

GRADUATE STUDENT ESSAY PRIZE WINNER

**THE BODY AS MEASURANT OF ALL:
DIS-COVERING THE WORLD**

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In this paper I re-evaluate Merleau-Ponty's use of the term "measurant." I argue that Merleau-Ponty's "body as measurant" (VI 249/297) describes embodied perception as a tuning into and a dis-covering of a world that is never completely in its grasp. I dis-cover in the world objects and other persons, which sweep me away from the centre of the world and which offer me new perceptual dimensions. This relation does not necessarily imply agreement and harmony, but it suggests that all our interactions, even those that are disharmonious and ambiguous, take place in a back-and-forth of response and transformation.

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? After all maybe she has received a sedative and feels nothing at all. When I consider 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 paper I take up and analyze one essential piece of the phenomenological puzzle: the sympathetic body’s projective or *measuring* perception. Concentrating on the Merleau-Pontian notion that the body is a “measurant” of other bodies, I depict the body as both actively casting itself upon the body of the other and thus *covering* her up with its own exemplary structure, and as *discovering* this other body while being passively subject to the other body that proves not to be measurable. From this I extract a phenomenology of embodied encounters that is based on a continual interrogation, exchange, and transformation of both our bodies.

The Body as Measure

In *Ideas II* Husserl labels the body the zero point [*Nullpunkt*] of all perception that is with us at each moment.² The body is the *means* by way of which the world, or the other is perceived, i.e., it is the organ of per-

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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 Edmund Husserl, *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie, II Buch, Phänomenologischen Untersuchungen zur Konstitution* (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1952), 56, 144.

ception. In the *Phenomenology of Perception*,³ Merleau-Ponty calls the body the “general medium [*moyen général*]” (PhP 146/182) and the condition for having a world. Like other philosophers before him Merleau-Ponty emphasises that the sympathetic coupling of bodies is based on the similarity between human bodies when he claims that my recognition of the other person is possible to the extent that the other’s “living body has the same structure as mine ... my body ... 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) Later Merleau-Ponty writes that this “body ... is the measurant [*mesurant*] of all, *Nullpunkt* of all the dimensions in the world.”⁴ This new notion of the body as measurant elevates the body from being a passive orientation point (the being “here and now”) to an active instrument for measurement (the perceiving as “such and such”). The important distinction between these two notions of the body is that to be the *zero point* means that the body is the centre of my world in relation to which all my perceptions are *located* 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. 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 then is the measure itself (my own shivering body) and not that which is to be measured (the woman’s body).⁵ This

³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, tr. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 2000). In French: *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945). Cited as PhP. In all quotes the page number of the English translation comes before the original French.

⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, tr. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2000), 249. In French: *Le visible et l’invisible* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), 297. Cited as VI. In all quotes the page number of the English translations comes before the original French.

⁵ In her chapter “The Invisible of the Flesh,” Luce Irigaray responds to Merleau-Ponty that if I cannot see the other as different, then I do not see the other at all. Instead I be-

example very clearly presents problems for perception, as it seems to turn perception into a ‘covering up’ and consequently one ever perceives only oneself rather than something or someone who might be different. Below I reanalyse and complicate the notion of measurement in order to get a full and less problematic understanding of what kind of measure the body is.

The Body as Instrument

In order to complicate the notion of measurement, I first discuss two opposing and misguided interpretations of 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 active sculptor 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, *mesurants* (*me-*

come blind to bodies that are structured differently. Irigaray claims that Merleau-Ponty’s seer “dwells unceasingly in his world. Eventually he finds some accomplices there, but he never meets others” (Luce Irigaray, “The Invisible of the Flesh: A reading of Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ‘The Intertwining of the Chiasm,’” in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, tr. C. Burke and G.C. Gill (New York: Cornell University Press, 1993), 173).

surants) for Being, dimensions to which we can refer it, but not a relation of ... immanence. (VI 103/137–8)⁶

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; 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)⁷ The relevant point is that 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

⁶ Merleau-Ponty in this quotation actually criticises both idealism and realism. I have simplified the quotation as the realist objection is dealt with later. Merleau-Ponty writes: "We do not have a consciousness constitutive of the things, as idealism believes, nor 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 or of immanence." (VI 103/137–8).

⁷ Merleau-Ponty here borrows from Marcel Proust in *In Search of Lost Time*, vol. 1, *Swann's Way*, tr. C.K. Scott Montcrieff and T. Kilmartin, rev. D.J. Enright (London: Chatto & Windus, 1992), 423. See also a similar argument and reference in PhP 145/181, both in text and in note 2 on the same page. The book is also known as *Remembrance of Things Past*.

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.⁸ 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. Already in the *Phenomenology* Merleau-Ponty explicitly denies that the body is a tool when he writes that the body is not an object in front of consciousness, instead it is *with* consciousness; consciousness simply *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 might be available and at hand for a geometer. Merleau-Ponty writes:

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 appliances [*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 ... and seize by reflection a being for whom the object can exist. (PhP 237/284; translation modified)

Merleau-Ponty here clearly rejects the idea that the body is a causal apparatus [*appareil*], a device or appliance for measuring and recording the world. If this were the case, he claims, one could no longer speak of a *perceiver*. To understand embodied perception in a phenomenological manner it is necessary to keep the lived experience of the perceiver in mind.

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* from the claim that the body is a

⁸ About "ideas possessing us," see VI 151/196.

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. As Merleau-Ponty writes, the body is “at least in relation to the perceived world the general instrument [*l’instrument général*] of my ‘comprehension’.” (PhP 235/282) 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 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 sensitive instrumentality, which is not separate from the subject, is more promising for understanding the measuring body as opposed to the notion of “device” discussed above.

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), 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.⁹

Dis-covering the World

Having uncovered the double passive-active role of the body in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, in the second half of this paper 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

⁹ 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 for example, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology*, eds. Leonard Lawlor and Bettina Bergo (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2002), 42, 84 n.104).

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.¹⁰

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 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) 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 certain orderliness. In spontaneous vision "at every moment I was swimming in the world of things"¹¹ 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 1

¹⁰ In opposition to a view like this Merleau-Ponty writes that "in perception, my body serves as the absolute measure ... this is still not the measuring itself [*mesurer*]" (Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The experience of others", tr. F. Evans and H.J. Silverman, in *Merleau-Ponty and Psychology, Studies in Existential Psychology and Psychiatry*, ed. K. Hoeller (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1993), 37. Cited as EO.

¹¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Prose of the World*, tr. J. O'Neill, ed. C. Lefort (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 52. Cited as PW.

or 100 metres away from me, but it is a question of me being (un)able to touch her and to discern the features of her face.¹² I never have the object 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 it as it has a thickness which resists my grasp.

In order to better to understand the relation between my body and the world, the object, or the other, Merleau-Ponty considers leaving behind the language of constituting subject and constituted object.¹³ He writes accordingly: “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 decentring as the ground of meaning.” (PW 45n) I take two suggestions from this quotation: 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 your 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.

Merleau-Ponty writes that “every visual something, as individual as it is, functions also as a dimension.”¹⁴ This quotation helps shed more

¹² See EO 37: “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.”

¹³ He replaces it with the concept of institution (Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *L’Institution dans l’histoire personnelle et publique : Notes du course au Collège de France* (1954–1955) [Paris: Belin, 2003], 123–4).

¹⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, tr. C. Dallery, in *The Primacy of Perception*,

light on the “biting” that happens between me 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 dispossessed of the object and decentred in relation to it, and because of it she dis-covers the object. Dis-covering the object means that the object has already affected her and made her respond to it before she is personally aware of it.

Merleau-Ponty’s notion of embodied existence makes paramount first that we cannot withdraw from the world in which we find ourselves and second that we participate in rhythm of affecting and being affected by objects and subjects in the world. The environment in which I find myself exerts a real pull on my body and calls it to respond such that it makes of my body not just a measurant of other persons but a measurant of *all*.

Encountering Another

As suggested by Geraldine Finn, the other body that is “covered up” with my own might be best understood as a *palimpsest*. A palimpsest is a medieval writing material that is used one or more times after earlier writing has been erased. The result is often that the previous text is still visible but is difficult to decipher. It is also not always possible to completely separate the new and the old texts from each other. Similarly, when I look at the other, my own body’s projections overlay hers to such an extent that it is difficult to decipher what is mine and what is hers. Nevertheless, like a palimpsest, her original body is present as a vague trace

ed. J.M. Edie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 187. Cited as EM.

that calls out to be read. When I meet another person I encounter in her secret but living traces of a history, traditions and sedimentations of rituals and bodily rhythms. An imaginative quote from Merleau-Ponty helps me to phenomenologically interpret what happens in such an encounter. Merleau-Ponty writes: “[the body] clasps another body, applying [itself to it] carefully with its whole extension, forming tirelessly with its hands the strange statue which in its turn gives everything it receives.... And henceforth movement, touch, vision, applying themselves to the other and to themselves, return toward their source.” (VI 144/187) Meeting another person I become her sculptor, using my own body as the model. My body traces and interrogates this other body, recognising similar affections, intentions, actions and habits in that body, slowly making that body into my own image. Thus I apply my own body to the woman who is walking in the cold and I sculpt her body in resemblance to mine. I feel ‘her’ cold as it truly is mine. But the other’s body is not a passive lump of clay. She resists my grasp; like the cup she has already changed the shape of my grasp before I was even able to reach out to her. Thus, my body has already responded to her while her body has also already actively responded to me. It is the other body that *gives to me and shapes me* as I give to her and shape her. Consequently, the sculpting of the other body with my own movement, touch and vision also resists, reverses and changes *my* movement and vision.

In my encounter with another it is this back-and-forth which is the pre-personal negotiation between the other and me. For example, while being engaged in a conversation we often and quickly take over some of the peculiarities and styles of that other person’s body. We adopt a similar posture, nod our heads in the same frequency and even start employing words we have never used before.¹⁵ This seems to happen pre-personally, without our knowledge, and maybe it only becomes obvious when a third person points it out to us. The catching of each other’s

¹⁵ Jaffe *et al.* summarise research done over the past 40 years that shows that during a conversation between two adults they each tune into the speech pattern of the other, their pauses match the pauses of the other and the rhythm and inflection of their speech is also matched. All of this seems to happen on a level where I precisely 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 (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, 1–151).

emotions, kinaesthetic and vocal rhythms happens from moment-to-moment in our most basic communications. At these moments I claim that the other person has “bitten into” us, that is, she has brought a new dimension to our world.

One might 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? This is true and I think 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 perceive the world is restricted according to this body. In the *Phenomenology* Merleau-Ponty writes about this that “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*,^[16] I cannot contrive it that they are small for me.” (PhP 440/503) This quote suggests that a person cannot do otherwise than to see the world in relation to her body’s abilities. While looking out of an aeroplane window, she oversees the Alps with one glance but she still does not experience them as the mole-hills 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 120,000 feet tall. But this new experience would then be restricted by being that particular Sirian body. Thus we are not measuring the world from up above, 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 dimension through which the world appears to us. This dimension can change, for example, when we grow up and grow taller.¹⁷ 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

¹⁶ *Micromégas* is a satirical short story written by Voltaire in 1752. In the story a man 120,000 feet tall from the planet Sirius visits the earth and marvels at its microscopic inhabitants.

¹⁷ As argued above, it also changes when we interact and intermingle with the world.

bodies change when we, for example, are pregnant, or when we lose or gain body parts (through amputations, prostheses, using canes, hats, walking on stilts, playing instruments, etc.) 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.¹⁸ 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 and am part of its rhythm, I also never succeed in covering her completely. Instead, like a palimpsest she is ever present under my gaze. Thus I *discover* in the world objects and other persons which I do 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.

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 each other in the space in-between our bodies, reaching out to each other but never able to immobilise the other through a full frontal grasp.

Concluding Remarks: A Question of Ethics

The measuring and sculpting of each other’s living bodies and the biting into one another opens up those living bodies to a question of ethics. It is important to stress that at issue in this paper is my pre-personal bodily response and perceptual attunement to other bodies. This attunement does not mean that it is necessarily a harmonious interaction. To imply that attunement is necessarily harmonious is in danger of imagining the

¹⁸ I am grateful to Geraldine Finn for a stimulating conversation about the dis-appearance of the other person. This term suggests well the double meaning that is present in the relationship between me and the other: as she appears to me she escapes me.

human relationship as always agreeably and productively related to each other. Actuality corrects this dream seeing that violence and *disharmony* are very real phenomenological experiences.

It is not stressed often enough that Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception can be read as a phenomenology of violence.¹⁹ The violence of perception is most vividly present in the lecture notes for "The Concept of Nature, 1959–1960: Nature and Logos: The Human Body."²⁰ There the reciprocity of two bodies is no longer captured in terms of a "mutual sculpting," a "giving and a receiving"; instead "biting" turns aggressive: "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." (N 280) In this image of mutual encroachment the intersubjective encounter has become particularly fleshy and violent. I no longer sculpt her with gentleness and release, I no longer hold back to see how she wishes to be sculpted. In return, I am no longer welcomed and received by her. Instead I bite her and she bites back and this mutual biting now hurts. Perception turns violent because the perception of the one *breaks* through the other's flesh such that the other finds the one within herself. As recounted in *Nature*, this perceptual battle is one in which we relate to each other through a sado-masochistic relationship, and the body's *passivity* is replaced with its *passion*. 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*. I worry that to turn passivity into passion is to forget the true passivity of receptivity in favour of an appropriation of the other.²¹ Merleau-Ponty's consecutive claim that "sadism is masochism" (N 280) is similarly marked by the forgetting of the body's passivity. In the submission to self-destruction the masochist is already violent and aggressive towards herself through the mediation of another subject. This violent transformation of the encounter illustrates that perception as such *is not yet ethical*

¹⁹ Merleau-Ponty refers in the *Phenomenology* to "a violent act which is perception itself." (PhP 361/420)

²⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Nature: Course Notes from the Collège de France*, comp. Dominique Séglaard, tr. R. Vallier (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2003). Cited as N.

²¹ "The world and the others become our flesh." (N 211; my emphasis)

and that the intersubjective relationship can have both ethical and violent consequences as it can be a mutual *transformative sculpting* or a *violent breaking into another's flesh*.

It is important to realise that my response to another person stems from my particular living body that is historically, culturally, socially and politically situated. This means that the pre-personal or habit body is never a neutral body; rather, it is a body that is already gendered, racialised and socialised according to the conventions of one's world. Because my living body is a particular sedimented body, my responsive sculpting of another body is never wholly innocent and innocuous. Whereas our pre-personal negotiation could possibly be constructive and positively transformative, it also might reinforce existing power differentials between differently gendered, racialised, or socialised bodies. This also means that as soon as I attune to another living body, I am always already *politically* engaged. Geraldine Finn draws a persuasive and radical notion of politics from Merleau-Ponty's ontology of the flesh. Finn's "politics of contingency" has neither a proper place nor a proper time, but rather it encompasses one's whole embodied life. She writes compellingly that 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 become a political statement of resistance or acquiescence.²² Finn does not offer us a "safe place for the 'politically correct'"²³, but instead a politics that is built on ambiguous and closely entangled embodied situations in which we always run the risk of being wrong.

If we always run the risk of being wrong, then what remains of ethics? Is there a way to decide the good? Gail Weiss insightfully argues that Merleau-Ponty's ontology suggests that one cannot de-contextualise and disembodily morality. Instead an embodied ethics emerges out of intercorporeal exchanges from within a situation.²⁴ I agree and stress that the ethical question emerges *after* our initial responsive encounter. This

²² 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 (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992), 176.

²³ Finn, "Politics of Contingency", 181.

²⁴ Gail Weiss, *Body Images: Embodiment as Intercorporeality* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 158.

means that the pre-personal response of the “body as measurant of all” does not yet intend “the good” for either of us. Bernhard Waldenfels draws attention to the pre-personal responsivity of our living bodies when he writes that “a bodily being ... responds to something other before this other gets a particular sense.”²⁵ While I agree with this statement, I question Waldenfels’ further argument as he makes the responsivity of the body already a response to an ethical demand and thus he transforms the living body’s responsivity into a *responsibility* for the other. Consequently Waldenfels makes Merleau-Ponty more Levinasian than I think is warranted.²⁶ Merleau-Ponty speaks most clearly about the primacy of perception over ethics when he writes: “just as the perception of a thing opens me up to being ... in the same way the perception of the other finds morality.”²⁷ For Merleau-Ponty the pre-personal response is a reaction to a *perceptual* demand which in turn can institute an ethic. But the pre-personal response itself is not yet an ethical response.

The notion of “letting be” in Merleau-Ponty’s final ontology is suggestive of an ethical relation. He explains that in perception we are (perceptually) called not to hold objects as 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 resonance they require, who follows their own movement.... It is necessary to comprehend perception as this interrogative thought which lets the perceived world be rather than posit it. (VI 101–2/136)

Perception is an interrogation that does not possess its objects but rather it follows them and gives them space. This “letting be” needs to be un-

²⁵ 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, J. McLane and C. Diehm (Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, 2006), 95.

²⁶ See also Diane Perpich’s response to Waldenfels’ paper: Diane Perpich, “Moral Blind Spots and Ethical Appeals: A Response to Bernhard Waldenfels”, in *Interrogating Ethics: Embodying the Good in Merleau-Ponty*, 107–31.

²⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. J. M. Edie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 26.

derstood as neither merely passively taking place in me nor wholly actively being appropriated by me. Instead, the full complexity of “letting be” describes my body as an active-passive space, interrogating but also holding back in order to receive the other and to let her reverberations find resonance. Perception is an *interrogation* that does not hold onto the other with forceps, but rather our perceiving body *dis*-covers others and “lets them be,” giving them a dimension through which they can be perceived while responding to their own particular resonance.

Reading Merleau-Ponty’s ontology, Kym 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.²⁸ As a result she locates the ethical response in the active questioning of oneself and the other that requires (i) a reflective insight in our (ontological) relation to each other and (ii) an understanding of our mutual differentiation. Similarly, Geraldine Finn’s politics of contingency suggests that the ethical response to the political situation requires reflecting on one’s own entanglement in the politically ambiguous situation. The manner in which both Maclaren and Finn take up the question of ethics confirms that the chiasmatic relationship between me and another is not yet 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 self-reflection.²⁹

In brief, the attunement between our living bodies does not necessarily imply agreement and political harmony, but it suggests that all our interactions, even those that are disharmonious and ambiguous, take place in a back-and-forth of projection, response and transformation. Thus there is a continual perceptual 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. This transformation is hitherto not yet ethical but it might bring us, without guarantees, before the ethical question.

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²⁸ Kym Maclaren, “Intercorporeity, Intersubjectivity and the Problem of ‘Letting Others Be’” in *Chiasmi International* 4, 2002, 197, 202.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 202.