involves times and spaces. I suggest that the notion of 'explosion' that Merleau-Ponty uses should be understood quite differently as it is a movement without displacement: it is a pre-restful movement. In "Eye and Mind" Merleau-Ponty writes about "a movement without displacement, a movement by vibration or radiation" (EM 184/77). While the terms vibration and radiation still capture a certain volatility, they also are able to integrate a notion of stillness and pre-restless tension. A vibration can be described as a trembling and a tension that has not yet found the release of displacement. I suggest that the explosion 'which is forever' should be understood as a vibration in this sense. Another comment on (quasi) locality of humanity supports this point. Merleau-Ponty writes: "locality [is] not by inherence in a spatio-temporal point—but locality by elastic tie" (VI 222/271). Our locality is not at a site, it is never fixed, solid and isolated, but instead this locality is characterised by a relation or a connectivity that is *elastic* which means that it is stretched out, both supple and tense, both giving way and always at a breaking point. It is interesting that locality is described now in terms of a 'tie' because this reminds us of what earlier was described as the connecting 'in-between' of the hollow:[52] locality as a connection emphasises the importance of the *relation* between the seer and the seen. Our ontological locality is found at the pre-restless

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52. See 4.2.3 and the first paragraph of 4.2.4. In chapter five (5.3) and in the afterword (section [i]) I explore the notion of the in-between and the 'connecting separation' in more depth.

zero-point (milieu) of being that is in-between myself and the world or in-between myself and another.

The ontological openness in which we dwell is *pre-restful*, i.e., it is before and beyond the spatial oscillations of figure and ground, before and beyond the temporal rhythm of past and present. The ontological openness is neither space nor time, neither the point of unity nor the place of plurality but a continual *opening up that connects:* it is the initiation of differentiation. This is the essential point: we find our ontological origin in the porosity (openness) of the flesh which is the *condition of possibility of the particular*, and as such it is *both* before and beyond, beneath and above the particular.

4.2.4.3 Review of the fleshy connections as 'elements of being'

In Heidegger's beautiful dialogue on *Gelassenheit* three characters express confusion about their ability to discuss and uncover that which cannot be represented. The three interlocutors at last find the solution in waiting, that is, not waiting for *something,* but waiting as *leaving open* that for which one waits.[53] The importance of such a 'letting be' is addressed later in this chapter (4.3). I here want to emphasise that speaking about 'the invisible of the flesh' places us in a similar dilemma because the making *visible* of the invisible lets us lose sight of the withdrawing invisibility itself and replaces it with terms and images that are visible representations of it. For example the risk of using a term like the 'flesh' is to conceive it as a porous *materiality*. Thus the flesh and the hollow as presented above are not to be understood as an

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53. Martin Heidegger, *Gelassenheit* (Pfullingen: Verlag Günther Neske, 1959), 44.

opposing and excluding pair of which it is true that where there is flesh there is no hole and where there is a hole there is no flesh. The real porosity of the flesh is much more radical. In other words, the flesh *is* the hollow and the hollow *is* the thickness of the in-between. One of the difficulties of understanding the flesh is that Merleau-Ponty's negative descriptions of the flesh are more accessible than his positive description of it as an 'element of Being'. He writes: "The flesh is not matter, is not mind, is not substance. To designate it we should need the old term 'element,' in the sense it was used to speak of water, air, earth and fire" (VI 139/181-2). By way of review of the complicated discussion above, I offer below an overview of the *positive* description of the flesh through imagining it through the four elements. These different elements of the flesh are not to be thought of as separate and additive aspects, but rather as an attempt metaphorically to describe that generality of being "which has no name in any philosophy" (VI 147/191) and, I should caution, that for which there is no fully representative *image* in philosophy either.[54]

Flesh as water: As water the flesh is beyond my grasp and slips through my fingers while it surrounds me and sustains me.[55] The flesh as water spreads, envelops and flows into all hollow spaces. It brings movement into them but also, as part of *one* sea, it abides within itself as rest. The flesh as water is exemplified by the wave that surges and stands out of the sea, the wave that folds over itself and thus that is both joined with itself and creates distance within itself. Flesh understood as a watery dimension is related to Heidegger's understanding of the sea [*pélagos*] which stirs and

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54. These images are offered here as an aid for imagining the flesh, not as exhaustive of the flesh.

55. Barbaras writes: "insofar as it is an element, the sea is truly just short of and beyond the place where I seek to grasp it; it is present only in surrounding me, only in being generalized to all aspects of a world the unassignable limits of which it nevertheless traces" (*The Being of the Phenomenon,* 190-191).

surges while abiding [*pélein*] within itself. Heidegger explains how the Greek word *'pélein'* should be understood in its manifold meaning as 'to stir', 'to come forth', 'to emerge', as 'to presence' and as 'to be'. The word *'pélagos'* means "that which stirs itself of its own accord and thus does not flow away but remains and abides within itself in its surging."[56] Flesh as water thus makes us understand this ontological dimension as a stillness that is simultaneously a surging activity, that is a folding over and a spreading out.

Flesh as earth: The flesh is a texture or a fabric that connects and as such it is our ontological foundation, our original ground. This earth as flesh is all founding, prior to particularity, and neither moving nor at rest. The 'rest' of the earth is the peculiar rest of *pre-restfulness* and as such it is *before* passivity and activity. The earth is the "source Being, the *Stamm und Klotz* being, in pre-restfulness" (HLP 76/92). The earth is the source as the *stem*. By taking up Husserl's notion of *Stamm,* Merleau-Ponty brings a generative (and thus temporal) notion to the primordial earth. *Stamm* is the stem from which the generations sprout, as such there is a generative aspect to the earth. This generative ground is best expressed through the splitting open of the earth, through the notion of the verticality of the abyss and through the productivity of this rupture. When the fleshy ground falls away and retreats or splits open, a gap or a hollow in the earth remains which is not a hole but an abyss in the sense of the German *Abgrund.* Beings have their abode in this hollow that ruptures the original ground: we have a locality that is openness.

Flesh as air: The flesh is air in terms of the whirling winds of a hollow that is

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56. Martin Heidegger, *Hölderlin's Hymn 'The Ister',* trans. William McNeill and Julia Davis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 72. Lectures from 1942.

both a lack and an excess. It is the air that separates us, that is in-between us, that

fills the distance between us and that flows as much into us as into others. It is the

air that blows right through us and decentres us from the middle of the world.

Irigaray speaks beautifully about breathing as the (intersubjective) sharing of the air

which is never fully one's own but instead it leaves the subject soon after it has

entered:

> breathing…signifies a sharing with the world that surrounds me and with the community that inhabits it. Food and even speech can be assimilated, partially become mine. It is not the same for air. I can breathe in my own way, but the air will never be simply mine. To breathe combines in a indissociable way being-there and being-with. Going out of the mother, I come into the air. I enter into the world, and in to the community of living beings.[57]

The flesh is the air that connects us by way of breathing in and out of us, breathing

into us and thus stimulating us: "We speak of inspiration, and the word should be

taken literally. There really is inspiration and expiration of Being, action and passion

so slightly discernible that it becomes impossible to distinguish between what sees

and what is seen" (EM 167/31-2). To be 'inspired' means to be actively and

creatively aroused, but it is also the act of breathing in. The analogy of inspiration

with breathing is interesting because whereas creativity is usually seen as an active

production, one's breath is a passive operation of one's body over which one has

generally no real control. One can hasten or slow down one's breath but one cannot

stop it or activate it by oneself. This means that inspiration is at once active and

passive. In the 'breath of being', inspiration and expiration, activity and passivity turn

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57. Luce Irigaray, "From *The Forgetting of Air* to *To be Two,"* trans. Heidi Bostic and Stephen Pluháček, in *Feminist Interpretations of Martin Heidegger,* ed. Nancy J. Holland and Patricia J. Huntington (University Park: Penn State Press, 2001), 312.

into each other. This active-passive exchange takes place in-between the seer and the seen as the vibration/radiation of the flesh as air.[58] In addition, entering into the vibrations of the air the subject finds herself always already living and breathing with a community of other beings.

Flesh as fire: Fire is destructive of materiality and rises up from it as energy. The destructive power of fire makes it at the same time a generative power of change: it is able to erupt and to break through solid foundations while turning them into a fertile ash out of which new things can grow. Similarly, the flesh has a generative power that makes change possible. The image of fire emphasises the vigorous *generativity* of the flesh. The image of fire also reminds us of its explosive quality. This quality is found in the flesh as its *volatility,* which again emphasises the possibility of change within a structure that seems initially stable (as our ground or foundation). Flesh as fire should thus be understood in terms of a fecundity that can overcome congealed sedimentations (it is our *Ursprung*).

The four elemental images offer us different metaphorical ways to conceive of the flesh. Water and air best describe the simultaneously active and passive dimensions of the flesh, the earth presents the flesh as a calm foundation, and fire turns the flesh into an erupting activity. The elements fire, air, and water all signify how the flesh is 'slippery' as it escapes the grasp of the subject while the image of earth suggest a foundation that provides a ground for the subject (but only when thought as an abyss). Earth, water, and air indicate how the flesh is a joining and a cohesion that encompasses and makes us share in one flesh. At the same time this

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58. It is a 'radiation' or an "ontological vibration" of a "perpetual pregnancy, perpetual parturition, generativity and generality" (VI 115/153).

joining is interrupted by a surging, and a distance that opens up as a fold, an abyss, a gap, or a hollow. Fire best emphasises the vigorous and volatile activity of change and the overcoming of stability that is made possible by this interruption within the flesh.

4.2.5 The volatility of the flesh and particularity

I have presented the general openness of the flesh as a precarious place of pre-restfulness. Merleau-Ponty writes that the flesh is the "indecisive milieu" which "is the very sphere of our life" (VI 115/153).[59] This sphere brings us back to the horizonal aspect of the flesh about which Merleau-Ponty writes in response to Gurwitsch: "the being of horizon: being before I hollow out my place there, before I *split off* from it [*je l'écarte*] in order to see myself."[60] The opening of the horizon comes to pass before consciousness turns back upon itself and is reflectively individuated. That means that the opening of the horizon is always already there for the (reflecting) individual. From this originary "indecisive milieu" of the flesh, I now return to the horizons of our lives in which the indecisiveness has collapsed into our particular style, tradition, or world in which we create our own hollows and dwellings.[61]

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59. In his discussion of the abyss it would be an interesting project to read Merleau-Ponty's remarks together with Heidegger's *Contributions to Philosophy*. The 'indecisive milieu' here mentioned reminds one of the Heideggerian notion of the 'hesitation' of the abyss: "Insofar as ground nonetheless also and simply grounds in ab-ground and yet does not actually ground, it is hesitating. Ab-ground is the hesitating refusal of ground. In refusal originary emptiness opens originary clearing occurs" (Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy,* 265). Another possible link between the later Merleau-Ponty and the later Heidegger would be to compare Merleau-Ponty's notion of 'vibration' with Heidegger's notion of "enquivering of be-ing [*erzittern*]"(*Contributions to Philosophy,* 16).

60. Merleau-Ponty, "Reading Notes and Comments on Aron Gurwitsch," 192n40/332n.

61. These human dwelling and homes are not to be confused with our ontological dwelling that is not created by us.

The volatile vibration of the flesh never really endures in itself. This shows why the notion of 'explosion' appropriately characterises the flesh. The rupture that has just opened up has already fallen and risen (sedimented) into the particular. Falling, it grounds us in our traditions; rising, it reveals perceptual figures to us; and falling *and* rising, it inserts us into the rhythmic experience of our lives. This does not mean, however, that the openness of the flesh afterwards closes and has made any further openness impossible. To say this would be to misunderstand the flesh as having a *temporal* origin that has happened once and for all. Instead, the original leap [*Ursprung*] of being is taking place all the time and forever. The flesh remains the *Urgrund* for openness and possibility, while always already it is erupting into particularity. This quivering that constantly falls and rises into sedimentary rhythms is the generativity of the *Ursprung* from which the possibility of the new continually breaks forth.

When connecting the generality of the flesh to our particular being as living bodies in the world, it is important to be careful with the implications of the connections that are made. Speaking about a volatility of the flesh that erupts into particularity does not mean that at any moment our particular being can erupt into something altogether different. Our own flesh is not extraordinarily pliable and changeable. Our experience of being-in-the-world is not generally characterised by the possibility that without warning our particular being might fall into fragments and might be reborn into something completely new. While such an experience of 'falling apart' does take place in some subjects, most people experience their subjectivity as a rather stable and cohesive dimension in their life. What needs to be

accounted for is how our subjectivity is at the same time dynamic but also cohesive.

First, the reflections on institution and horizons have revealed that we are living bodies in a world that is structured according to cultural and historical conventions and habits. In this world we have build homes for ourselves, we work and have our favourite pastimes within our circle of friends and acquaintances. These historical and social dimensions give structure to our lives. However, no matter how stable these structures are and how solid the homes we have created, they can be disrupted and uprooted because we are ontologically at home in the differentiation of the hollow. The differentiation at the heart of our being (the hollow or abyss) and the continuation of historical institution are not opposing notions. Second, to reiterate an important point: the hollow is not an empty nothingness or a void. The separation and the differentiation that is makes possible is therefore not an absolute separation in a Sartrean sense. For example, I am not wholly separated from my past and future, but rather my past and future spread out into the present[62] and the backgrounds of my life continue to limit my perception of the figure. As this cohesive structure the flesh is a foundation that presents the subject as *someone* (a particular subject) yet without this ever being a finished and stable identity because this foundation always already opens up as differentiation.

A sceptic might well wonder that if the ontological field is so elusive and essentially invisible, then why even discuss this ontological domain? Would it not be more fruitful to stay safely within our phenomenological description of the particular

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62. See chapter three (3.2.1).

horizons which provide us with fairly stable dimensions through which we perceive the world? In other words, when I meet another person, is not my phenomenological experience of her as a person appearing within my horizon more important than trying to uncover the ontology of the flesh that decentres me and brings a rather intangible notion of openness to the centre? Elizabeth Grosz asks a similar question in *Time travels: Feminism, Nature, Power*: "why are these obscure, abstract and non-practical questions…questions without instrumental value…of any relevance to feminist or other political concerns?"[63] In other words, is the flesh in all its multiple meanings an empty concept that does not apply to the reality of our experience because it is always already filled up with particular being?

It is true that we do not usually reflect on the ontological dimension of our daily lives. We are generally too busy, too involved with the projects we have set for ourselves that most of the time we do not even engage phenomenologically with the world let alone that we reflect on the question of ontology.[64] Grosz answers her own question by writing: "without some reflection on the most general and abstract conditions of corporeality and materiality…we do not have the perspective…the distance…required to see what has commonly remained invisible or unseen in our everyday, even our feminist, habits and assumptions."[65] Translated to the discussion at hand, the above reflections on the general conditions of our *fleshy* corporeality asks of us to renounce our narcissistic possession of the world so that we can begin to see traces of dimensions of openness.[66] Asking ontological questions brings to the

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63. Elizabeth Grosz, *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 128.
64. See my discussion of our interest and disinterest in the world in the introduction (section [ii]).
65. Grosz, *Time Travels,* 114.
66. See also Levin, *The Philosopher's Gaze,* 211; and "Visions of Narcissism: Intersubjectivity and the

foreground that which remains invisible in our everyday rhythmic exchanges with the world and others. Trying to draw near to these invisible and precarious foundations helps to develop an insight into our way of being in the world. Consequently, it can actually guide our thinking about the practical questions of politics and ethics.[67] In the context of this thesis, the path into ontology has uncovered the condition of possibility of differentiation. From it we learn that our ontological birth place is not a place of undifferentiated sameness, neutrality and fusion, but rather we realise that our being is characterised always already by the fecundity of an original difference.

4.2.6 Revisiting the flesh as mother

The careful reader will have noticed that the discussion in this chapter is permeated with references to maternal dimensions of the flesh. The flesh is presented as the hollow, pregnancy, and fecundity of a volatile openness, which is the erupting of differentiation. Consequently this discussion figures nicely with Merleau-Ponty's remark that the flesh *is* the mother (VI 267/315). Mauro Carbone presents the flesh in a maternal light in his dense account of the flesh in *The Thinking of the Sensible.* Carbone suggestively writes that "concavity, or hollowness, is…a crucial feature of the basic meaning of conceptus" which means "to be pregnant…receiving

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Reversals of Reflection," in *Merleau-Ponty Vivant,* ed. Martin Dillon (Albany: State University of New York, 1991), 49.

67. Both Geraldine Finn and Kym Maclaren offer interesting examples of letting practice be informed by ontology. Geraldine Finn, "The Politics of Contingency: The Contingency of Politics – On the Political Implications of Merleau-Ponty's Ontology of the Flesh," in *Merleau-Ponty, Hermeneutics and Postmodernism,* ed. Thomas W. Busch and Shaun Gallagher (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), 171-188. Kym Maclaren, "Intercorporeity, Intersubjectivity and the Problem of 'Letting Others Be'," *Chiasmi International 4* (2002): 187-210.

something into one's spirit."[68] Taking this suggestion to heart, the multiple references of the hollow in Merleau-Ponty's writing undergo a metamorphosis. That is, Merleau-Ponty's writing seems once again to be filled with references to the maternal through the figure of the hollow of the womb. This observation seems to do justice to Irigaray's critique that Merleau-Ponty is in debt to images of maternity. This debt to the maternal flesh is forgotten by Merleau-Ponty as the mother is forgotten generally in Western Philosophy. In chapter three I reinstituted part of the maternal element into Merleau-Ponty's notion of institution by thinking temporality, rhythm and birth together. I argued that we are not magically thrown into the world as from nothing, but rather that our phenomenological origin is the leap of birth which institutes us into a world that is always already there for others. Since in addition we always already have responded to the other, our phenomenological origin is the *relationship*. Staying true to a Merleau-Pontian vision it was possible to recover and to bring to the foreground an *actual* maternal other.

Even though the ontology of the flesh is imbued with images of pregnancy and maternity it is difficult to construct a similar argument as in chapter three (3.2.3). The ontological investigating in the present chapter presents the flesh as the generativity that folds over *itself* and as such the flesh is at once the hollow and the thickness of the flesh. The flesh is a fecund power that decentres the subject and which creates in the subject the hollow that is the subject's ontological origin. I worry that this account of our ontological origin is more vulnerable to a feminist critique because the fecundity of the flesh now seems to be primarily an impersonal *self*-possession of

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68. Carbone, *The Thinking of the Sensible,* 47.

the flesh. Thus, Merleau-Ponty's ontology ends up being an ontology of self-possession to the extent that it is not the subject that possesses herself, but rather it is the *flesh* which produces and possesses the subject as an exemplar of itself.[69]

Based on this notion of the self-possession of the flesh I cannot fully agree with Merleau-Ponty when he asserts that the flesh is 'the mother'. My description of the maternal origin is one that hinges on having a relationship with an *actual* other, and consequently I claim that the impersonal flesh cannot be the mother. However the flesh also does not fit into the stereotypical philosophy of subjective self-possession that is criticised by Battersby, Guenther, Tyler and others. If a notion of complete self-possession is what defines a so-called 'masculine' philosophy, then the flesh fails to be masculine because the subject does not possess herself but rather the *flesh possesses her* as she is an exemplar of the flesh. At any moment the flesh decentres the subject from the centre of the world and places her in the middle of a volatile openness from which the subject can begin to see. The flesh escapes both these designations as it speaks of a fundamental impersonal *relation* of the flesh to the subject and a fundamental *possession* that is not owned by the subject herself.

While I claim that the flesh can neither be thought to be properly maternal nor masculine, I agree that Merleau-Ponty does seem to be heavily biased in using maternal metaphors for describing the flesh. Again his unacknowledged debt to the

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69. Merleau-Ponty himself did not foreground the maternal in his work, although, as I have already indicated, his writing is rich in maternal metaphors. It is therefore no surprise that not all his terms and explications of the flesh or the abyss neatly fit in with this maternal reading. With the maternal reading I aim to clarify a certain aspect of Merleau-Ponty's ontology which I hope to reveal in a new light; however, I do not aim to give a complete and final reading of this ontology. Having access to what is in effect still a work in progress, there is not one final reading of Merleau-Ponty's ontology. This openness in his incomplete work defies a final determination but is also the inspiration for developing Merleau-Ponty's thought in ways that he himself would not have foreseen.

maternal is evident, as is his tendency to make these metaphors speak for an invisibility of experience and thus he seems to equate the maternal with the imperceptible. It might not be possible to save Merleau-Ponty from such allegations. On a more generous reading one could say that when the flesh is understood as both self-possession and fecundity it is rendered *both maternal and masculine* and as such it might indicate a being that is prior to such a particular oppositional distinction.[70]

4.3 Encounters: letting one another be

4.3.1 'Giving them the hollow' as letting be

In order to bring this chapter to a close, a crucial question needs to be addressed: how is this volatile, precarious, and grounding hollow present in the intersubjective relationship? As we have seen in the previous chapters, Merleau-Ponty often arrives at the understanding of the intersubjective relationship through first looking at the general perceptual relationship.[71] I do the same here by first commenting on a better way of seeing objects and then expanding this to a better way of perceiving other *subjects*. Merleau-Ponty writes that one perceives 'better' only when the objects:

> offer themselves…to someone who wishes not to have them but to see them, not to hold them with forceps, or to immobilise them as under the objective of a microscope, but to let them be and to witness their continued being—to someone who therefore limits himself [*sic*] to *giving them the hollow*, the free space they asks for in return, the resonance they require, who follows their own movement, who is therefore not a nothingness the full being would come to stop up, but a question

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70. The opposition I refer to here might seem awkward. Usually the masculine is differentiated from the feminine and the paternal form the maternal. However the elements of femininity that Merleau-Ponty brings to the foreground are exclusively maternal images. The feminine is thus concentrated in the image of the mother. This by itself is ground for a critique.

71. See my critique of this in 4.3.2.

consonant with the porous being which it questions and from which it obtains no answer, but a confirmation of its astonishment. It is necessary to comprehend perception as this interrogative thought which lets the perceived world be rather than posit it, before which the things form and undo themselves in a sort of gliding, beneath the yes and the no. (VI 101-2/136, my emphasis)

In this rather beautiful excerpt, Merleau-Ponty redefines perception according to an open interrogation. The subject herself becomes openness and the resonance chamber of the world as she 'gives the hollow' to the perceptual object in which it can resonate and as such she lets the object be. Carbone incorporates the Heideggerian notion of letting be [*Gelassenheit*] in his interpretation of Merleau-Ponty's notion of the hollow. Merleau-Ponty's familiarity with Heidegger's work suggests that this is a plausible connection. Carbone writes that *Gelassenheit* speaks about releasement and calm. This interpretation is evident when uncovering the German root of the word which comes from 'to let' (*lassen*). *Gelassenheit* is to release one's interests, which, as Heidegger cautions, does not mean that we can *actively will* this release.[72] Actively willing the release would be to force it and keep it in one's control and thus to not give it the space it needs. To speak with Merleau-Ponty, one cannot 'let something be' when we try to hold on to it as by forceps. Thus there is in the notion of 'letting be' a fundamental calmness. It is crucial to understand that this passive dimension of release does not merely turn 'letting be' into an absence of interest and a passive *letting go* of the object without giving it another look. Essential for understanding the importance of 'letting be' is that it is both an activity of *letting* be and a passivity of letting *be*. Carbone describes the Heideggerian 'letting be' as an oscillation between activity and passivity. As I have suggested above, in Merleau-

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72. Heidegger, *Gelassenheit*, 32.

Ponty this relation is even more closely connected considering that an oscillation is still a changing of activity into passivity which are separate parts of one movement. The being of the openness of the flesh does not allow for this changing between the two, but rather activity and passivity in the 'letting be' of the ontological vibration *belong* to each other. This renders 'letting be' neither active nor passive, instead 'letting be' is the possibility of activity or passivity.

Merleau-Ponty speaks tellingly about a *giving* space to the perceptual object and a *following* of the object. On first sight, 'giving space' to an object implies an action on my side. In order to give something I need to participate in it as giver. However, above I mentioned that the space that is opened up in me is opened by the flesh, it is not a hollow that I have created myself. Instead, in response to the object a space has already been opened up in me, that is, the object has been given a space before I know it. Thus when I 'give' a space to things, this giving is active but not fully in my own power. Merleau-Ponty further indicates that giving a space for the object means that I *follow* it. To follow something suggests that I do not stay 'within' myself but that I am called beyond myself to the object, following it. Following thus has a passive and responsive meaning. Nevertheless following can also indicate an activity because it indicates that I *trace* something. Thinking back to chapter three (3.3), following also means that I transform the trace that I follow. In this sense, to follow something is also to re-shape it and thus I am not completely passive in following the object's resonances. Consequently the notion of 'letting be' understood through 'giving space' and 'following' replaces a problematic notion of the gaze that grasps and dominates what it sees. In this active-passive dynamic of giving and following,

both I and the object are transformed by the space that has opened up in-between. This fundamental openness that is prepared before my birth (VI 233-4/282) institutes me into a rhythm of exchange and accomplishes a transformation between myself and the world.

I suggest that the active-passive exchange of 'letting be' helps us better to understand our perception of *others* (i.e., not to perceive another by limitation and domination). To return once more to Merleau-Ponty's rich but sometimes worrisome maternal metaphors: 'giving them the hollow' is to conceive perception as being *pregnant*, as a welcoming that is opening up to something or someone new. This is the labour of the flesh: "through a labour [*travail*] upon itself, the visible body provides for the hollow whence a vision will come" and thus "the seer is premeditated in counterpoint in the embryonic development" (VI 147/191).[73] Before birth, my being as a seer is prepared in a point (an instant, a hollow, a crux) that is a *counter*-point and thus this point is already stressed differently, it is already *differentiation*. Our mutual individuating births institute us into a rhythm of exchange and transformation from an original moment of openness and differentiating cohesion.[74] Merleau-Ponty presents the intersubjective encounter, not as the encounter between two positive and closed subjectivities, but rather as "*two* caverns, *two* opennesses, *two* stages where something will take place" (VI 263/311, my emphases). The dynamic between myself and the object is thus doubled as soon as there is another subject present. This

73. See also the end of section 3.2.3.2 footnote 126.
74. Here again we return to the notion of the original hollow that describes both our proximity and cohesion and our distance and differentiation "Therefore all of this: what we call the 'wall of Being' before individuation, because in effect as soon as there is transcendental intersubjectivity, what is is not only viewpoints of each, added up, but their articulation, their *Ineinander*, their alternating cohesion, *their alternation which is a cohesion*…Therefore we speak of absolute being ('Ursein,' absolutes sein)" (HLP 47/58, my emphasis).

complicates the above notion of 'letting be' giving it a twofold direction.

There is a clear sense of expectation in the description above. When I meet another, something 'will take place'. In chapter three I have already foreshadowed that which will take place when we meet. Namely, in me a space is opened up for the other's resonances (I *let her be*) but this also means that I am already transformed by her. In turn, a space for me is opened up in her and thus she is already transformed by me. While I let the other be within myself, I give her space and follow her beyond myself so that I am *in her*, that is, I am in that space which she has given to me while she follows me. Our ontological belonging to the flesh places both of us within the openness of the horizon of horizons. The ontology of the flesh thus emphasises that the intersubjective relationship is grounded in the general cohesion of the flesh. This cohesion could be interpreted in intersubjective terms as a kind of 'general community' of the flesh. But it should not be misunderstood as a particular community, but rather as signifying a notion of shared being[75] that all the same preserves the distance between us. My particular embodied existence that belongs to the world does not allow me to step away and perceive the other as she 'truly' is. Interestingly, precisely because I am fundamentally open to the other I never succeed in capturing her completely within my own limiting horizon (background). Instead, like a palimpsest she is ever present under my gaze but never fully grasped. Thus while giving space to the other I dis-cover her in the world as someone who calls me to follow her and who offers to my body new dimensions through which the world unfolds itself. Perception, Merleau-Ponty writes, is an *interrogation* that does not hold

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75. See also the discussion on the *Ineinander* in chapter five (5.3) and in the afterword (section [i]).

onto the object or the other with forceps in order to immobilise them, but rather our perceiving body *dis*-covers both objects and other persons and 'lets them be', giving them a dimension through which they can be perceived while responding to their own particular resonance (VI 101-2/136).[76] Thus our intersubjective relationship is marked by a continual and mutual exchange and transformation between our bodies as we enquire into each other, impose our view on the other and discover our view to be already changed in response to the other.[77]

4.3.2 Objects and others

The encounter with another person is modelled here on the encounter of me with an object. From his writings in the *Phenomenology* through to the notes in *The Visible and the Invisible,* Merleau-Ponty does not give the encounter with the other much of a different significance than the encounter with objects and with the world in general. In the first work he writes: "the problem of the existential modality of the social is here at one with all problems of transcendence. Whether we are concerned with my body, the world, the past, birth or death, the question is always how I can be open to phenomena that transcend me" (PhP 363/422). In his last work he notes in a similar vein: "the chiasm is not only a me/other exchange…it is also an exchange between myself and the world, between the phenomenal body and the 'objective' body, between the perceiving and the perceived" (VI 215/264). This equivocation of my relation with others, objects, 'the world', or with my own body is not without problems. The hold other people have over us and the extent to which we feel that

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76. See also chapter one (1.2.2).
77. For an account of disharmony, see chapter five (5.3.1)

our bodies overlap and extend into one another seems at first sight much different than the hold that objects have over us and the manner in which there is overlap between us and the object. As Luce Irigaray points out:

> Our body is not only set down or situated in space, placed side by side with other bodies, or other things. It is also intertwined with them and interlacing of those within it. It thus constitutes a place made from flesh which no longer greatly resembles Descartes' *partes extra partes* space. But this is not simply due to the fact that it is a body; it is rather because it is always in relation with…a being-in-relation-with which is modulated differently according to whether the relation is with another human, another loving being or a fabricated thing, be it material or mental.[78]

Irigaray thus echoes Merleau-Ponty's claim about the intertwining of our body with the world and the things in the world, highlighting the notion of *relationship*. Following Irigaray, Merleau-Ponty's claim that "I feel myself being looked at by the things" (VI 139/181), should be understood differently than a claim that 'I feel myself being looked at by another'. I grant Irigaray her point and think that Merleau-Ponty too easily equivocates between other persons and objects. Irigaray reminds us that the relationship we have with things or with other persons is not the same, which makes good phenomenological sense. For example our attitude to our favourite clothes is not the same as the attitude we take to the chalk we use to write on the backboard, which again is not the same as the relations we have with our sister or with the cashier at a supermarket.[79] An initial Merleau-Pontian answer to this allegation is precisely that the human body *belongs* to the world and *shares* in its materiality. Merleau-Ponty's notion of embodied existence is important because it

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78. Irigaray, "To paint the invisible," 403.

79. This example is a simplification of our day to day relationships with things and people. We can feel more attached to things than people and treat people more like objects of use than things. For example our relationship to our clothes (cars, houses) are sometimes experienced as more personal than our relationship with a cashier (call centre employee or cleaner). In these cases other subjects are objectified and no longer recognised as open subjectivities (see also 5.3.1).

makes paramount: (i) that we cannot withdraw from the world in which we find ourselves, and (ii) that we participate in rhythms of affecting and being affected by *both* objects and subjects in the world. My environment exerts a real pull on my body and calls it to respond such that my body is not only a measurant of other persons but a measurant of *all*. A more in-depth answer to this problem will follow in the discussion of our specular reversibility in the next chapter.

4.3.3 Concluding note: philosophy and astonishment

Levin connects the receptivity that perception requires to the Heideggerian notion of thanking for the gift of the given. To 'let be', Levin claims, is to approach the given in an appropriate manner as thankfulness.[80] Thankfulness does not surface in Merleau-Ponty's writing about 'letting be'. Instead appropriately to let the object be means to be confirmed in the *astonishment* we have in face of the world. Here again Merleau-Ponty refers to a decentred subject who will never be able fully to grasp that which she questions, but rather that which she questions keeps opening up new dimensions of wonder to the subject. In this way Merleau-Ponty follows and extends Plato's observation that philosophy is grounded in wonder.[81] Not only is wonder the *beginning* of philosophy, but it is also its *aim* [*l'object*] (VI 101/135). This note on wonder or astonishment revisits an insight first expressed in the introduction (section ii) and in chapter three (3.1.2): Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, we saw, does not aim at fulfilment in a Hegelian absolute knowledge, but instead Merleau-Ponty writes that

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80. Levin, *The Philosopher's Gaze,* 191. Heidegger, "Gelassenheit," 66-67.
81. "This is an experience which is characteristic for a philosopher, this wondering: this is where philosophy begins and nowhere else." Plato, "Theaetetus," trans. M.J. Levett, rev. Myles Burnyeat, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1997), 173 (155d).

there is neither beginning nor end, but instead there is only a constant volatile opening up that is an astonished searching (IP 61).

5

Reflections of others

> What if I thought only after the other has been inserted, introjected into me? Either as thought or as a mirror in which I reflect and am reflected. (Irigaray, *Speculum*, 183)

> The flesh *is a mirror phenomenon*, and the mirror is an extension of my relation with my body. (VI 255/303)

Allow me to complete the circle by returning to a discussion that began in chapter one. In the context of the body as measurant I discussed there the notion that one's body is a mirror for other bodies (and for the world). Through Irigaray's critique the mirror was presented negatively as a narcissistic technical artifice that is unable to reflect the living quality of that which is mirrored in it.[1] In this chapter I engage the question of the mirror again in order to better understand its exemplary function as an instrument of our body's reflexivity (EM 168/34). Because of the phenomenological and ontological analyses in the previous chapters, I now have more conceptual tools with which to understand how the mirror is an extension of both my relation with my own body and my relation with the bodies of others. Fittingly, this also means that this return to the beginning is not a mere repetition, but rather it is a renewed opening up of a question that will bring us new insights into the encounter between embodied subjects. These new insights are partly brought about through Merleau-Ponty's turn to psychoanalysis. In this chapter, I explore several psychoanalytic themes as they surface in Merleau-Ponty's lecture on child psychology, "The Child's Relations with Others," and in his 1958-1960 course

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1. See also chapter one (1.1.2 and 1.1.3).

on nature.[2]

To begin with, I return to the problem of the narcissistic mirror and present it as a *shallow* mirror. The notion of the shallow mirror is challenged throughout the first two parts of the chapter. First, the shallow mirror is questioned when I explore the 'mirror-stage' in child development. I argue that rather than returning the child to herself, the mirror-stage reveals the social community to the child. Second, the shallow mirror is challenged when I propose a more complex reading of the reflections of the body by analysing the social dimension of two other senses: hearing and touch. Hearing and touch interrupt and complicate the child's encounter with the mirror. I argue that the social dimension that is present in vision, hearing, and touch require rethinking the reflective body as a *concave* mirror[3] whose vision is no longer totalising.

I close the chapter with yet another aspect of reflection, namely its projecting and introjecting quality. In this context I discuss Merleau-Ponty's notion of the *Ineinander* [in-one-another]. I give the complicated intertwining of the *Ineinander* a first critical reading in the framework of another of Merleau-Ponty's psychoanalytic adaptations: the oppositional structure of sadomasochism.[4] Whereas Merleau-Ponty successfully adapts the notion of the mirror-stage to fit with his phenomenological insights, I argue that reading the *Ineinander* in terms of sadomasochism strips the ontology of the flesh of some of its most attractive features. Through

2. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Nature: Course Notes from the Collège de France,* compiled and with notes by Dominique Séglard, trans. Robert Vallier (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2003). *La Nature: Notes Cours du Collège de France,* établi et annoté par Dominique Séglard (Paris: Éditions du Suil, 1995). Hereafter cited as *Nature.* In all references the English page number precedes the French.

3. A mirror that is hollowed out. This notion of a 'hollow mirror' allows us to revisit the ontological hollow that was presented in the previous chapter.

4. I present a more productive reading of the *Ineinander* in the afterword.

sadomasochism the fragility of the mirror is exposed as it is shattered by the necessity of violent perception. The chapter concludes posing a question concerning ethics.

5.1 Mirrorings: towards sociality

5.1.1 Revisiting solipsism: Narcissus' shallow mirror

In *Antwortregister* Waldenfels recounts a tale of jubilation and suffering when he retells the story of Narcissus. The beautiful young man, Narcissus, encounters his own image in the water after having scorned many lovers. He first *does not recognise* the beautiful creature as his own reflection; instead he sees this image as the appearance of another being with whom he falls deeply in love. This suggests that Narcissus' initial jubilation does not refer to the discovery of *himself,* but instead it refers to himself understood as being *another.* Bending over to embrace this lovely being but discovering the surface of the water instead, Narcissus learns that he is actually looking at himself. This discovery plunges him into despair and while looking at himself he withers away until he dies and turns into a narcissus flower. Narcissus' downfall is that he is unable to look past himself while he attempts to find the other who can love him. Waldenfels concludes that Narcissus searches for the other only in himself.[5] In his search for the other Narcissus is caught in a mirror-cabinet in which he never meets others, but instead only meets himself.[6]

The narcissistic mirror seduces the subject into self-love and drowns the subject in this love. Narcissus' self-love is therefore not a joyous love and recognition

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5. Waldenfels, *Antwortregister*, 486.
6. "*Spiegelkabinet*" (Waldenfels, *Antwortregister,* 499). See also Irigaray's critique in chapter one (1.1.2).

of oneself (although narcissism is often depicted as such), but rather it is the despair that in the very closeness of one's mirror image one can never coincide with this image, embrace it and make it other. I call this narcissistic mirror that does not give us anything of the other, a *shallow* mirror. If we understand the mirror 'shallowly', then the mirror is nothing more than a reflective device with a smooth surface without any real depth. The notion of a shallow mirror fits with our common intuitions about mirrors. After all, the mirror is a reflective surface precisely because it is fully closed and does not absorb the light. Because it cannot be infused with the light that touches it, the light bounces off as soon as it touches the surface of the mirror. This results in returning to the viewer a virtual image of what was hitherto hidden (i.e., her face).[7] The mirror itself is unaffected by this rebounding of light and is submissive to it. The mirror merely reflects the original and does not add anything to it or change anything in it.[8] The shallow mirror gives everything back to the viewer and shows her the 'complete' or total image of what is mirrored. On this 'shallow' view the mirror is merely a passive device and all activity takes place in the 'real' object and the light rays that shine on it.

When the mirror is understood as a *shallow* mirror, there are some obvious problems with the view that the other is a mirror to me (see chapter one, 1.1.2). Irigaray rightly argues that when the other is my (shallow) mirror then this means

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7. The image we see in the mirror is thus not real but we have learned to make good use of this 'unreal' or virtual image that the mirror-device offers to us. For example, it helps us guard dead corners and check on our physique and our health. The virtual image can be calculated and measured. The claim made below is not that this more intellectualist and scientific understanding of the mirror is incorrect. But rather that a much richer phenomenological account can be given of it.

8. An approximation of a 'total vision' can be obtained when one adds other mirrors that show a body or a thing from all sides. Another example of a 'total' vision is the image that is displayed in a convex mirror which captures the whole surroundings. For an excellent example of totalising vision of a convex mirror see Escher's 1935 drawing *Hand with Reflecting Sphere.*

that she is not affected by my reflection in her.[9] I merely bounce off of her and I am given back to myself as I really am. Thus, the other returns my image to me without modifying it or adding anything of herself to it. In this case the other is reduced to being the pure passive reflector of my actions and I am exalted as pure activity. From all others and from all directions *my activity* bounces back to me and whatever I encounter or whoever I face, she finds her active origin in *me*. Consequently the world I live in, and everything and everyone in it, reflects only me. Once again we have returned to the problem of solipsism because these mirroring others do never have a real and active presence in my world. This is so because as a shallow mirror the other is refused any active status from the beginning. The image that is reflected in the shallow mirror is a *narcissistic* image because I can do no other than to see myself and I cannot discover anything of the other in this vision. This means that as a seer I am a prisoner to the limitless symmetry of living in a 'palace of mirrors.'[10]

What needs to be explained, beyond this narcissistic account of mirroring, is how the image in the mirror can give us another. That is, how can the mirror bring us the true doubling of the flesh when its physical function is to bring us mere *virtual* and narcissistic doubling? I argue that this can only happen because: (i) the mirror is not a passive device, but instead it is an active instrument that gives us back to ourselves infused with life, and also infused with the presence of the other. I discuss this point below beginning with the development of a child who for the first time

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9. *Speculum of the Other Woman,* 135. Weiss explains, "[Irigaray] argues that women's flesh has historically been understood as a (deficient) mirror of men's flesh, a specular surface that, far from revealing genuine difference, reveals only what men want to see" ("Urban Flesh," 148). See also Irigaray's reading of Plotinus's claim that the unaffected mirror is the parallel of the (female) matter that is unaffected by the form that is pressed upon it. Matter is unchanging, immune and untouched and submissive to the idea (image) that is reflected in it. *Plotinus' Enneads* in Luce Irigaray, "Une Mere de Glace" in *Speculum of the Other Woman* (168-79).
10. Irigaray, *Speculum,* 137.

recognises her or himself in a mirror. As Levin convincingly argues, the Merleau-Pontian mirror-stage shows how the child encounters in the mirror image "a subjectivity whose identity is not necessarily centred on egological experience."[11] And (ii) the other is also present in the mirror image because *the reflective doubling has already begun* before I step in front of the mirror. It is important to realise that the mirror is not the sole origin of the reflective doubling of my body, but rather the mirror is an instrument of a social doubling that *completes* a visual, auditory, and tactile development, which has already begun at the first beginning (ecstasy) of embodied life. This last point requires us to rethink the shallow mirror as a *concave* mirror.[12]

5.1.2 The mirror-stage in child development

For most of us who live in a world that is visually preoccupied (as we are surrounded by mirrors, visual recording devices and advertising), everyday our own mirror-image captures us and fills us with joy, indifference, or concern. While we might not generally fall *fully* captive to our image, we have our own narcissistic traps as we carefully study our faces in the morning, as we glance at ourselves in shopping windows and car mirrors, as we are continually fascinated to see ourselves in photos or videos, and as we feel upset or amused by the distorted faces that approach us from the gleaming metal of a round teapot.[13]

The mirror is also one of the instruments of choice for a psychologist who wants to test a child's (or animal's) conception of 'self'. The classic psychological experiment is the so-called 'rouge test'. After marking her forehead with a red spot, a

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11. Levin, "Visions of Narcissism," 64.
12. See 5.2.
13. This concern with mirrors is of course also related to Western Society's continuing obsession with visually attractive (female) bodies.

child is put in front of a mirror. It is argued that if she locates the spot on her *own* head rather than on the head of the 'ghost' in the mirror, then this proves that she recognises herself as a unified embodied self.[14] This ability to recognise oneself in a mirror occurs in children of about two years of age. The claim is that mirror recognition is an important factor in self-recognition which requires that one have a concept of 'self' and that one understands that the body that one sees in the mirror is one's *own* body and, consequently, that this body that is seen at a distance from oneself in the mirror can be found *on this side* of the mirror.

It might not be surprising that as a phenomenologist of perception (and most notably of *visual* perception) Merleau-Ponty's reading of child development is strongly grounded in the child's encounter with her mirror image. This makes sense also because the mirror not only interests a child during the above mentioned laboratory experiments. On the contrary, these experiments work because they reflect a real life situation. A young child is often fascinated with reflecting surfaces and enjoys being held up in front of a mirror by a parent or caregiver. In "The Child's Relations with Others" Merleau-Ponty follows the work of the psychologists Henri Wallon and Paul Guillaume. He writes that when an infant is held up in front of a mirror at first s/he merely fixates on the mirror image.[15] A significant change occurs when the infant smiles at the parent in the mirror, but nevertheless, turns toward the parent when s/he hears the parent's voice coming from behind. At this

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14. G.G. Gallup Jr., "Self-recognition in chimpanzees and man: a developmental and comparative perspective," in *The Child and Its Family,* ed. M. Lewis and L. Rosenblum (New York: Plenum, 1979), 107-126. Interestingly this test shows that some higher animals and apes also have this ability to recognise themselves in the mirror.
15. In the following discussion I adopt the at times awkward pronoun s/he to refer to the child. I do this in order to smoothly integrate the quotes of Merleau-Ponty and Lacan without following their masculine oriented language.

point the child has not yet fully understood the reflective property of the mirror and s/he might still attempt to reach out and grasp the image in the mirror. Nevertheless, Merleau-Ponty argues, the mirror image has only a marginal and secondary existence for the child. To the child, the parent is somehow able to double him or herself into a real and a phantom parent by means of the mirror (CRO 128/192).

The difficulty with recognising one's *own* body in the mirror is that the child "must displace the mirror image, bringing it from the apparent or virtual place it occupies in the depth of the mirror back to himself" (CRO 129/193). The problem is: how can a child *recognise* a face *as her or his own* when s/he has never seen it?[16] Obviously, the child *has seen* the face and the body of her or his caregivers many times before and thus recognising them in the mirror is not a very difficult task. It is a greater accomplishment for the child to recognise her or his own body, which up until now s/he has seen only in fragments (hands, legs and body) but never as a full totality.

In "The Child's Relations with Others" Merleau-Ponty adopts Jacques Lacan's 'mirror-stage', in order to address the above question. Lacan writes how in the mirror the total form of the body is given as a *Gestalt* which is "in opposition to the turbulent movements with which the subject feels he animates it [the body]."[17] This infant body that before was spread out and fragmented, that felt the cry of the other infant, and that lived in the biting mouth of the other,[18] now is given an outline and permanence in the mirror. The crux of the argument is that the specular 'I' presents

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16. The problem is quite similar to the puzzle that underlies the problem of invisible imitation in chapter two (2.2.1): how can a child *imitate* a face when s/he has never seen her own?

17. Lecture notes from 1937 in: Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: the First Complete Edition in English,* trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2006), 95.

18. See chapter two (2.1 and 2.2.1.2)

the body of the child with visual boundaries, it limits it and thus the mirror separates the child's body and *alienates* it from others. Lacan argues that the *alienated* specular 'I' is the precursor of the *social* 'I', which requires the child to learn how to engage with the other in a dialectical relationship.[19] Merleau-Ponty follows Lacan and claims that the 'confused reality' of the infant months are coming to a close when the child recognises the image in the mirror as her or his *own* (CRO 136/203). This also means that the child for the first time realises that s/he is 'captured' by a 'self'. In addition and most importantly, Merleau-Ponty emphasises that the ability of the child to recognise her or himself in the mirror also makes the child aware of the fact that "he can…be seen by an external witness *at the very place at which he feels himself to be*" (CRO 129/193). S/he now realises that it is possible that others can take a viewpoint on her or him (CRO 136/203). Furthermore, acquiring a complete visual notion of her or his body allows the child to separate "what *he* lives from what *others* live as well as what he sees them living" (CRO 135/201). Both the child and the others have now become *seers with their own perspectives* and the child learns that the viewpoints taken by her or himself and by others can differ. To speak with Lacan, the child's body is alienated from others' bodies. Consequently, it becomes evident why the mirror stage is important to Merleau-Ponty: recognising one's body in the mirror accomplishes three things: (i) it (partly) overcomes the life of anonymous transitivity of the infant by capturing it in one bounded image; (ii) it brings to full realisation the doubling of one's body as a *seen*-seer;[20] and (iii) it is a symbol of the perspective of the *other*.[21]

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19. Lacan, *Écrits,* 98.
20. Later in this chapter I discuss other sensory doublings of the body that show that the doubling of one's body is a phenomenon also for the *pre-mirror-test* infant.
21. The other's look does not come to the infant exclusively through the mirror. The infant has ample experiences of being looked in the eye before she recognises the look of the other on her body-as-a-

These three accomplishments are related: the child acquires the ability to see her/himself as another might see her/him and as s/he might imagine her/himself to be seen: "the specular image has a de-realising function in the sense that it turns the child away from what he effectively is, in order to orient him toward what he sees and imagines himself to be" (CRO 137/204).[22] This visual structuring and limiting of the body as a self is something in which the child simultaneously *jubilates* (the recognition of her/himself as a self) and *suffers* (the alienation of being as others see her/him).

5.1.3 Beyond Narcissus to the social community

In every stranger, Waldenfels claims, we see ourselves reflected. This also means that as soon as I look in the eyes of the other there are *multiple* reflections at play because *she also reflects herself in me*. Waldenfels describes this peculiar interchanging look as: "I see that you see that I see that you see that I see."[23] He adds that in this interchanging look we closely approach coincidence. However, Waldenfels points out, one always escapes this point of coincidence because the mirror is not a mere (shallow) reflector but instead it is a detector that first allows oneself to be

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whole in the mirror. Early communication between infants and their caregivers is usually preceded by making direct eye-to-eye contact with the infant (Colwyn Trevarthen, "The Self Born in Intersubjectivity: Psychology of an Infant Communicating," in *The Perceived Self: Ecological and Interpersonal Sources of Self-knowledge*, ed. Ulric Neisser [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993], 130) and infants are generally captivated by face-like shapes.

22. See also Gail Weiss' chapter "Body Image Intercourse: A Corporeal Dialogue Between Merleau-Ponty and Schilder" for an excellent account of the mirror stage and the narcissistic structure of the body image (in *Body Images,* 7-38). In her book Weiss considers intercorporeality in the context of a discussion on what role (multiple) body images play in our everyday experience.

23. Waldenfels, *Antwortregister,* 499. He argues that while reflecting each other, the interchanging look [*Wechselblick*] is infinite but never symmetrical because the look always starts somewhere (in me or in you). Its symmetry could only be observed by a god's eye or by a disinterested spectator.

discovered and then alienates the self through the gaze of the *other*.[24] At this point Waldenfels adopts Lacan's observation that one's reflected image is first jubilantly recognised as one's own, and then alienated because this image comes to us through the other's perspective. I add that this also means that Waldenfels needs to let go of a particular narcissistic account of self-mirroring. It is important to note that while Narcissus' jubilation referred to the image of the beautiful *other* gazing up at him, the jubilation of the mirrored subject is described as the jubilation of the recognition of *oneself*. Narcissus' despair concerns the discovery of his *self-image*, whereas the alienation of the mirrored subject concerns the discovery of the *other's gaze*. Consequently, I claim that these two accounts of mirroring are structured differently: Narcissus perceives the other but discovers only himself; the mirrored subject perceives herself but discovers truly the other's gaze.[25] Through discovering the other's perspective, the subject in front of the mirror discovers that she was always already there for *another*. On this reading, the mirror-stage does *not* lead to narcissism but to an understanding that *we are part of a larger social whole*.

To clarify, I use the word 'narcissism' above with explicit reference to the Narcissus myth. The mirror-stage, I just argued, is not structured like this myth: it does not lead to a discovery of only oneself, but instead it leads to a discovery of the other's gaze. However there is a behaviour that is often called 'narcissistic' which in fact only appears *after* the discovery of the gaze of the other. I call this behaviour 'self-preoccupation': being preoccupied with oneself in the eyes of others. Although Merleau-Ponty refers also to the Narcissus myth (CRO 136/203), when he describes

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24. Waldenfels, *Antwortregister,* 499.
25. Waldenfels moves easily and quickly between the myth of Narcissus and the description of the Lacanian subject. This makes it unlikely that he has noticed this structural difference himself.

the so-called 'narcissism' of the child (CRO 137/204), he truly describes it as a preoccupation with oneself for another. First, Merleau-Ponty argues that others tear me away from myself more than a mirror is able to do. This is so because the mirror reflects my body to me as it has always been: looking into the mirror I realise that my body has always already been visible for other seers. The rupture and alienation of myself therefore does not happen merely because of the physical and technical properties of the mirror, but because of the presence of *other seers*. After having discovered the gaze of the other, a conflict arises "between the *me* as I feel myself and the *me* as I see myself or as others see me" (CRO 137/204). The problem is that I can never know the perspective of the other because I do not see myself precisely as the other sees me. In addition I have only limited power over the other's gaze. All I can do is to imagine how the other sees me, and try to let this image fit with how I want to be seen. The awareness of a "me that is visible at a distance, an *imaginary* me" (CRO 137/204) brings about a preoccupation with myself insofar as I try to make myself look to the other as I want the other to see me (as good or bad, as pretty, strong, smart or needing help). Young children are clearly occupied with this kind of role playing behaviour in order to draw attention from other children or to be noticed by adults. Adults are also still caught up in this behaviour: I might feel a need to look in the mirror before I leave the house, I carefully select clothes for work or leisure, and I wonder how my behaviour is evaluated by others and how this evaluation can be turned to my favour.[26] This behaviour is in some sense self-centred or self-serving which explains why one might want to call it 'narcissistic'. I refrain

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26. I do not want to imply that this behaviour is 'bad', but rather it is quite a common and important behaviour that enables one to be part of a social community.

from calling it narcissism because it is a complex behaviour that is a form of self-directed behaviour that it is always also *other*-directed behaviour because it requires first an understanding of the other's gaze. For this reason this kind of preoccupation with oneself is already *social* behaviour. Merleau-Ponty expresses this when he writes that:

> [t]he child's problem is not so much one of understanding that the visual and the tactile images of the body…in reality comprise only one, as it is of understanding that the image in the mirror is his image, *that it is what others see of him*…and the synthesis is less a synthesis of intellection than it is a synthesis of *coexistence with others*. (CRO 140/208, my emphases)

The philosophical significance of the mirror stage is thus not so much the acquisition of a new intellectual skill, but rather it brings to the foreground our complicated coexistence with others.[27] This coexistence with others does not only play out in the visual domain. Other senses, notably hearing and touch, are able to break through our visual preoccupations and bring us into contact with others through different dimensions of sense.

5.2 Interrupted reflections of my body

5.2.1 Interrupted vision

Waldenfels points out that one does not only look the other in the eye, but also that one falls under the gaze of the other [*unter die Auge kommen*].[28] He argues that this look is the look of a stalker and comes from behind, it is a look that makes one feel vulnerable. In order for this argument to work Waldenfels draws together both Sartre's account of the battle of the gazes and Merleau-Ponty's notion of the

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27. "[R]eflection is not an identification with oneself" (VI 204/254).
28. Waldenfels, *Antwortregister,* 498.

inhuman gaze. Merleau-Ponty writes that we mutually transform each other into objects only "if we both make ourselves into an inhuman gaze, if each of us feels his actions to be *not taken up and understood, but observed* as if they were an insect's" (PhP 361/419, my emphasis). However, Merleau-Ponty continues, this unbearable situation can only occur when it replaces a possible communication and both the other and I remain inactive.[29] Yet it is truly impossible for a subject who is "in and of the world" (ibid.) to remain inactive and thus I can never fully escape all possible communication with the other. Instead, each of my gestures and each of my glances towards the other is already a manner of communicating with her. This is so because gestures and glances are always already personalised, it is *my* way of looking that is different from *her* way of looking. This means also that when I encounter another, I encounter a glance or a *style of looking* and not a mere eye or a pure look that captures and paralyses me. Each gesture and each glance of the stranger makes her come closer to me and be less strange. Her inhuman gaze has always already been interrupted by her style of being.

Merleau-Ponty emphasises that the inhuman gaze is most clearly interrupted when the other or I start to *speak* (PhP 361/419).[30] This comment is interesting because from the beginning of life the subject is familiar with both the other's voice and her own. The bias towards the visual sense that is present in most of Merleau-Ponty's work makes one forget that vision is almost never experienced in isolation

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29. "Each existence finally transcends the others only when it remains inactive and rests upon its natural difference" (PhP 361/419).

30. See also Al-Saji's argument that vision needs to be supplemented by the voice: "'Speech…would interrupt this fascination [of vision]...' (*Signs* 24/17). In excess of its visibility, the body before me begins to smile, to speak and to think. This body is no longer an object in general, any *voyant* [seer], but reveals a particular character, and expresses a specific style of life" (Alia Al-Saji, "Vision, Mirror and Expression: The Genesis of the Ethical Body in Merleau-Ponty's Later Works," in J. Hatley, Jamice McLane and Christian Diehm, *Interrogating Ethics: Embodying the Good in Merleau-Ponty,* 54-55).

from the other senses. Worthy of note in this context is the following comment by Husserl:

> It seems, from my observation, that in the child the self-produced voice, and then, analogously, the heard voice, serves as a first bridge for the Objectification of the Ego or of the formation of the '*alter*', i.e., before the child already has or can have a sensory analogy between his visual Body and that of the 'other' and, afortiori, before he can acknowledge to the other a tactual Body and a Body incarnating the will.[31]

Husserl's remark reminds us that the mirror is not the only instrument of the doubling of the body. In *Antwortregister,* Waldenfels offers us three sensuous doublings: (i) eye, look, and mirror; (ii) voice, hearing, and echo; and (iii) hand, touch, and handshake.[32] Below, I follow Waldenfels' analysis in order to explore the social significance of the voice and of touch and in order to show how they are able to interrupt and complement the visual doubling of the mirror.

5.2.2 Echoing voices

The Narcissus story is intertwined with the story of the nymph Echo. This talkative girl has been punished by the gods which means that she can never again initiate a conversation. Instead, she can only repeat the last few words of another's sentence. Echo feels great love for Narcissus, but because she cannot begin to speak she has to wait for him to say something. When he calls out to his lost comrades, she echoes his words, declares her love and approaches him to embrace him. His subsequent rejection of her leaves her to pine after him. Again the myth has a tragic ending when she dies and her bones turn to stone. All that remains of her is her resonating voice

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31. Husserl, *Ideas II*, 95n1. See also Helena De Preester's remarks on this passage in "Two Phenomenological Logics and the Mirror Neurons Theory," in Helena de Preester and Veroniek Knockaert, *Body Image and Body Schema,* 46-7.
32. Waldenfels, *Antwortregister*, 487, 498, 506.

that is scattered over the earth and rebounds off of every rock. Waldenfels presents Echo as the one who gives herself fully for the other and *who doubles the stranger* rather than doubling herself (as Narcissus does). He writes: "the echo-voice looks for herself only in others."[33] Waldenfels presents the sense of hearing as an assembly of voice, hearing, and echo. He argues that the last one, i.e., the echo, adds the social dimension to the auditory sense.

From the earliest moments of existence we are enveloped in a fabric of sounds, sounds of other bodies and voices, and sounds that come from my own body. Some of these sounds come from 'the outside' some I hear 'from the inside'. What one hears of oneself is one's voice and both the 'outer' and 'inner' activities of one's own body. This hearing of oneself is almost always also a *feeling* of oneself. Playing with the vibrating sensation of the air in her lungs, the body doubles back on itself when the infant hears and feels her own voice. Babbling, the child does not only witness a world of sounds but witnesses her self-produced voice.[34]

Hearing one's own voice is a good example of a self-doubling that generally develops before one understands the visual self-doubling in the mirror. However, Waldenfels reminds us, hearing is a very different sense than sight. For example, there is no real interchange of hearing [*Wechselhören*] but there is an interchanging look [*Wechselsehen*].[35] The acoustic double-play has a limit because I cannot 'hear myself hearing' as I can 'see myself seeing'. Instead I hear myself *speaking* and I hear my own voice as "I hear my own vibration from within; as Malraux said, I hear myself with my throat" (VI 144/187), which implies that 'hearing myself speaking' is

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33. Ibid., 486.
34. See also Phillipe Rochat, *The Infants World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001) 38.
35. Waldenfels, *Antwortregister*, 493.

an intermodal rather than intramodal phenomenon. Hearing myself with my throat means that at the same time that I *hear* my voice, I have a *tactile* sensation of my voice as it is produced by the resonances of my vocal cords. Thus as soon as we speak, as soon as we make a vocal sound, we both hear and feel ourselves from the inside.

There is more to hearing than the above description of it as an intermodal sense. From very early on, hearing and babbling are already a social phenomenon and a playful exchange between caregiver and child. Colwyn Trevarthen describes what he calls a proto-conversation between caregiver and infant as a "musical duet"[36] in harmony and counterpoint. Both caregiver and infant imitate each other's facial expressions and cooing sounds in a give-and-take manner. Parents most often start the 'conversation' by copying the babbling voice of the infant. This echoing back of the infant's babblings is done by distorting them, giving them back to the infant higher pitched and with more exaggerated vowels. Later when the infant in turn starts to echo the words of the caregiver, this exaggerated echoing continues. There is evidence that suggests that these exaggerations emphasise the most important vowels of the 'mother-tongue' enabling the child to learn a language.[37] Babbling and learning to speak thus take the shape of a playful dialogue in which both caregiver and child hear the sounds one makes being echoed back by the other. In this manner, the voice of the other comes to us in our earliest existence as an echo of our own voice. This echo is a *lively* echo as it changes stresses and frequencies, vowels, and words and gives them back to the speaker differently than they were originally uttered. There is no 'shallow' echo that gives back the sound exactly the way it was

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36. Trevarthen, "The Self Born in Intersubjectivity," 137.
37. Ibid., 131-132, 136.

received. Instead the echoing interlocutor has already changed and added to the sound and made it other. Engaged in echoing play, the infant is immersed in a world of sound that already has a particular social dimension.

What further work can the strange echo do, apart from giving an account of how the infant is engaged in a social dimension of sound? That is, how does the echo complicate the auditory experience of hearing oneself speak? According to Waldenfels, the difference between visual and auditory experiences is that our mirror image is *new* to us. The voice, he writes, is not new to us since we have heard it before. However there is more to say about this distinction between my unfamiliarity with my mirror image and my familiarity with my own voice. That is, this distinction fails on two accounts. On the one hand, the mirror image is not altogether new to me. In the mirror (and in the look of the other) my body is represented as a delineated whole but this does not mean that this body was never seen before. Before encountering my mirror image I have already seen fragmented parts of my body (e.g., torso, arms, and legs) and I might even have put them together as a relative whole (my feet connecting to my legs, my legs connecting to my torso, etc.). On the other hand, I am not fully familiar with my own voice. Listening to my own voice I have both a tactile and auditory sense of it. But even now I can still be surprised by the sound of my own recorded voice when I hear it as others do 'from the outside'. Merleau-Ponty writes insightfully: "I do not hear myself as I hear the others, the sonorous existence of my voice is for me as it were poorly exhibited; I have rather an echo of its articulated existence, it vibrates through my head rather than outside" (VI 148/191-192). I do not normally hear my speaking 'from the outside' and, confronted with a number of voices, I am not sure whether I could

easily pick out my own voice-from-the-outside if the *style* of speaking (its inflections and its rhythm) is kept relatively similar across voices.[38] My taped-voice remains strange to me as if it is never really *my* voice. Thus it seems that I am neither fully familiar nor fully unfamiliar with my mirror image or my voice. In both cases it is especially important that I am not fully familiar to myself. I never wholly obtain an impression of my voice as it sounds to another, just as in the mirror I do not obtain a full image of myself as I appear to another. Instead it is precisely *another* subject who sees me and hears me, who breaks through my own self-security about my visual and auditory body, and who interrupts my familiarity with myself.

The echo gives my voice back to me differently than when I hear my voice either from the inside or (recorded) from the outside. As an echo my voice comes late, from a distance and it re-sonates in the wide open space before me, which means that the sound is given back to me again. Echoing and mirroring thus work according to a similar principle. The mirror refracts light waves, the echo re-sounds auditory waves; in both cases a sort of 'bouncing' of waves is involved. The bouncing of auditory waves in the echo does not happen as neatly and precisely as the reflection of light waves in the shallow mirror. The echo generally alters my voice as the sound resonates differently when I am in a long empty hallway, a rocky mountain range, or under a bridge. In the echo my voice turns into something strange and when we both speak, the differences between our voices almost disappear. The echo transforms my voice *and* the voice of the other to such an extent that they both sound as if they are no longer alive. Our echoes are no longer ours but have truly

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38. For example when speaking syllable for syllable, can one pick out the sound of one's own voice from other voices speaking similarly?

become the voices of the rocks (the voice of Echo herself). Interestingly Echo's 'dead' voice does not repel me or frighten me, as it is no longer really 'of me'. This transformation of the echoing voice gives rise to my delight in the play of the echoing space *together with the other*. Here we meet and try to outdo each other with our witticisms and garbled sentences.[39] The echo compels, mocks, and amuses without ever bringing me the discomfort of my own alienation. Instead of being alienated I am being *decentred* by the echo. In the echoing play of our conversation, it is no longer about me or her; but instead we lose ourselves in this play, that is, the echoing sounds themselves are at play.[40]

My voice is distorted even more when another echoes my words back to me. The sound of my voice alters as soon as it has entered the space between us, but in addition its reverberations transform within the cavities of her body, i.e., within that secret space within her to which I have no access. Consequently, when she speaks, she gives my voice back to me differently. Speaking to each other we engage in this echoing play, where our words are altered both by the echoing properties of our surroundings and by the twist that we give to each other's words. Thus, contrary to what Merleau-Ponty suggests, it is not the case that I hear my own voice when I listen to the other (PW 139/194) as it is the case that I see my own image when I look at the other. Instead I suggest that this speech is no longer mine or hers, but rather it is Echo's voice (i.e., the "hollow between speaking and hearing" [VI 246/295]), it is the voice of the space that is between and in us that compels, mocks,

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39. A typical echo-game for Dutch kids is to call out: "*Wie is de koning van Wezel?*" [Who is the king of Wezel] hearing back "…*ezel*" [donkey].

40. See also Gadamer's *Truth and Method*: "The movement backward and forward is obviously so central to the definition of play that it makes no difference who or what performs this movement" (103); and "The real subject of the game… is not the player but instead the game itself" (106).

and amuses us while pulling us into the conversation. It is in this echoing play that an infant first meets the other when her sounds are echoed and transformed by her own parents. Beyond childhood the echo continues to bring the other and myself together in play.

Hearing the echo in the other is playful; however there are serious and risky consequences of this auditory encounter between myself and another. It is not easy to listen carefully to the other. Waldenfels correctly points out that I cannot bar myself from hearing through covering my ears as I can shut myself to seeing by closing my eyes. Even the red shimmer of my eyelids can be shut out through covering my eyes with my hand or with a heavy piece of fabric.[41] Covering my ears with my hands does not take my hearing away; it merely muffles it. It is especially difficult to close myself off from hearing the sounds of my own body. Even if the sounds of the world can be shut out by building walls around me, I would still hear my body, my step, and the sound of each movement I make. In a quiet place my own heart beat can suddenly become ear-splittingly loud. However, Waldenfels reminds us that even though hearing cannot be covered up or shut out, it can be drowned out. For example we can block out voices in a busy space because they merely sound like a wall of white noise. This noise becomes a murmur in the background or even disappears from our experience, especially when we attentively read a book, work on our laptop, look at a painting, or think to ourselves. Vision can also drown out sound. Waldenfels writes about a yellow colour so bright that we stop hearing

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41. Even then I might still see some patterns and dots which might be due to after-images or to the pressure exerted on my eyes. The discussion above maintains mainly that it is easier to shut out visual perception with darkness than it is to shut out auditory perception with silence.

anything.[42] Colours can thus truly be 'loud' and my friend needs to call me several times before I realise that someone is speaking to me and I turn my gaze away from Barnett Newman's *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue?* Waldenfels' comment that one needs an "extraordinary form of wakefulness" in order to hear is thus especially accurate.[43]

When hearing is at times so hard then it might be no surprise that we often have difficulty really hearing what the other says. Her speech is easily drowned out by what I am looking at, by my own inner speech, or by what I choose to incorporate of her speech into mine. At such moments I have not given myself over to the play of the echoes, but instead I remain with myself. In order to really listen to the other I need to step away from the centre and open a space for the other in which her sound can resonate and in which I can 'let her be'. This requires a playfulness that, as María Lugones expresses so well, includes uncertainty and an "openness to surprise" in which both of us can creatively be.[44] At the end of this chapter I continue this thought in the context of an ethics of letting others be.

5.2.3 Touching one another

Living in the world we might choose to reduce our visual or auditory intake of the world by closing our eyes or covering our ears, but we cannot do the same for touch. Touch is the more persistent of the senses, although it is not necessarily always the most dominant and outspoken. Whether I walk, sit, or lie down, my body touches something. While I work, my bare feet feel the soft solidity of the surface on which

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42. Waldenfels, *Antwortregister,* 469.
43. Ibid.
44. María Lugones, *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing coalition against multiple oppressions* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 95-6.

they rest, my back is pressed against the yielding softness of a pillow and under my fingers the smoothness of the keyboard comes alive. While these sensations are most of the time tacitly experienced they do form a background of my being at this moment. In this manner we experience a world that is always already there for touch. Touch is, as Husserl describes it, always a double sensation: while we touch the world and feel it under our own feet so the world also touches us when it returns the pressure to our feet. Through touch the world always already leaves an impression on us.

Touch differs from vision insofar it does not give us an object in one instant, but instead it *takes time* to touch (just like it takes time to listen). In addition touch requires closeness. In order to grasp the object I need to reach over and in order to com-prehend it I need to let my fingers glide over it and explore every inch of it. Thus touch is made possible by movement or temporal displacement (it involves change). Since touch is movement it inserts a delay between the first touch and the full comprehension of what I touch. I am in direct contact with another when I touch her cheek, but it will take time for me to explore her face and discover its expressiveness solely through touch. Touch is linear in its unfolding and lends itself less easily to a totalising perception than vision.

Touch differs from both vision and hearing with respect to its demand on the subjects involved. I can see another person without her seeing me and I can listen to another person without her hearing me. The demand of touch is much more immediate: when I touch another, she also touches me and we both feel being touched. One cannot ignore touch in the same way that one can (pretend to) ignore a look or a call, because the other's touch stirs me directly. At the moment of touch it

seems that we touch each other without delay and without a break between us. Fanon recognises in touch a possibility to overcome the oppressive gazes and historico-racial voices of a racist society. He writes: "Superiority? Inferiority? Why not the quite simple attempt to touch the other, to feel the other, to explain the other to myself?"[45] Following Merleau-Ponty, Waldenfels writes that touch is socialised in the handshake. Through the handshake one senses the responsiveness of the other. Greeting someone through a handshake, we detect whether the other hand is warm, harsh, cool, or limp and we adjust our handshake accordingly. Giving our hand in a handshake (as in German and Dutch one normally says that one *gives* one's hand) we give something of ourselves and receive something from the other that already expresses her or his style. Handshakes are for Waldenfels a symbol of the intertwining of the self and the other and are offered as a sign of reconciliation. Thus it is suggested that touch lends itself quite well for exploring the social dimension of embodied existence because it involves a direct and responsive connection between subjects. But really, how direct and responsive is touch? In order better to understand touching *another* subject, below I explore other-touch in conjunction with *self*-touch which appears to be the most direct of all tactile experiences.

The example of self-touching (or double-touching) is exemplified in Merleau-Ponty's work by the image of my left hand touching my right hand, while the right hand is touching an object in the world (VI 141/183, see also VI 134/174). Merleau-Ponty then wonders whether my touching of my own exploring hand would be similarly structured as my touching of someone else's exploring hand: "if my left hand can touch my right hand while it palpates the tangibles, can touch it touching,

45. Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks,* 231.

can turn its palpation back upon it, why, when touching the hand of another, would I not touch in it the same power to espouse the things that I have touched in my own?" (VI 141/183). The most obvious difficulty for answering this question lies in the fact that my two hands are part of one body, which is not the case for my hand and the hand of the other. Merleau-Ponty responds that there is a larger flesh of which both hands are part: we are bound together in an anonymous generality (an intercorporeal being, VI 143/185).[46] Thus it seems that the structure of self-touch matches the structure of other-touch after all. To touch another subject's exploring hand is an extension of my ability to touch my own exploring hand: in both I discover the power of taking up and comprehending the things it touches. However, both self and other-touch also are subject to a continual failure to really *touch the touching*. Merleau-Ponty writes:

> my left hand is always on the verge of touching my right hand touching the things, but I never reach coincidence; the coincidence eclipses at the moment of realisation, and one of two things always occurs: either my right hand really passes over to the rank of the touched, but then its hold over the world is interrupted; or it retains its hold over the world, but then I do not really touch *it*—my right hand touching, I palpate with my left hand only its outer covering. (147-8/191)[47]

It appears that touch is not so 'direct' after all because even in the closeness of self-touch there is already an interruption between the touched and the touching. According to Merleau-Ponty I cannot at the same time feel my right hand touching the world as I can feel my left hand touching my right hand. I cannot touch the touching. Either I feel my (active) right hand touching the world or I feel my left hand touching a (passive) right hand as an object under my touch. Consequently

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46. See also chapter one (1.1.3) for Irigaray's and Levinas' critique on this claim.
47. Similar arguments are made in VI 249/298, 254/302.

touch is split apart by a subject-object dichotomy: (i) within itself (left and right hand), and (ii) between itself and the world or itself and others. One would therefore have to conclude that in touch I (the subject) grasp my body, someone else's body or a thing precisely as an *object*. This account of touch has disappointing consequences for our thinking about touch as a promise of social equality and reconciliation because it reinstates the subject-object dichotomy within perception. The problem is that if I cannot feel her hand as a touching hand, then she merely is present to me as an object under my hand and in turn I become an object for her touch. Hence, we would touch each other reciprocally only as *objects* and Fanon's hopeful note ends in desolation.

When touch is the exemplar of the doubling of the flesh then it is necessary that the account of touch be complicated.[48] One curious part of Merleau-Ponty's example is that it does not really deal with double-touching at all. Merleau-Ponty discusses what is felt at the fingertips of the right hand and the left hand while they explore *different* things (i.e., the world or the right hand). Through the right hand Merleau-Ponty literally inserts a whole world in-between myself touching (the world) and myself touched (by a hand). I am interested in a different location of touch: I wonder what is sensed *in-between* the fingertips of the left hand and the back of the right hand. It is at this location that my touching left hand is reciprocally touched by the right hand. Alternatively I wonder how my touching right hand is touched by the world (or by another subject). In order to address these questions the example of touch needs to be adjusted.

Taking his cues from Merleau-Ponty, Waldenfels spends much time speaking

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48. See chapter four (4.2.4.1).

about touch as it takes place in the hands. By extension he takes the handshake to be exemplary for intersubjective touch (placing it next to the social character of the mirror and the echo). His focus on the hands is understandable because our hands are some of the most sensitive surfaces and versatile parts of our body. However, I worry about the handshake as the *primary* symbol for the social dimension of touch. This is partly because the handshake is an example that is foremost Western and masculine. In addition, to concentrate primarily on the hands is to overlook the other interesting touchings of the body. The hands are not the only entry point for touch as the eyes are for sight and the ears are for hearing. Rather my whole body is a complex surface of touch so that at any moment I am both touching myself and touching the world. Through touch I am always (tacitly) present to myself and to the world. Irigaray offers different examples of touch that are helpful when reflecting on double-touching. Her examples show that other bodily touchings and sensitivities are important for theorising about touch. In what follows I use three of Irigaray's examples of self-touch: touching hands as in prayer, the resting of the lips on each other and the folding of the genital lips of the woman. I use these examples because they are important and evocative images of self-touch. I do not, however, follow precisely Irigaray's further analysis of these images. Instead I explore whether these examples can be extended as exemplars of double-touching also between different subjects.

Irigaray also mentions the double-touching of the hands, but in a significantly different example. She presents an image of self-touching hands as hands in prayer

(or greeting): palms and outstretched fingers fully facing and touching one another.[49] When my facing hands touch, I feel my own touch most closely. At this moment of stillness I no longer distinguish between a hand that explores and a hand that is touched; there is no obvious exchange between activity and passivity. There is no exploration as actual movement, but instead the sensation is one of warmth. My hands closed and joined are both active and passive and neither active nor passive. Thus this account of the touching hands is promising because it allows for a double-touching that does not oscillate between actively touching (subjectivity) and passively receiving touch (objectivity). Still I would maintain that there is a peculiar *in-between*, a peculiar gap between those hands. When I locate the touch of my facing hands, I locate the sensation of warmth between my hands: I feel on the *surface between* my hands. This also means that my hands never become one organ; they do not coincide and fully flow into one another. Instead the flow between my hands creates a surface of warmth that is situated *between* my hands. The notion that these hands never become one also has to do with the possibilities of my hands. My hands are two and can be engaged in their own projects, my body knows their possibility of being at different places. The possibility of moving my hands already separates them even before a phone call breaks them apart and my right hand reaches for the phone while my left hand remains suspended in the air.

Irigaray reminds us that there are other sensitive parts of the body that are folded in self-touch. In silence my lips rest on each other in the simultaneity of activity and passivity. But again there is never really a sensation of unity. Like my hands, my lips are possibilities of self-movement: my hands open up through

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49. Irigaray, "The Invisible of the Flesh," 161.

projects and my lips open up through the voice. This means that my lips' double-touching includes the in-between of the possibility of speech.[50]

Irigaray most radically rethinks the double-touching of the body by drawing attention to the exclusively *feminine* double-touching of the genital lips:

> As for woman, she touches herself in and of herself without any need for mediation, and before there is any way to distinguish activity from passivity. Woman touches herself all the time and moreover no one can forbid her to do so, for her genitals are formed of two lips in continuous contact. Thus within herself, she is already two—but not divisible in one(s)—that caress each other.[51]

In the female body these sensitive lips are in continuous contact with each other such that no separation is felt between them. These two lips coincide in touch 'as if' they were *one* while at the same time they are never really one. The sensitivity of these lips in their stillness is a form of self-touch that is hidden and only comes to presence when a *third* touch separates them in order to uncover their sensitivity.[52]

Do these examples better capture a structure of touching that is not dependent on grasping the other as an object? Also, do they reveal something about what happens at that place where the touching and the touch come together? First, in all three examples touching is depicted as simultaneously active and passive without having become one and the same and without having to oscillate between object-touch and subject-touch, as such these examples are useful for theorising a touching

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50. While the interruption of *language* is here the most interesting example (because it connects back to the earlier discussion of hearing and voice), my lips are not exclusively opened by language. Lips also open when taking nourishment for the body, they open in a relaxing yawn, or in a kiss.

51. Luce Irigaray, "This Sex Which is Not One," in *This Sex Which is Not One,* trans. Catharine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 24.

52. While this example might imply that the lips are essentially only separated by a penetrating gesture of phallic culture (Irigaray's suggestion), one has to acknowledge that it also could be the woman *herself* who separates them by stroking them. For that matter it could also be another woman's (or even man's) non-penetrating caress which uncovers their hidden sensuality. Giving birth is another way in which these lips are opened up to sensation. All these examples could be further explored in a phenomenology of sexuality, sensuality, or birth.

that does not objectify. Second, it has to be acknowledged that when I touch the hand of another subject I do not experience this in exactly the same way as if I were touching my own hand (after all I cannot feel what you feel, and I cannot control the projects of your hand). Nevertheless, when closing our hands around each other, there is a similar sensation to touching my own hands together. That is, there is a sensation of a sensitive surface of warmth that is situated *in-between* our hands: this is where we touch and where we are both passive and active.[53] This surface is the medium through which we are connected to each other while neither having become one and the same nor having distinguished ourselves as wholly object or subject. Third, the above examples uncover the *hidden* sense of touch, which is a touch that disappears (momentarily) as touch. One might think here of the example of the woman's genital lips, but one could extend this also to other bodily touchings that are in the background. For example, my crossed legs or arms stop being experienced as touched when I am involved in other projects. However they do not stop being a hidden background of touch, a sensitive surface that makes itself known if my position changes.

Thus, the Irigarayan examples help describe a tactile structure that is not necessarily ordered according to a subject-object dichotomy. In addition her examples allow me to draw attention to what generally is seen as stereotypical feminine touchings (the sensitivity of facial lips, the resting of the genital lips, the folding of legs) in order to steer the social significance of touch away from its stereotypical masculine depiction through grasping and shaking hands. The other approaches me in multiple ways: through shaking my hand, but also through

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53. I discuss the notion of 'surface' in the afterword (section [i]).

embracing me, kissing my cheek or lips, or through caressing or holding me. Touch is a whole-body affair. One observes this clearly in the infant who explores her own body and the world with the help of her whole body, her hands, mouth, feet, back and belly.[54] As adults, intersubjective touch remains a whole-body affair when we shake hands, embrace, sit close together in the metro, or brush past each other during a busy event. In these touchings the other is close to me and has to be noticed. The living dimension of the body comes alive to me through the surface of touching between our bodies. Through the closeness of her body I feel her responsiveness, her drawing away, her tiredness, her agitation. In this manner our bodies are perceived not as objects but as living and thus active-passive subjects.

Letting go of the subject-object distinction within touch does not mean that touching the other is never objectifying. While the visual image of a handshake might symbolise agreement and openness it does not tell us what is felt in it. Handshakes can be visual symbols of reconciliation but its touching reality might be one of domination and hypocrisy, alienation and repulsion. The same is true for embraces, for kisses (one might think of the aloof 'air-kisses' that fail to land on one's cheek) and other purposeful and accidental touchings. While touch is not essentially structured according to the subject-object structure, this does not mean that touch is immune to the objectification of the touched. This also means that this discussion of

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54. From early infancy, a child is very much engaged in self-touching behaviour. Typical infant behaviour is the tactile exploration of her own body: she feels, strokes, bites, and pokes her own body regularly. In addition the infant might touch herself in what seems to be soothing behaviour (Robin J. Moszkowski and Dale M. Stack, "Infant Touching Behaviour During Mother–Infant Face-to-Face Interactions," *Infant and Child Development* 16 [2007]: 307–319). Because her motor skills do not normally enable a young infant purposefully to touch others, in early infancy other are more often initiator of social touch between them and the infant. Using touch the caregiver stirs the infant in order to wake her, strokes her to calm her, tickles her to engage in play and holds her close while she drinks or sleeps. This is remarkably different from the other two senses in which the infant can look the other into the eye and (most importantly) can call out to the other.

touch (understood as an openness to the other and as a contact surface through which the other is present in closeness) is not yet a discussion of ethics. Touch does not necessarily overcome the classification of subjects into the superior and the inferior, and thus it is not sufficient to refer to touch as that which overcomes oppressive gazes and domineering voices.[55] In the most extreme case touch becomes a way of control and objectification through punishment, abuse, or violence. Social control of the body is not only accomplished through exerting physical force onto it, caresses can also be used to subdue, manipulate, and dominate a living body. The body is especially vulnerable through its extended surface of sensitivity, its openness to the touch of others, and because it is difficult to ignore (the onset of) touch. The body is not wholly open to touch at all time, the onslaught of touch changes over time. A continued pressure on one's body can disappear to the background, one's body can 'get used' to a particular touch or pain sensation, and in some cases repeated physical violence can turn the body numb to this abusive touch. In these cases it is the repetition of touch that changes the body's affectivity to touch.[56] Notwithstanding the body's ability to protect itself from an enduring tactile sensation, the body remains especially open to be disrupted by the onset or change of touch. No matter whether the other touches me aggressively, lovingly, or indifferently I am initially called out of myself to attend to who (or what) touches me.

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55. In *Black Skin White Masks,* Fanon does not further take up the example of touch and leaves it unresolved whether or not touch would provide a promising alternative to an oppressive gaze. In his later writings he argues that the oppressive society can only be undone through the employment of violence. See for example Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth,* trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2005).

56. Repetition does not always lessen one's response to a touch sensation, it can also augment it. The repetition of a touch which is hardly felt in first instant can make the body more sensitive over time. This could be why a sibling's soft but steady shoulder pokes can be highly irritating after a while.

5.2.4 Mirror completion

Above, several social dimensions of sense were explored separately. However we rarely experience senses in isolation. When I perceive the other I might see, hear and touch her at the same time. Similarly, in the early life of an infant it does not happen often that one sensation (touch, sight, or hearing) is experienced by itself. Trevarthen describes a mother who calls her infant out of sleep by using different sensorial stimulations: "[a]lthough many of her actions seem to be directed to obtaining close eye-to-eye contact, she leads with touch and voice, and she may use the 'feel' of the infant's body, especially the hands, to sense awakening and readiness to be active."[57] This multisensory priming of the infant might then initiate a more uni-sensory exchange such as a proto-conversation, a peek-a-boo game, or tickling. Rochat argues that before mirror recognition, the infant already develops a sense of 'self' (an egological experience), through seeing parts of her body, feeling her body move, touching her body and through babbling to herself. These experiences do not normally take place separately. Rochat describes an infant who begins to experience her self-doubling, proprioceptive and multisensory body when she slowly brings her hands (initially out of sight) in front of her face, looks at them as she intertwines (touches) her fingers. Then, in a vocal burst of excitement she separates her hands and starts the same sequence again.[58] I extend this observation by claiming that multisensory self-oriented experiences together with the varied playful interruptions of others make it possible that multiple *selves* (i.e., this is a social experience) arise in conjunction. While looking at the other, I have heard voices echoing in the space

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57. Trevarthen, "The Self Born in Intersubjectivity," 130.
58. Rochat, *The Infant's World*, 39.

between us, and I have experienced the closeness of the other when she reduced the space between us to a sensitive surface of touching. In this multisensory play the other has surprised me and I have surprised myself in echoing back what I received. These various sense experiences finally come together in the mirror image when the child recognises her 'self' as present to others. The mirror completes and provides me with a visual boundary to the multi-sensing and multi-sensed body. However this 'self' will never completely remain captive to the contours of this image as other senses and other selves continue to interrupt it.

Thus, the mirror-stage is part of a process of socialisation that has long begun and that has slowly integrated different sensorial experiences of self-doubling and perceptions of others. This mirror body has already been infused with hearing and touch and ceases to be a shallow mirror; instead this mirror has already been *interrupted*, *opened up* and *hollowed out* by the social dimension of the look, the voice and touch.

5.2.5 The concave mirror: revisiting the other as hollow

Irigaray offers an interesting alternative to the shallow mirror which is supposed to return the light to us perfectly and totally. She writes that the subject, while searching for a mirror that wholly catches his reflection "is already faced by another specularisation. Whose twisted character is her inability to say what she represents."[59] The subject already meets another subject who is unruly and whose body is not for him a shallow mirror in which he perfectly recognises a reflection of his own body. Instead this mirror-body is twisted as a *concave specularity* which distorts that which is

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59. Irigaray, *Speculum,* 134.

reflected in it.[60] For Irigaray this dynamic is exemplary of the relation between the male subject and the female other. Irigaray gives a productive but also destructive power to the concavity of the other's reflectivity (the concave mirror is also a 'fire glass'). At the same time she describes how the subject occupies the hollow (a phallic image) and appropriates the mirror's multiple deforming images as his own.[61] Consequently, the concave mirror could be seen as both a promising alternative to shallow mirroring and also as a problematic image of subject domination. The problematic of the subject's appropriation and occupation of the concave mirror is discussed in the final section of this chapter (5.3). Below I explore the image of the concave mirror in more depth, giving it a more constructive reading. I propose that the reflective phenomena of all our bodies are thought more productively if we take up this suggestion of the concave mirror. The concave mirror is a suitable image within Merleau-Ponty's philosophy because it is able to provide another image for the folding over, the gap, or the hollow that takes a central place in his ontology of the flesh.

The concave mirror has a couple of interesting properties: it is a mirror that can reflect an incoming light wave multiple times within its own cavity. Consequently, this mirror gives neither one sole perspective, nor a total and complete vision of its source. Rather this mirror gives a different reflection depending on where one positions oneself with respect to the mirror. In this mirror I might see myself upright or upside down, my image might be *virtual* (i.e., an image seen behind or 'in' the mirror), or my image might be *real* and invisible until it is

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60. Ibid., 143.
61. Ibid.

captured somewhere in front (outside) of the mirror.[62] Because of these properties, this mirror always more or less distorts and restructures me; it adds something to my image in a way that the shallow mirror is unable to do. In its fringe this mirror offers me a kaleidoscope of confusing reflections that scatter me and break me into a thousand different fragments.

When translated to the intersubjective encounter, the image of the concave mirror both *complements* the analysis of reflection in this chapter and *complicates* the discussion on embodied encounters as 'giving the hollow' in the previous chapter.[63] It complements the discussion above because it offers us a reflective surface that is no longer shallow. This mirror, I suggest, does more than let light bounce off from its closed surface, but instead it is a resonance chamber for light, sound, and touch. I suggest that to imagine a mirror being infused with hearing and speech is to reconceive the mirror as a hollow in which our resonances and dissonances are echoed back and forth. In addition, to conceive a mirror as permeated with touch one needs a mirror that does not merely reflect but responds to me. I suggest that the concave mirror *moves* (touches) me and fragments me: it does not give me back to myself as a whole just like touch does not give me myself (or another) as a whole but only in fragments. Instead of offering me a neat and tidy contour to capture and complete myself, this mirror is able to return several images of me. When I truly

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62. At no point does the concave mirror give me back my image 'as it is'. It distorts my image, making it larger, smaller, or inverting it: (i) If I stand close to the mirror (distance[d]<focal point[f]), then the image is larger than me, upright, and virtual or 'in' the mirror; (ii) if my distance is equal to the focal point (d=f), then there is no image as it is formed at infinity; (iii) standing a bit farther away (f<d<2f, the image is real, larger than me, and vertically inverted; (iv) when my distance is twice the focal point (d=2f), then the image is real, inverted, and the same size; and (v) when I stand farther than twice the focal point away (d>2f), then my image is real, inverted, and smaller than me. In its fringe the multiple reflections of the concave mirror create a mosaic border in which the image is fragmented and scattered.

63. See chapter four (4.3.1).

open myself to the effect of the concave mirror, I discover myself as a multiplicity of selves. The concave mirror thus integrates the three senses discussed above: this mirror reflects me back to myself, while having first shaped and multiplied that image according it its own hollowing porosity; this mirror playfully echoes back the resonances and dissonances of my own voice differently than I had spoken them myself; this mirror moves me out of the centre of the world and through this movement it touches me in its fascinating response to me.

The notion of the concave mirror complicates the intersubjective relationship because we are for each other such multifaceted mirrors, and our reflective bodies are "dazzle[s] of multifaceted speleology…scintillating and incandescent concavit[ies]."[64] Merleau-Ponty writes that "in reality there is neither me nor the other as positive, positive subjectivities. There are two caverns…where something will take place" (VI 263/311).[65] Below I give a glimpse of the complexity of what 'will take place' in the social play between these two 'scintillating' caverns. Thinking about the intersubjective encounter as a play of multiple concave mirrors accomplishes two things: (i) the mirrored subject is no longer the sole source and author of the reflection, and the mirroring subject is no longer merely passive. Instead the mirroring subject adds reflections of her own to the dazzling play of reflections, which reshape the image of the mirrored subject. And (ii) the porous mirror also never reflects the subject according to the subject's own wishes, but instead it surprises the subject by reflecting her differently and in a different

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64. Irigaray, *Speculum,* 143.
65. See also my discussion of this quote in chapter four (4.3.1).

location.[66] The subject is no longer reflected back to herself as always being in the centre but instead she is fragmented, spread out, and relocated to the margin. The concave mirror thus sheds light on both the active-passive and centred-decentred dimensions of subjectivity. Thus when I meet this other and 'see myself' in her, this other does not return a complete image of myself to me, but instead she generates my image as already having been decentred and confused. In this curious concavity of the other I do not get back everything of myself, i.e., some of me is *absorbed* in her inner reflections, but I also receive *more* than I gave because some of her is added to what she reflects back to me. For this reason one can say: (i) that the contour of my mirror image is no longer a fixed and permanent limit, but instead it is open to change; and (ii) that both the other and I are no longer isolated from one another, but instead the surface through which we engage in a reflective interplay with each other is fuzzy and *porous*. That is, we flow into one another as I am partly absorbed into her reflections and as she adds to mine. In reflecting (on) me, the other has changed me and responded to me in a way that takes me by surprise. I can either delight in the creative sparkles of this concave, specular other or be concerned about her de-struct(urat)ive power.[67] In any case, what is returned to me stimulates me to respond again to the other and to continue this dialogue of reflectivity.

The phenomenological descriptions of this chapter and the previous chapters come together in the following account of the intersubjective encounter as the play between concave mirrors. In this chapter I have described how different, but never

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66. Also, for this reason the subject will always fail fully to appropriate the image that is returned to him or her.

67. 'De-struct(ura)ion' is Irigaray's term. With it she emphasises that the concave mirror has the power to give a new structure to what is mirrored but also can destruct it (*Speculum*, 135).

quite discrete selves arise together through multiple social dimensions of sense (sight, hearing/speaking, and touch). These multisensory exchanges between myself and others are partly made possible by my body's *doubly*-anonymous dimensions through which 'one' attunes and connects to other bodies.[68] Thus while we share a general anonymous life and 'slip into one another', each of us is also separated from this shared existence through the differentiation that makes of us always already bodies with their own individual styles. The social significance of the senses introduces me to the disruption of the gaze, voice, and touch of other subjects, and I discover that I am never safely enclosed within my own egological boundaries. The interruptions of others reflect back to me an image or echo of myself which encapsulates me but which never has a wholly fixed contour and over which neither I nor another has full power. At the same time I recognize the gaze, voice or touch of another subject at the heart of this image that is reflected back to me. These intersubjective rhythms of play and reflexivity are shaped in larger historical, social, and cultural rhythms of sedimentation and renewal.[69] Thus through this inter-play of (concave) reflectivity we discover each other and ourselves as always already taking part in a generative, multifaceted, and sometimes confusing relationship.

The description of the intersubjective encounter as the mutual reflection of two concave mirrors also makes sense within Merleau-Ponty's *ontological* philosophy of the flesh. In chapter four I discussed the flesh as our shared ontological home-ground which is a ground that falls away: i.e., it is a possibility of differentiation, a

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68. See chapter two (2.2.2.1)
69. See chapter three (e.g., 3.1 and 3.2.1)

volatile openness, or a hollow.[70] That is, the unifying flesh also makes possible our differentiation and separation from each other. Not only are we ontologically at home in this openness or hollow, but we also duplicate this hollow *within ourselves* when we 'give the other (or the thing) the hollow or the space to be'. However, Merleau-Ponty cautions, this is not a hollow with which I affect myself (VI 216/266). Thus I suggest that our concave, reflective interplay does not begin on the level of subjects, but rather the possibility of this reflexivity begins on the ontological level of the flesh. The flesh is the fundamental fold, hollow, or openness. It is within this originary openness that the first concave and incandescent reflectivity takes place as the flesh folds over itself and multiplies itself in a myriad of dazzling fragmentations of itself. Thus it is not *I* who duplicates the hollow of the flesh within myself, but instead it is the generative power of the *flesh* which makes possible that I become a reflective hollow for the world, for things, and for others.

In the context of the present chapter 'giving each other the hollow' obtains a new significance. In the previous chapter 'letting be' was introduced through the active-passive dimensions of 'giving space' and 'following'. I argued that as a giver the subject participates in the opening of the hollow without ever being in full control of this giving. In addition, 'letting be' meant that the subject follows the resonances of another while simultaneously transforming and being transformed by these resonances.[71] Giving the other a space to be is to let another be reflected and absorbed in the concavity of my specular body, to let her touch move me, and to let her voice resonate within me such that I am transformed. To follow another means

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70. See chapter four (4.2.4).
71. See chapter four (4.3.1).

that my body attunes to hers, follows her movement, and echoes her voice. But the space I have given to these visual, tactile, and auditory reverberations also has already refracted, fragmented, and transformed them and consequently the vision, movement, and voice that I reflect back to her are no longer the same. But this does not mean that I have appropriated her image, movement, and voice because their change is a consequence of my transformation in response to her. These reflective transformations that happen in-between us mean that neither of us has absolute power.

When I 'give the other the hollow' I do not invite the other to take up residence within me. The space which is opened up within me is not a place for another permanently to settle into; it is not a place in which she can be safely at home. Instead, I invite the other into a volatile space of incandescent reflections. This is a space in which the voices, touches, and gazes of both of us can affect us and resonate. This interplay of reflections is inherently social since it relies on our mutual response and openness to each other. As two hollow and specularising subjectivities we participate in a dazzling play of reflections between and within ourselves in which we continually re-discover each other and in which we are both continuously de-structured or re-constructed.[72] I may well recognise myself in the other, but I always risk discovering myself as already changed and fragmented, as having been taken out of the centre of the world, and as having been relocated to the margin. In this intersubjective play I am always affected by her and I discover her in

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72. This re-construction of the self does not mean that during each encounter we discover each other as being radically different. Instead I also can be re-constructed by the other and/or myself as the same again (e.g., as always being such a stubborn person). Re-construction is possible both as *re*-newal and re-*new*al and thus it is a repetition in the sense of a "continual birth which makes it always new and, precisely in this respect, always the same" (*Signs,* 184/231). See also chapter three (3.2.1 and 3.2.3.2[ii]).

continually more complex and dazzling reflections.

The above account of intersubjective 'play' corresponds well with Lugones' notion of loving "playfulness,"[73] especially when it culminates in a mutual willingness to give this openness to each other and to follow the other. However this harmonious and ethical exchange is not the necessary outcome of intersubjective play. In the last part of this chapter I first discuss a form of play that turns inherently violent, after which I consider the possibility of an ethics.

5.3 Projection and introjection: a first reading of the *Ineinander*

A consequence of speaking of the *porosity* of the flesh and of the *hollow* that *opens up*, is that these terms lend themselves to imaginations that emphasise a possibility of 'entrance' and introjection, occupation and 'penetration' of the one subject into the other. It is therefore not surprising that Merleau-Ponty entertains these possibilities. In the course on nature one finds references such as:

> Enigma of the body, as thing and as measurement of all things, closed and open, in perception as in *desire*—there are no two natures in it, but a double nature. The world and the others become *our flesh*. (*Nature* 211/273, my emphases)

> Freudian Eros and Thanatos rejoin our problem of the flesh with its double sense of opening and Narcissism, mediation and involution.— Freud truly saw with projection-introjection and sadomasochism the relation of the *Ineinander* of ego and the world, of ego and nature, of ego and animality, of ego and *socius*. (*Nature* 226/288)

These questions bring together four important notions (*Ineinander*, projection-introjection, desire, and sadomasochism) which are explored in more depth in this section. The term '*Ineinander*' shows up most often in Merleau-Ponty's lecture course

73. Lugones, *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes,* 26, 93.

on "The Concept of Nature, 1959-1960: Nature and Logos: The Human Body" which he gave at the same time as he was working on *The Visible and the Invisible*. In this course the term *Ineinander* is used to describe the 'in-one-another' of the human body with animality, nature, and the social world (*Nature* 208/269). In the context of this thesis, I am interested in the *Ineinander* mainly as a description of the intersubjective relation, i.e., the *Ineinander* describes the place and the manner in which subjects cross over into one another. This notion of crossing over into another is central in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology: it surfaces in the *Phenomenology* as the extension of my body into others; it emerges in the lectures on child psychology as the transitivity of infants;[74] in the later works and working notes the *Ineinander* is understood as the chiasm of the flesh. Merleau-Ponty writes that the "reality of the inter-human world" is that there is a "surface of separation and of union…[which] is the geometrical locus of the projections and introjections, it is the invisible hinge upon which my life and the life of others turn to rock into another, the *inner framework of intersubjectivity*" (VI 234/283). Rocking into another, the inter-human world is a world of projection and introjection*,* which also means I am never alone and my experiences are not exclusively mine, but instead they are connected to and projected into another subject, i.e., my experiences affect her. Reciprocally, I am affected by her because her experiences are introjected into me. Through this introjection of the other into me, she interrupts me and draws me out of myself. Thus, both '*Ineinander*' and 'projection-introjection' are fruitful notions through which to theorize a phenomenology of intersubjectivity. However in the lectures on nature Merleau-Ponty adds more notions through which to understand the

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74. See chapter two (2.1).

intersubjective relationship: (self)desire, cannibalism and sadomasochism. I suggest that these additions put Merleau-Ponty at risk of rendering his philosophy of intersubjectivity inherently violent. Below I discuss the problematic of founding the intersubjective relationship, i.e., the *Ineinander,* on a ground of violence. In this first critical reading of the *Ineinander,* I show how this turn to violence strips Merleau-Ponty's account of some of its most promising features, but I also caution that one cannot ignore these instances of violence.[75] Violence is a very real phenomenon of the intersubjective relation, but it is not essential to this relation. Instead I claim that the intersubjective relation is fundamentally *volatile.*

5.3.1 Libidinal Bodies: the sadomasochism of the *Ineinander*

It is a worthwhile endeavour to bring the existence of violence to our attention through asking: "is there not a sort of evil in collective life?"[76] However this becomes a more problematic issue when violence is interpreted to be an *essential* aspect of collective life. Merleau-Ponty refers twice in the *Phenomenology* to the violence of perception but it is stated in passing and not further elucidated (PhP xx/21; 361/420).[77] In *Humanism and Terror,* written only two years after the *Phenomenology,* Merleau-Ponty makes violence inescapable to human existence when he writes:

> [i]nasmuch as we are incarnate beings, violence is our lot…Life, discussion and political choice occur only against a background of violence…it is a law of human action that the present encroaches upon the future, the self upon other people. (HT 109/118)

From being a possibility of human action, violence has now become the *background*

75. In the afterword I present a more constructive reading of *Ineinander* and desire (section [i]).

76. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror,* trans. John O'Neill (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), xxxviii. *Humanisme et Terreur* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947), xxxiv. Hereafter cited in text as HT. In all references the English page number precedes the French.

77. See also PW 131, 140, 142.

and the *condition* of all human life, discussion and choice. It is precisely because we are open subjects who *encroach* upon one another that violence is our lot. Extending this to Merleau-Ponty's later work, in the *Visible and the Invisible* his numerous references to the 'encroachment' [*empiétement*] of the flesh (VI 202/253, 216/265, 218/267) now become expressions of violence. The term 'encroachment' is a translation of the French *empiétement* or German *überschreiten*. These terms literally speak about a stepping over, or a passing into something. *Empiétement* refers to an overlapping and to a seizing which can be a breaking open, a breaking through, or even a biting. These all are images of an approach which might possibly turn into the appropriation, infringement, and violation of boundaries. Although *empiétement* does not necessarily refer to a threatening situation, the *Nature* lectures support an essentially violent reading of *empiétement* because it describes the 'passing into one another' of encroachment as a mutual biting and retaliation (*Nature* 280/347).

In *Nature* Merleau-Ponty argues that the encroaching body is a body that *desires*: it is a *libidinal body* (*Nature* 225/287). A large portion of the lectures on nature are aimed at explicating this libidinal body. The body, Merleau-Ponty suggests is a body that is open to other bodies through the desire of perception. In the passion of desire, other bodies are encroached upon and appropriated as "the others become our flesh" (*Nature* 211/273):

> cannibalism: it is oral incorporation (make the other pass to the inside). Introjection. But to make him pass into my body is also to make a body pass into me which, like mine, bites. Retaliation. This action is thus passion, sadism is masochism. (*Nature* 280/347)

To encroach upon another subject is to project oneself into her and by passing into

the other one infringes on her and violates her.[78] One does not only infringe on her but also make her one's own by *cannibalizing* her and forcing her to become part of oneself. This depiction of the intersubjective relationship is very different from the others that were sketched before. One no longer sculpts another subject with gentleness and release, following her and holding back to see how she wishes to be sculpted, that is, one is no longer welcomed, received, and *conceived* by her.[79] Instead one bites her and she bites back as she retaliates and this mutual biting now hurts. In this image of mutual encroachment the intersubjective exchange has become sinister and violent. The particular violence of intersubjectivity is no longer merely due to an objectifying look in which bodies are wholly separated as subject-body and object-body.[80] Instead collective life turns violent because subjects are open to each other and can do no other than to *affect* one another. This affectivity has been extensively discussed in this thesis, but in the context of the *Nature* lectures it takes the form of a violent encroachment upon another in which a subject occupies and appropriates the place which another has opened up for the subject. This appropriation is illustrated by the metaphor of biting and cannibalizing. Projecting myself into the other means that I sink my teeth in her flesh and I introject her into me by 'swallowing' her. When I 'swallow' another, I force her to truly become part of me, i.e., I appropriate her as nourishment for myself. This cannibalizing relation between myself and

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78. We are reminded also of Irigaray's worry that the hollow of the concave mirror is vulnerable to occupation and appropriation by the subject (5.2.5).

79. In chapter four I quote Carbone as commenting on the "concavity, or hollowness, [which] is…a crucial feature of the basic meaning of *conceptus*" which means "to be pregnant…receiving something into one's spirit" (*The Thinking of the Sensible,* 47). He interprets *conceptus* positively as evoking a "gesture of 'welcoming' rather than [a] gesture of 'grasping'. Rather than the attitude of 'subjecting', it evokes the attitude of 'complying with'. According to the meaning of *conceptus*, 'to conceive does not mean to take possession of anything, but rather to create space for something'. And the direction of Merleau-Ponty's thinking seems to be exactly along these lines" (ibid.).

80. Jorella Andrews makes this point in "Vision Violence and the Other: A Merleau-Pontian Ethics," in Olkowski and Weiss, *Feminist Interpretations of Maurice Merleau-Ponty,* 172.

another is described as a sadomasochistic relationship. I take pleasure in violating another, but at the same time I enjoy being intruded and 'eaten' by another. In a back-and-forth of violation and violence we intrude and are being intruded upon by each other.

Because of these explicit violent images the *Nature* lecture might seem out of place with Merleau-Ponty's other writings. However because it is written concurrently with *The Visible and the Invisible* (which seems at least neutral with respect to the question of violence) one cannot easily dismiss it as a position that was once taken but now has been surpassed by the ontology of the flesh. One needs to consider the possibility that the intersubjective relation is inherently violent. Below I explore in more depth the structure of a violent intersubjectivity. I discuss the worry that Merleau-Ponty forgets and surrenders many of his most promising insights into the dynamics of collective life when he discusses the intersubjective relationship in terms of violence. Later I argue that the relationship, though fundamentally *volatile*, should not be interpreted as inherently violent.

5.3.1.1 'Action is passion' and 'activity is passivity'

In the context of the subject's desire for another, Merleau-Ponty writes that "action is passion" (*Nature* 280/347). On first sight, this claim might seem to be similar to the earlier claim that 'activity is passivity'.[81] However, passion is not the same as passivity. Instead, passion is an intense *activity* (e.g., feeling passion for someone, something, or for an ideal) which drives a person to act further. Passion is foremost *action*. Consequently, the claim 'action is passion' is similar to the claim that 'action is

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81. See for example chapter four (4.3.1).

more action', which does not cover the interesting tension between activity and passivity that Merleau-Ponty refers to elsewhere.[82] In this and the previous chapter the affective receptivity of the living body has been presented as passive-activity or active-passivity; for example one's affective body was said to be marked by a *passive* receptivity that responds to others and follows them beyond its own, but this following is also already *active* because it transforms that which it follows. In addition, the *active* 'giving a place to the other' was said to be at the same time already a *passive* being open to the other which is not in one's own control. Thus the important insight gained is that action is never purely active but instead a passive dimension belongs to it. I worry that the meaning of this passive receptivity changes in the context of the sadomasochistic *passion* of encroachment, cannibalisation and violation. The problem is that the passion which is described as "oral incorporation" (*Nature* 280/347) has no passive dimension. The response to the other is no longer giving or following but it is *retaliation*, i.e., action again. That also means that 'action is passion' describes an intersubjective back-and-forth of ever increasing passionate and retaliating activity in which no moment of rest and receptive passivity seems possible. What is omitted or forgotten in this description of the passionate relationship is how passivity and activity belong to each other.[83]

Merleau-Ponty's consecutive claim that "sadism is masochism" (*Nature* 280/347) is similarly tarnished by the forgetting of passivity. The masochist is not the passive counterpart of the active sadist. Masochism is a self-effacement that rejoices in being violated and used. The masochist finds pleasure in her own

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82. HLP 42/51, 76/92. See also chapter four (4.2.2 and 4.3.1).
83. A more constructive notion of *Eros* is developed in the afterword (section [i]).

suffering, and in her self-destructive behaviour. In the submission to self-destruction the masochist is already violent and aggressive towards herself through the mediation of another subject. Her passion for subjecting herself to the other still takes place in a relation of desiring which means that there is a passion to hold onto and to grasp the other. The masochist holds onto the other (manipulates the other) through having the other dominate her. The masochist has the other in her (manipulative) grasp and is not really receptive to the other. Thus, by claiming that 'action is passion' and 'sadism is masochism' Merleau-Ponty surrenders his insight into the active-*passivity* of the intersubjective relationship.

5.3.1.2 Re-centralising and decentralising

When 'action is passion', 'perception is desire', and sadism is masochism, then I am no longer openly directed to others. Instead I am self-servingly oriented to the other. I passionately desire (or want to grasp) the other foremost for my own sake and I do not necessarily act on account of her. Her interests are only secondary to the fulfillment of my own interests. Even when our interests complement each other (e.g., when fulfilling my desire also fulfils the desire of the other) my self-interest remains on the foreground. Renaud Barbaras describes such a self-interested form of desire when he writes that carnal consciousness can only find itself through its reflection in others:[84]

> desire is truly *self-desire, fundamentally narcissistic*…The self joins back up with itself, therefore, not against the other, but with the other; it is together that they reach themselves…when desire blossoms, there is fulfilment common to both…there is thus a fundamental reciprocity of desire or, at the very least, of its fulfillment; *by remaining oriented toward*

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84. Barbaras, *The Being of the Phenomenon*, 267.

> *itself*, each one of the two participates without knowing it in a common work. By rising to *itself* through the mediation of the other each one reaches a 'self' which is neither its own nor other.[85]

Barbaras argues that when I find myself through the other, the 'self' I find is neither my own nor the other's but a common fulfilment. Nevertheless he writes in the same breath that it is still a rising to *itself* that has been accomplished and desire is *self-desire*. The aim of the desiring subject is to 'know itself' instead of to 'know the other'. It is in this egocentric pursuit of desire that I need the other as a *mediator* to find myself. I worry about these formulations because they no longer speak of a true decentralisation of the subject. In desire as self-desire I am no longer a decentralised subject, but instead I have merely taken an indirect route in order to reach *myself*. I have temporarily given up my place at the centre of the world only to return to it. The other is thus refused a real decentralising power and a possibility to be a subject that really affects me. Barbaras writes that in this interchange the other similarly finds herself. As long as I remain oriented to myself the other will also gain herself. But this satisfaction of the other is merely a by-product of our relation and not something that I as a subject have to be concerned about. The other can reach her fulfillment without my knowing it. Thus, when the intersubjective relation is founded on self-desire the decentralisation of the subject has become a *re-centralisation* towards the subject's own flesh.

5.3.1.3 Invasion and openness

To speak of encroachment is to suggest that one crosses over and treads into a space and a flesh that are not one's own. When the notion of encroachment is read

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85. Ibid., 269 (my emphases).

together with sadomasochism it suggests a *taking over* of the other rather than a mutual intertwining and reciprocal border-crossing: in sadomasochism one crosses over in order to *invade and appropriate*. No longer are we in-one-another through the openness that we give to the other, but rather I overpower and cannibalize the space that you give me. I place myself at your centre and your flesh becomes mine (*Nature* 211/273). The ease of our embodied overlap and fleshy extension is now being replaced with the violence of entering into the other by *invading into* her hollow and not giving her any space in return. I am no longer open to meeting her through our common flesh; we have no common flesh, but rather the only flesh that we 'share' is that which I take for *myself* in violation of her.

5.3.1.4 Immediacy and distance

When I appropriate the other by cannibalising her, I reduce any differences between us by annihilating (digesting) them. Consequently the productive distance between us is removed as soon as I come so close to you that I can sink my teeth in you and make you immediately mine. Thus I worry that reading the *Ineinander* through the violence of infringement and appropriation maximises our proximity and eradicates the productive *écart* between us.

The four worries above reveal that the discussion of intersubjectivity in *Nature* seems incommensurable with Merleau-Ponty's otherwise promising notions of intersubjectivity. Reading the *Ineinander* through the violent sadomasochistic relation of self-desire: (i) leads to an overlooking of the mutual receptivity of the embodied encounter; (ii) reinstalls the subject into the centre of the world; (iii) loses the

openness to the other; and (iv) annihilates the distance between subjects that Merleau-Ponty at other places so successfully defends.

5.3.2 Revisiting encroachment and at-tunement

Levin regrets Merleau-Ponty's use of 'encroachment' because it contradicts the open sociality of the subject. He writes that terms like 'encroachment', 'transgression' and 'alienation' "only make sense within a discourse…that posits the priority of the subject and conceptualizes it as a self-contained monad."[86] I agree with Levin to the extent that encroachment solely understood as sadomasochism and violence re-installs the subject at the centre of the world and does not take into account the passivity of a veritable receptivity towards the other. Levin's response is to ignore the notion of encroachment in favour of an account of the primary sociality of the embodied subject. He writes that the intersubjective encounter is foremost marked by a discovery of the inherent sociality of the lived body and not by the need first to shatter the boundaries of alienated and self-contained subjects through encroachment, transgression and violence.[87]

While the primary sociality of our bodies is a central part of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, and while I worry about the forgetting of some of the most insightful aspects of the intersubjective relationship, I do not agree with Levin's clear cut rejection of the notion of encroachment in favour of an "ethics of reciprocity."[88] I worry that this rejection of encroachment brings us too far to the other side of the

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86. Levin, "Visions of Narcissism," 65.

87. Ibid., 65-6.

88. Ibid., 80. Levin writes also: "There is, already, in the flesh, a certain *logos* [word or reason], a certain *legein* [gathering or saying], an inscription as it were, of reason, always already laying down for us, and gathering us toward, an ethical and political assignment" (Ibid.*,* 72 [Greek translations added]).

argument, namely, it implies that the ontology of the flesh is inherently ethical.[89] To imply that our attunement is primarily harmonious and reasonable risks assuming that there is always already a fruitful dialogue and overlapping between myself and another. However, at times the encounter with another hurts, boundaries are shattered, and bodies are violated. For example, it is important to realise that my response to another person stems from my particularly situated body. This means that my living body is never a neutral body, but rather that it is a body that is already gendered, racialized, socialised, etc., according to the conventions and histories of one's world. Consequently, it is always possible that our relation reinforces existing power differentials, rather than that it overcomes them.[90] This also means that the responsive sculpting of another body is never wholly innocent and innocuous or necessarily free of violence. While it is not the case that the encounter *is and only is* violent, encountering another person always includes the *possibility* of violence.

Aside from the above concerns, to speak about encroachment is not necessarily problematic in itself. On the contrary, recognising that perception involves a certain *crossing over* helps us escape from the non-difference of a life of complete fusion. Crossing over implies that something needs to be bridged (a gap, a border, an in-between). We are not general beings who are 'melted into' [*eingeschmolzen*] the world,[91] but rather we are embodied individuals and we have both

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89. See 5.3.3.

90. This means as well that my behaviour is always already *politically* charged. I follow here Finn's persuasive notion of a radical "politics of contingency." Finn writes compellingly that "we do not slough off our skin or our genitals…our beauty, our wealth… on the doorstep of our 'homes' when we leave the 'public' sphere, nor drop their social and political meanings on the doormat with the mud of our shoes" ("The Politics of Contingency: The Contingency of Politics," 177). There is no escape from the political sphere and each of my actions (for example my way of walking, talking, looking and passing someone in the street) could be understood as a political statement of resistance or acquiescence (ibid., 176).

91. See also chapter two (2.1).

visible and invisible 'borders' in this living body. This also means that speaking about the 'self-containment' of an individual is not problematic in itself because this is precisely what makes us *different*. To ignore our 'boundaries' comes close to ignoring the differences between us. However the notion of what constitutes a 'border' or 'boundary' needs to be rethought and Merleau-Ponty has already offered us an alternative. I suggest that the 'boundaries' between subjects are not to be thought of as immoveable and impermeable walls that need to be shattered or cannibalised in order to gain access to another. Our 'boundaries' are not necessarily the opposite of our openness to one another. On the contrary our 'boundaries' are marked by the ungraspable gaps or divergences that open up between subjects. These 'boundaries' *separate* but at the same time bring subjects *together* in difference.[92] Thus I suggest that the intersubjective relation is not founded on violence, but instead it is founded on the *volatility* of the gap [*écart*] that opens up between us.

Jorella Andrews interprets Merleau-Ponty's references to the violence of perception as perception "continually exceeding and *undermining* itself."[93] She argues that perception is embodied in an instable and vulnerable lived experience that has only a precarious hold on things and whose solipsism is already shattered. I am sympathetic to Andrew's reading of the 'violence' of embodied existence. However I suggest that her description of it is not so much a question of perceptual *violence*, but instead it is a question of perceptual *volatility*. Volatility comes from the Latin *volare* [to fly]. Thus it refers to a lightness that is mobile [*beweglich*]. While something that is volatile might now be at rest, it always includes the possibility of instability or

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92. In the afterword (section [i]) this peculiar 'boundary' is understood as surface that is porous and pliable, it is a "surface of separation and of union" (VI 234/283).
93. Andrews, "Vision Violence and the Other," 173.

change. Volatility is versatile and expresses well that moment of ontological stillness in the heart of the whirlwind or the pre-restfulness of the flesh.[94]

I suggest that encroachment [*empiétement*] can be understood more productively when it is understood as a *volatile* crossing over rather than as a violent breaking into another subject. Volatile encroachment is a leaping or traversing [*enjambement*] (IP 37-8) toward one another.[95] When one leaps, one takes to the air and is 'in flight' if only for a moment. *Empiétement* no longer merely describes how one places one's foot into something or someone else and forces it open. *Empiétement* as enjambement describes the flight of a leap that traverses but never fully steps into the place of another. In the leap the gap is straddled but not overcome. The gap remains underneath and consequently the spanning stride of enjambement is never a stable position to maintain. When used as a poetic device, enjambement both includes a sense of flow and an [inaudible] break, i.e., when a sentence runs from one line of verse into the next.[96] When understood together with volatility and enjambement, encroachment means that we never really complete the crossing into one another and we never reduce the gap by cannibalising the other. Instead there is an openness and indetermination in both of us which cannot fully be grasped or contained by either of us. This also means that intersubjective traversal is not without risk for either of us. Intersubjectivity, I suggest, is not inherently violent, but instead it is fundamentally volatile.

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94. See chapter four (4.2.2).
95. See chapter three (3.2.3.1[ii]).
96. For example see the following excerpt of Anne Hébert's poem "Bread Is Born:" "How do you make bread talk, this old treasure all wrapped / up in its strictures like a winter tree, anchored so that / its nakedness is set off against the see-through day?" (trans. Maxine Kumin, in *A Book of Women Poets from Antiquity to Now,* ed. Aliki Barnstone and Willis Barnstone [New York: Schocken Books, 1992], 229).

Because our traversal is marked by the fundamental volatile gap between us, traversing toward one another is not necessarily marked by a harmonious attunement to one another. In order to acknowledge this gap I propose to rewrite attunement (introduced in chapter two, 2.2.1.2) as *at-tunement* so that the word that signifies how we are brought together in anonymous existence also includes a gap, a breaking up of the flow and a possibility of disruption. At-tunement is disrupted by a hyphen which signals the hesitation and distance of differentiation. Thus even in the flow of the anonymous life we are never immediately the same, *eingeschmolzen* in a fusion, but rather we are always already differentiated in double anonymity.[97]

Finn argues that as a consequence of Merleau-Ponty's ontology of the flesh, we can no longer theorise about a politics of oppositional difference in which the other is an enemy once and for all because the enemy is already part of my own embodied self.[98] Finn's interpretation of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy does not offer us a "safe place,"[99] but instead she presents a politics of contingency that is built on ambiguous and closely entangled embodied situations in which we always run the risk of being wrong and violating the other.

This reflection on encroachment means that one cannot simply sweep aside Merleau-Ponty's lectures on the sadomasochistic body and the related violence of perception, as if this were a mere slip-up. His continued use of violent metaphors also in other works suggests that this is not a one-off remark. Moreover one cannot simply 'correct' the violence of perception by paying attention only to Merleau-Ponty's more 'positive' account of the flesh. What should be acknowledged is that

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97. See also chapter two (2.3).
98. Finn, "The Politics of Contingency: The Contingency of Politics," 176.
99. Ibid., 181.

the productive doubling of the flesh and the evocative *Ineinander* of reversibility make

possible both the ethical and the violent relation with the other. I give the last word

in this section to Merleau-Ponty:

> The human world is an open or unfinished system and the same radical
> contingency which threatens it with discord also rescues it from the
> inevitability of disorder and prevents from despairing of it. (HT
> 188/206)

5.3.3 A question of ethics

If we always run the risk of being wrong and inflicting violence, then what remains

of ethics? Is there a way to decide the good? Merleau-Ponty does not help us very

much with the pursuit of this question and remains mostly silent on the question of

ethics. Responding to Merleau-Ponty, Waldenfels reinterprets the responsivity of the

body already into a *responsibility* for the other.[100] It is important to keep in mind that

for Merleau-Ponty the pre-personal response is a reaction to a *perceptual* demand

which *in turn* can institute an ethic. Merleau-Ponty writes, "just as the perception of a

thing opens me up to being…in the same way the perception of the other founds

morality,"[101] and thus he emphasises the *primacy of perception* over ethics.[102]

Although the initial responsivity of the subject is not yet a responsibility, this

does not mean that Merleau-Ponty's thought is closed to the ethical question. Instead

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100. See also chapter three (3.2.3.2 point [iii]).

101. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "An Unpublished Text by Maurice Merleau-Ponty: A Prospectus of His
   Work," trans. Arleen B. Dallery, in *The Primacy of Perception,* 26.

102. Commenting on Merleau-Ponty's understanding of 'letting be', Maclaren argues that we are
   involved in an ethics of playful negotiation with each other in which we can actively and openly take
   up the *ethical* project of letting-the-other-be ("Intercorporeity, Intersubjectivity and the Problem of
   'Letting Others Be'," 197). As a result Maclaren locates the ethical response in the *active* questioning
   of oneself and the other. This requires first a *reflective* insight in our relation to each other and an
   understanding of our mutual differentiation. The manner in which Maclaren takes up the question
   of ethics confirms that the relationship between myself and another is not ethical *in itself.* As
   Maclaren explains, the ethical call of 'letting others be' is never automatic, immediate and guaranteed
   but needs to be achieved through learning and reflection.

his ontology opens up important avenues towards thinking about an ethic that is grounded in lived experience and in the volatility of the encounter. Reinterpreting Merleau-Ponty's 'violence of perception,' Andrews writes about a learning process in which one needs to achieve an understanding that as a participant in an ethical situation one is related to other subjects "in ways that are as of yet indeterminate."[103] She challenges us not to foreclose on the possibilities between us, but instead we should cultivate openness and a "generosity for negotiating differences."[104]

Notwithstanding the encouraging terms above (generosity, openness, negotiation), it is important to stress that these ethical undertakings might not bring us to a comfortable and pleasant place of love and respect in which there is no further ground for worry. Instead, working towards mutual openness is risky and requires entering marginal places in which we are not comfortable and over which we have no control. bell hooks compellingly and repeatedly invites us to "enter that space" of radical openness, possibility and creativity.[105] It is not enough to listen to the marginalised who tell their stories of pain and deprivation. Instead the meeting place *is in the margin* as a site for resistance. In the margin we can listen to the voices of others and our voices can be heard. We are invited to enter the margin that is not imposed by oppression and to choose this space "as location of radical openness and possibility."[106] hooks' compelling voice functions as the concave mirror which draws us out of the centre and challenges us to find our place in the indeterminate, risky and creative margins of the intersubjective encounter. Lugones similarly hands out a

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103. Andrews, "Vision Violence and the Other," 177. She adds that we are "profoundly together in [our] respective differences" (Ibid).
104. Ibid., 178.
105. hooks, "Choosing the Margin," 54. See also chapter one, footnote 7.
106. hooks, "Choosing the Margin," 55.

risky invitation when she encourages us to initiate deep coalitions through playfulness.[107] To be playful means partly to participate in "world travelling" in which one 'travels' to another subject's world in order to understand "*what it is to be them and what it is to be ourselves in their eyes.*"[108] However this travel is (again) not to be understood as the leisurely journey of the privileged to the quaint and exotic back countries in order to entertain oneself or to distract oneself from the truly important issues in one's own world. It is also not a travelling that is undertaken merely to gain background to one's life or to 'discover oneself'. Instead this kind of travelling involves: (i) a true widening of one's horizons, such that one risks one's own ground and enters a place of uncertainty;[109] and (ii) a possibility that these worlds might reconstruct one's own world and consequently that one finds oneself as radically different than one imagined oneself to be. Through the notion of playfulness Lugones describes an activity without rules in which we are open to surprise, willing to risk our ground and attempting to "seeing multiply."[110] Lugones cautions us not to abandon ourselves to a particular, sedimented being of ourselves and of our world. Instead, I suggest that we need to abandon ourselves to the volatile openness that makes possible our differences. To be playful, I propose, is to enter that place of instability that exists in-between us and from which we can begin to engage and negotiate an ethics of openness.

The pre-personal at-tunements between our living bodies do not necessarily mean agreement and political harmony, but instead suggests that all of our interactions, even those which are disharmonious and ambiguous, take place in a to-

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107. Lugones, *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes,* 98.
108. Ibid., 97 (emphasis in the original).
109. Ibid., 98.
110. Ibid.

and-fro of projection, response, and transformation. This transformation is hitherto not yet ethical, but through reflection, risk, and play, this transformation might bring us, without guarantees, before the ethical question.

Parting thoughts: interbeings

> Define a being of the in-between, an interbeing [*interêtre*].
> (*Nature* 230/293)

After having spent many hours in the multifaceted and thought-provoking environment of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, is it possible to formulate a final thought? Is it possible, as one says, to 'wrap it up' and to 'close' the argument one hundred years after his birth? An obvious 'no' comes to mind when considering this question. First, it is clearly not possible to complete and finalise Merleau-Ponty's own thought. This thought was left incomplete and unfinished after his early death. Consequently we have access to his last thoughts mainly through the cryptic and fragmented working and lecture notes that were never meant to be published and that give us only traces of the thought process of a great thinker. Second, and more generally when one attempts to think any work to its final conclusion, one disregards the productive power of this work. A work can never be finalised, not even if its author had lived to complete it, to give it more detail, or to suggest more shades through which to consider it. Merleau-Ponty's editor, Claude Lefort, expresses this line of thought succinctly in his foreword to *The Visible and the Invisible* in which he commemorates his friend and mentor:

> [w]hether the writer's labor seems to have come to its term or not is…of little importance: as soon as we are confronted with the work, we are faced with the same indetermination; and the more we penetrate into its domain, the more our knowledge increases, and the less we are capable of putting a limit to our questions. (VI xvi/339-40)

As I will stress once more in this 'final' section: at the heart of Merleau-Ponty's

philosophy lies a fundamental openness and thus it is appropriate that his thought keeps opening new vistas for those who read it.

Notwithstanding these considerations, in this closing section I offer not a final but a parting thought in an all too human effort to re-capture one's object of interest, and through it I hope to continue the dialogue that has brought us here. In doing so I also fulfil a promise which was left open in the last chapter. In chapter five I presented a first critical reading of the notion of the *Ineinander* which turned at times so violent as to forget the openness and the receptive passivity of the intersubjective body. This means that I still need to offer a second and more productive reading of the *Ineinander*. Like the critical reading, I find the grounds for this second reading in Merleau-Ponty's own writings, but unlike the first, this reading is able to gather into itself the other aspects of the intersubjective encounter discussed in the previous chapters. Therefore this interpretation is a fuller (but not final) expression of Merleau-Ponty's thought.

(i) A different Eros: the *Ineinander* reconsidered

The 'new' notion of the *Ineinander* is "an *Ineinander* that is not that of a thing in a thing, not a de facto *Ineinander,* but rather one ratified by our lived, perceived *Ineinander*" (*Nature* 208/270). This means that the in-one-another of the encounter should not be thought through the image of an object in a container. Such an image is marked by the notion of boundaries and by the violence of entering into the other through infringing on the other and usurping her. In the last chapter the *Ineinander* became such a violent exchange through understanding it by way of the Eros of *self-*

desire, cannibalism, and sadomasochism. To reconceive the *Ineinander* is to leave behind this metaphor of containment and infringement and instead to think it as 'interbeing' (*Nature* 208/270).

In order to conceive of the *Ineinander* as interbeing one needs to start with a different bodily Eros. This also means that one has to move away from Barbaras' notion of desire as self-desire. When Eros is self-desire the ego is re-installed at the zero-point of the world. Merleau-Ponty's Eros is a different Eros: "Eros is moreover not understood as an effect or an oriented force, but rather as an elevation toward…X, or a sort of seething [*une sorte d'ébullition*], an 'always future hollow'" (*Nature* 210/272). This Eros is not understood as a *passion* that is an oriented force towards something, or a desire to strive after and to grasp something for oneself. Instead this Eros is more passive and diffuse on the subject's side: it is an *elevation* towards something or someone. Of interest here is that it does not seem to be the case that one elevates oneself, but instead Eros *is* elevation and one is not the agent of this Eros. This passivity of the desiring subject is peculiar because it is not described in a flaccid manner. The rising up is described as a seething which is a lively bubbling, a turmoil, or even a raging. Being 'elevated towards' includes thus a passivity that is alive with activity. One could also express it as follows: one is *subject to* this desire, not *the subject of* this desire and thus the 'elevation toward' has a compelling dimension. To desire is to be called in this compelling manner and the passivity of hearing this call is not devoid of activity. This also means that this description of Eros is much more in line with Merleau-Ponty's other descriptions of the belonging together of activity and passivity. The different reading of desire

becomes even clearer when he describes the living body as "a body which of itself desires *something other than itself* or its similar" (*Nature* 210/273, my emphasis). Merleau-Ponty makes it very clear here that the Eros of the living perceiving body should be understood as *other-desire* which is never directly fulfilled but places *openness* at the heart of desire and presents the body as an open totality (*Nature* 218/281).[1] Through this reading of Eros Merleau-Ponty emphasises again the fundamental openness and decentring or dis-possession that is the foundation of perception (see chapter four). In my bodily desire for you I do not first place myself into you as in a container, but instead I am already opened toward you.

When the *Ineinander* is grounded in openness and dis-possession, what really does the '*in*' of the in-one-another signify? Merleau-Ponty writes that in order to understand the problem of intersubjectivity we need to understand that 'unconscious' constellation that makes object and others possible: "it is *between them* as the *interval* of trees between the trees, or as their common level. It is the *Urgemeinshaftung* of our intentional life, the *Ineinander* of the others in us and of us in them" (VI 180/231, emphases mine). This quote presents the *Ineinander* as the in-between and the interval. I would add that the 'in' is also the inter-ruption, and the inter-being. It helps us understand the *Ineinander* not as a desire of breaking in and appropriation but as a desire that is an opening: this also means that it is not just the crossing over or passing through the interval, it is not just the overstepping of boundaries, but *it is this interval itself.* The *Ineinander* is interval, in-between, inter-being.

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1. Desire is "an always future hollow" (*Nature* 210/272) and "[p]leasure is open like sensing is open onto the things. The self's body asking for something other than body" (*Nature* 218-9/281). "This that-is-openness to things…is properly the flesh" (*Nature* 223/286).

Thus we find ourselves in-one-another because we are related, connected and interlaced by the interval that is between me and you: "a surface of separation between me and the other which is also the place of our union" (VI 234/283). The interlacing of you and me should not be understood through the grasp of appropriation and containment. Instead between us there is "a relation that is one of embrace" (VI 271/318), and thus there is no frontier that first needs to be broken by a projectile. Instead there is a "contact surface" (VI 271/318) where we touch each other. With respect to the above, I suggest the following distinction: the word 'frontier' speaks of a frontal encounter with someone or something; it is the outer limit to which I can go but beyond which is danger and obscurity. The frontier is a separation that can only be disrupted by violence or stealth. The word 'surface' has much less antagonistic connotations since it is a place where contact is possible. To touch a surface does not necessitate a frontal approach, but instead it might involve an approach initiated laterally, from behind, above, or below. A surface separates but also speaks of connectivity; on the contrary, a frontier separates by opposition. Surfaces are in no way impermeable: water has a surface, my body has a surface and both are porous and pliable in their own way. They admit of interruptions and manipulations that are not necessarily violent. Thus I suggest that the borderland that is interrupted and opened up by the Eros of other-desire should be understood as a surface rather than as a frontier.

The notion of 'contact surface' describes the relation between the body and the world, the body and the other.[2] From it, Merleau-Ponty writes, are immediately

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2. VI 271/318. This means also that "[t]he other is no longer so much a freedom seen from without

derived "[t]he specular image, memory, resemblance: fundamental structures" (VI 271/319). In this one remark Merleau-Ponty sums up some of the major themes that were discussed in this thesis: (i) the contact-surface makes possible my resemblance to the other, i.e., our mutual imitation and at-tunement play out across the connecting interval between us. (ii) The contact-surface makes possible my specular image because my own bodily surface folds over itself and sees itself seeing, hears itself speaking and feels itself touching. Being a separation as well as a union, the folding or mirroring of this flesh is interrupted (hollowed out) by the other who gives birth to me, responds to me and to whom I already respond through the interval between us. (iii) The contact surface makes possible my institution (birth) into temporality because it is the passage or interval of the present which is an overlapping (folding) of past and future. In the previous chapters the contact-surface has been presented under many different names as Merleau-Ponty's most fundamental ground: the original ecstasy, the rhythm of rupture and continuation, the leap of birth, the hollow or spread, the abyss, the *chiasm,* etc.[3] These are all different names and dimensions of the fundamental *Ineinander or interval* of the folding flesh. Below, this contact surface is presented through the encounter between myself and another subject.

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as destiny and fatality, a rival subject for a subject, but he is caught up in a circuit that connects him to the world, as we ourselves are, and consequently also in a circuit that connects him to us— — And this world is common to us, is intermundane space…activity is no longer the contrary of passivity" (VI 269/317).

3. We are also urged to remember that to attempt completely to disentangle the "idea of chiasm and *Ineinander*…renders unintelligible— —This bound to the very meaning of questioning which is not to call for a response in the indicative— —" (VI 268/316). The questions that are opened up by the search for an original ground cannot be answered factually and positively, instead their response is a continued searching (IP 69, see chapter three and four).

(ii) Decentred perception as co-perception

When the perceiver is always already taken out of the centre of the world and dis-possessed of it we need to find a different way to describe the encounter with the other. No longer can one speak of 'the one versus the other', 'the one opposed to the other', or 'the one facing the other in a frontal clash'. Neither am *I* the centre of the world because of my passivity and affectivity to the other, nor is the *other* the centre of the world because of my activity and my ability to affect the other. This means that neither of us is located in the centre. We are both always already relocated which means that the relation between a subject and another is no longer hierarchical or frontal but instead it is a *lateral* relationship.[4] Describing the intersubjective relationship as a *lateral* relation accomplishes several things: (i) it signifies my *inability to hold another subject in a frontal* grasp. I can neither fix her with my look, nor hold her with my hands, nor dictate her with my imposing voice. Instead she comes back to me from a side that is wholly unforeseen.[5] The fundamental disorientation that the other brings into my world is the condition of possibility of speaking about a genuine difference between subjects (PW 142/198). (ii) Having a lateral relationship with the other also means that this relationship is *indirect* in the sense that there is a hiatus between us. I cannot directly grasp her but instead there is an interval, divergence, or hollow between us that makes of us different individuals. It is through this difference or distance that we are connected to each other. Being connected through difference allows us also to speak about this hollow as a passage. The passage that leads to and

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4. See *Nature* 211/273, PW 45n/63n.

5. I can never quite localise her (PW 133/186) as the other subject comes from behind and in doing so she surprises me: "The other in my eyes is thus always on the margin of what I see and hear, [s]he is this side of me, [s]he is beside or behind me, but [s]he is not in that place which my look flattens" "the other is the unexpected response I get from elsewhere" (PW 134/187).

into one another is the interval between us, which is our *Ineinander.* (iii) The lateral relationship describes another subject as coming neither before me nor after me; instead it emphasises that we *"are born together* from the original ecstasy" (*Signs* 174/220, my emphasis). We are always already there also for another (IP 37), and thus I never succeed in being alone and locked up in a world that is fully mine. (iv) To find another *laterally* implies that the other is found *at the same level* or side as me. Thus there is no foundational hierarchy between myself and another.[6] One has to be careful here because expressing the relationship between myself and another as 'being on the same side' is not unproblematic. If we come from the same side, one might conclude that we are annihilated into similarity or that we are necessarily 'of the same mind'. The lateral dimension should not be mistaken with being in common agreement. And (v) laterality recasts perception as *co-perception* (*Nature* 225/287).[7] Coming at us laterally, we no longer frontally 'lock our eyes' but instead we co-perceive the world and each other. Irigaray expresses this well when she writes:

> And if we see differently when we look together, as two…it is because we look differently when we share looking at. Thus the chiasm does not simply exist between me who sees and me who is seen, me who touches and me who is touched…It is also that my gaze, whether I want it or not, whether I perceive it or not, sees differently if I am not alone looking in the present. My perception itself is modified because it is shared with the other.[8]

While Irigaray is here criticising Merleau-Ponty for staying in his own world by

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6. This does not mean that there could not be a socially, historically, or culturally created hierarchy between us. Hierarchies can impose a difference of level (and hence not a foundational difference) on us. These hierarchies do violence to our originary lateral relation.

7. See also Merleau-Ponty's claim that there is "not only a me-other rivalry, but a co-functioning" (VI 215/264).

8. Irigaray, "To Paint the Invisible", 392, 399.

proposing a reversibility that is in essence solipsistic, I suggest that her own notion of the chiasm captures well what Merleau-Ponty intends to say. Namely that as soon as the other is co-present then one's vision is already modified, anonymously, or before one knows it. This observation is not limited to the visual dimension; we also share our touching and hearing and thus I touch differently when the other shares my touch (and thus when she touches me), I listen and speak differently when another hears me.[9] This notion of co-perception does not stay within one perceptual modality, on the contrary, our look changes when we touch or speak to each other, our touch changes when we share looking at or speaking about, and our speech changes when we are touched or when we look at each other.

By focussing on laterality and dis-possession one implies that when we encounter the other subject we cannot hold on to her, and thus she always already *escapes*. One needs to be careful when speaking about escape in this manner because one would not want to imply that as a consequence the other subject can never be actually captured by me (or I by the other): the other subject would then always be radically free to escape my determinations. This kind of Sartrean freedom in which even the slave is free to 'break' (or 'escape from') her chains,[10] is problematic because it renders the notions of 'freedom,' 'escape' and 'liberation' rather thin. I side with Simone de Beauvoir's demand that one should take seriously situations of captivity, immobilisation, and limitation.[11] A short reminder of a recent Austrian tragedy illustrates my point: one would not want to say that the unfortunate Elisabeth was

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9. Both in chapter two and in chapter five I suggested how our senses are mutually responsive and transformative in sympathetic couplings, imitations and in intersubjective multisensory exchanges.

10. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 550.

11. See Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity,* trans. Bernhard Frechtman (New York: Citadel Press, 1976). First published in French, 1947.

able truly to escape the horrifying circumstances in the dungeon which her father built for her.[12] For years and undeniably she was captured, immobilised, grasped, and violated. In this case it is utterly unhelpful to interpret the ontology of the flesh: (i) superficially as the possibility of always factually escaping the grasp of the other; and (ii) sentimentally as a connectivity that embraces all beings in a beautiful harmony of Being. Elisabeth's story does not admit of sentimentalisation and the application of a thin sense of freedom. When I speak about escape or dis-possession in an ontological sense I neither intend to say that this makes concrete abuse impossible nor that there were concrete possibilities for Elisabeth to escape the cellar, nor that she was free. Instead the ontological notion of dis-possession brings to the foreground the fundamental difference between two subjects who never become one and the same. This fundamental difference grounds the lateral relationship of the *Ineinander* between subjects, and thus I emphasise how we are mutually *implicated* in one another. This also means that I read Merleau-Ponty's friendly sounding notion of 'embrace' through the more impartial notion of 'implication'. For many years Elisabeth surely was not able factually to escape her father's hold and manipulation but she is very much implicated in his life as he is implicated in hers.[13]

(iii) Explicating our implication in one another

Let me say a few words on 'implication' or better, let me *ex-pli-cate* it by first clarifying what explication is all about. Robert Vallier, the translator of *Nature*, makes two

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12. Mark Landler, "Austria Stunned by Case of Imprisoned Woman," *New York Times*, April 29, 2008, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/29/world/europe/29austria.html?_r=1&scp=4&sq=fritzl&st=cse&oref=slogin

13. Of course, Elisabeth escaped at last. However, in a curious turn of events, this was accomplished only with assistance of her father who allowed her to see her daughter in the hospital.

interesting and helpful observations: first Vallier notes how Merleau-Ponty speaks about the "'leaf' [*feuillet*] of being" (*Nature* 204/265). He writes that *feuillet* can also be understood as a 'folio-leaf': an A3 size paper that is folded such that one can make a booklet out of it. Vallier writes: "what is important is that the sign 'leaf' carries with it significations like 'unfolding,' unfurling,' and 'doubling/redoubling' all at once."[14] Second, Vallier makes a comment about the meaning of ex-pli-cation, which is used by Merleau-Ponty as "an unfolding outward in language,"[15] and as a signification which is hidden in the word itself (ply) that refers to the Latin *plicare* [to fold]. These observations are meaningful because they reorient us to the phenomenological project. That is, in order to understand the fleshy dimension of our intersubjective encounters it is necessary to unfold the folds of the flesh which means that one needs to *spread it out* in order to perceive its hidden dimensions. However one should realise that unfolding a folio-leaf also leaves the contents of the pages of the original booklet scrambled and out of order. It seems that undoing the folds (ex-pli-cating) leads one to lose an original meaning that was precisely due to the folding of the leaf. Explicating the flesh as fold therefore does not exhaust its meaning, but instead we might try to refold it in an effort to grasp its full meaning, but by doing so we also hide its layers again within the folds, and thus we continually fail to grasp it in its totality.

I extend these thoughts on 'folding out' to the notion of 'implication' which I suggest refers to the other side of explication; namely, it refers to a 'folding in'. To

14. *Nature* 305 n7 (in the English edition only). Apparently both Merleau-Ponty and his students used such folio leaves as notebooks.
15. *Nature* 305 n10.

say that we are im-pli-cated in one another means that we are folded into one another: we are associated and involved with each other. Being implicated in one another means that subjects are connected (*Ineinander*) in an ever re-newing, precarious and sometimes dangerous rhythm of at-tunement, differentiation and transformation. It matters that we are implicated, folded into each other, Husserl writes: "connections would not connect if they made no difference to what they connected."[16] The mutual overlappings between us and the separating surfaces that unify us affect us and the manner in which we respond to each other.

The close relation between the notions of implication and explication suggests that no explanation can fully reveal how we are associated, connected and involved in one another because to pull apart the folds is already to change the relation. This impossibility of full explication brings us back to the impossibility of a complete phenomenological reduction. If we are implicated in one another and in the world, if in addition temporality implicates us in our historical cultural situation, then we cannot step back and look with a pure gaze at what unfolds before us. Sara Heinämaa expresses a sentiment that comes close to mine when I discuss phenomenology and wonder.[17] Heinämaa writes: "[t]he task of the phenomenologist is not to *explicate*…structures but *to disclose* them."[18] When we spread out the flesh, carefully smoothing and levelling it out, what was hidden inside the folds is not

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16. Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, 699.
17. In the introduction (section ii) and in chapter four (sections 4.2.4.3 and 4.3.3).
18. Sara Heinämaa, "Merleau-Ponty's Modification of Phenomenology: Cognition, Passion and Philosophy," *Synthese* 118 (1999): 56. She responds to Merleau-Ponty's claim that "[o]ur relationship to the world, as it is untiringly enunciated within us, is not a thing which can be any further clarified by analysis; philosophy can only place it once more before our eyes and present it for our ratification" (PhP xviii/18).

explained once and for all, but rather it is being complicated and opened up for continual questions.[19]

The phenomenological and ontological structure of embodied encounters has not been exhausted in this thesis. Instead this thesis has disclosed structures, openings and rhythms through which these encounters can be seen anew and from which they can continue to be complicated. Let this thesis be part of a continuing dialogue with others as a shared looking at that makes possible (even if ever so slightly) the transformation of our perceptions of one another.

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19. Extending the discussion above, complication can be understood as 'folded together' or 'difficult to unravel'. These three terms can thus be put together in the following rather playful manner: the explication of implication achieves its complication. While of course the above relies on a play of words, the notion of complication should be taken serious. For example, in an excellent keynote address given for "Mapping Feminist Scholarship/Tracer les Études Féministes" (McGill, June 2006) Sherene Razack underscored the need to complicate the stories of Muslim women in the Western world, emphasising that these complications would reveal the diversity of stories and the impossibility to gather 'the Muslim woman' under the single category of 'the other'.

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