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Sharing “the flesh of the world”: alterity, animality, and radical community in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy

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DePaul University

Sharing “the Flesh of the World”
Alterity, Animality, and Radical Community in Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy

A Dissertation
Presented in
Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

By
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Chicago, IL
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Dedicated to Sammy, Dexter, and Mr. Bojangles, who have taught me that family, friendship, love, humor, thoughtfulness, and hospitality extend far beyond the boundaries of blood or species.
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Acknowledgments

If Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy and if this project may be reduced to a single thesis, it is that there is nothing in existence that is not a relational, communal effort or accomplishment, and this is especially true of any philosophical or scholarly undertaking. As Merleau-Ponty remarks, “even reason’s labors presuppose…infinite conversations.”\(^1\) Every idea and argument here has been informed by innumerable conversations and been made possible by extensive webs of support, and it will not be possible for me to do justice to all of them here. That being said, I wish to acknowledge those for whom I am most deeply grateful for the roles they have played in supporting me and my academic endeavors, those whose insights, encouragements, and love are inscribed in every word I have written here.

Setting aside for the moment our mutual resistance to thinking of personal and ethical relationships in economic terms, no words would ever be adequate to express my “indebtedness” to my dissertation director, intellectual mentor, and friend, Peter Steeves. The idea for this dissertation was born in the first course I had with him during my first year in graduate school, and since then Peter has modeled for me the kind of thinker, teacher, and person I hope to be someday. I never use the term “genius” casually, but Peter is not only that but something even rarer still: genius combined with boundless kindness, warmth, and generosity. Peter has so profoundly affected how I think that I truly cannot claim to know where his ideas end and mine begin, and there is nothing I have to say in this work that does not, ultimately, belong to him. Moreover, throughout the past several years, Peter’s friendship did so much to sustain me and my research during rather dark times, times when I considered giving up. I likely would never have been able to complete this project had it not been for Peter’s preternatural ability not only to

\(^1\) *Signs*, “Introduction,” p. 19.
help me discover my own thoughts but also simply to make me feel that everything, in the end, will be alright, even good, and I cannot overstate how important that has been (and continues to be). The best, most important thing graduate school has given me has been the privilege of knowing Peter, and no words will ever truly do justice to him or to what our relationship means to me. Another word I do not use casually is “love,” and I truly do love Peter, and that love has made all of this possible.

The philosophy department at DePaul University has also, of course, deeply nurtured and shaped me as a thinker and teacher over the past decade. Every professor at DePaul I have known or from whom I have learned has helped me grow into the scholar I am today; they have challenged me in significant and often unexpected ways, opened me to new horizons of thought, improved how I think and write, and simply validated my passion for our discipline. In particular, I must thank the members of my dissertation committee for their generous participation in this project and for everything I have learned from them: professors Michael Naas, Sean Kirkland, and Leonard Lawlor. Though Merleau-Ponty is the focus of my research, Michael’s seminars on Derrida and Plato and Sean’s seminars on Aristotle have influenced and enriched all of my research throughout graduate school in deep ways, and they have been wonderfully supportive of me. I must also mention how grateful I am to Leonard Lawlor. As an outside reader for this project and as someone with whom I have never had the privilege of taking a course, professor Lawlor may not realize how important he has been to my work over the years. Ever since I was introduced to his scholarship as an undergraduate it has profoundly shaped my understanding and appreciation not only of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy but of Continental philosophy in general. Frankly, he is one of my favorite writers and voices in contemporary philosophy, one I will never be able to emulate yet who will always be one of my
regulative ideals for what it means to do philosophy or to think, and I am honored he has agreed to be part of my committee. I also wish to acknowledge professors Will McNeill and Kevin Thompson, from whom I have also learned so much. Will’s courses on Heidegger and Nietzsche and Kevin’s courses on Hegel and Deleuze have strongly influenced me in many ways. More importantly, they are both remarkably gifted teachers whose rigorous, stunningly clear expositions of the most difficult texts have made me a better teacher, writer, and philosopher.

A fundamental fact about human life – one that is as cliché as it is startling – is that most of it is the result of irreducible contingencies. I cannot say what course my path through philosophy would have taken had I never known professor Larry Hass, my undergraduate philosophical mentor. I cannot know if I ever would have studied Merleau-Ponty much at all had Larry never introduced him to me. I likely would never have studied Merleau-Ponty extensively had Larry not taught him to me with such sincere and unrestrained passion, the purest form of the kind of love we philosophers are supposed to embody, the kind signified by the verb philein. Larry introduced me to Merleau-Ponty, and his mentorship and friendship throughout my undergraduate career set me on the trajectory toward this dissertation and the career that lies beyond it. Like Peter Steeves, Larry has meant more to me than language is equipped to describe. He is unquestionably one of best teachers I have ever had and one of the best, most lucid thinkers I have ever known, someone who is also an all-too-rare combination of genius and kindness. Since I first encountered him in an introductory philosophy course my freshman year of college, he has exemplified for me the philosopher, writer, and teacher I hope to be. Larry inspired not only my passion for Merleau-Ponty but also my resolve to pursue an academic career. Any time I have felt discouraged about academia, I remind myself of how deeply Larry enriched how I think about and see the world, and my hope to do for others what he has done for
me is thus ignited once more. My only hope is to inspire others the way Larry inspired – and continues to inspire – me.

Of course, Larry was not the only professor I had as an undergraduate, and the close-knit philosophical community at Muhlenberg College nurtured my passion for philosophy and influenced my thinking in ways that have left indelible marks on me and on my work. I would not have been prepared for graduate school had it not been for the outstanding and pluralistic philosophical training I received at Muhlenberg. From courses on contemporary analytic ethics and metaphysics to those on post-structuralism and Daoism, from courses on ancient and modern philosophy to those on Nineteenth Century philosophy and feminist political philosophy, from independent studies on Kant and Marx to those on Aristotle and Spinoza, from courses on formal logic and epistemology to those on philosophy of mind and philosophy of language, everything I learned at Muhlenberg is responsible for the thinker I am today and may be gleaned between every line of this dissertation. So, I wish to thank all of my undergraduate professors, each of whom continue to speak through me in everything I write and teach: professors Lud Schlecht, Christine Sistare, Steve Coutinho, Ted Schick, Patrice DiQuinzio, Matt MacKenzie, and Thomas Gardner.

Nothing I have achieved here would have been possible were it not also for love and support outside of my academic life. My parents, Ellin and Stewart Singer, have loved and supported me and my academic ambitions unconditionally, and I would truly be lost without them. Few parents would support their child’s dream of becoming a professional philosopher as proudly, generously, and patiently as they have supported mine, and without the privilege of having them as my parents, I know I would never have had any of my other many privileges, including that of studying and teaching philosophy for a living. As a young child, they
encouraged all of my interests and passions. From reading to me every night and dinner-table conversations about education and politics to taking me to museums and zoos nearly every other weekend, they instilled in me a love of learning and intellectual curiosity that has led me to where I am today. In general, I know that I can count on them for anything, and the security of that knowledge – the security of their unwaning, unreserved love – has allowed me not simply to persevere through every hardship or setback but truly to flourish in the world, to realize my potential both as a scholar and as a human being, and nothing I may ever do for them will ever be commensurate with what they have done – and continue to do – for me.

Finally, I must express the deepest gratitude for my partner, Byler. I faced a number of serious challenges throughout the course of writing this dissertation, some of which nearly derailed it altogether. However, Byler’s love and humor motivated me to write – and motivated me to invest all of myself into my writing – when no one or nothing else otherwise could have done so, and at times when I did not think there was any energy in me left to invest in writing at all. Human life is impossible without hope because human life is impossible without an orientation toward a future, and hopelessness is precisely the loss of futurity, or rather the loss of any sense that a different and worthwhile future is possible, the loss of any notion that the future holds out the possibility of anything worth the effort to accomplish or to be around to experience. Byler precisely brought hope into my life when I most needed it. She makes a worthwhile future possible and palpable for me because she already makes each day we spend together wonderfully, richly worth living. Without the happiness and hope she brings to my life – without the sense of a real future that she makes possible – I would not have been able to finish this work, and it is largely because of her that I now look forward to the work I have yet to do and to the life I have before me yet to live.
Introduction

“Bêtise”

“…[The philosopher] dispossesses [humanity]…inviting it to think of itself as an enigma.”

– Merleau-Ponty

Philosophers have always found clever ways to doubt what most people take to be obvious truths, and while philosophy may, at its best, illuminate important matters and contestable assumptions about the world that we would otherwise overlook – that is, while philosophy may rightfully reveal to us the strangeness or questionability of what we have passively accepted as familiar or unquestionable – at other times, at its worst, it may just as well loosen our hold upon or cause us to repress the very basic, concrete truths that most merit attentive consideration and that, in many cases, urgently demand renewed affirmation in our lives. In order to see things clearly – or in order to critique our prevailing assumptions about the world so that we may begin to do so – it is surely the case that we need to take a certain distance from them, but a central insight of phenomenology (and a point that Merleau-Ponty consistently insists upon) is that the abstractions or conceptual frameworks we typically achieve through such a critical distance, as well as those already well-established abstractions and conceptual frameworks upon which we rely precisely in order to take such a critical distance from the world in the first place – in short, the hard-won and long-sown fruits of our toil to make sense of the world – can (and in many cases do) occlude or distort more than they help clarify or reveal.

Since philosophy and the questions it poses are so often themselves governed by problematic yet deeply entrenched prejudices and abstract concepts, what we need is a kind of philosophical

reflection that does not simply distance us from unreflective experience (which reflection, by definition, must do) but rather one that, however difficult and indeed paradoxical it may be, ceaselessly returns us to it, a kind of reflection that can precisely uncover (or rather help us rediscover) the truths we know perfectly well by direct acquaintance yet which naturally become concealed through our passage into reflective thought and the dormitive comfort of its settled, well-worn acquisitions. Such, then, is the aim of phenomenology: the aim of elaborating the fundamental structures and features of lived experience, the aim of rediscovering “through a process similar to that of an archaeologist…the structure of the perceived world…buried under the sedimentations of later knowledge.”

Reflective, critical, philosophical thinking is so easily captivated by its own readily available stock of sedimented, sclerotic concepts, propositions, and schemas that it hardly merits the name. If reflective, critical, philosophical thinking is truly to live up to its name – if philosophy is truly to fulfill its “task of wakefulness” – then it must open up a space that, quasi-paradoxically, brings us into deeper, more intimate touch with the fundamental, elemental conditions and aspects of our existence rather than alienate us from them or withhold them from our view; it must open up, and must continually labor to hold open, a distance between human subjectivity and Being and between human subjectivity and other beings that does more to bring them together than to separate or exclude them from one another, a distance that precisely, and again (quasi-)paradoxically, reveals and in itself realizes our basic, irrecusable solidarity with the world and with all of its inhabitants. Taking a reflective distance from things tends to mean

considering them in an “abstract” way, yet phenomenology insists that it is precisely our abstractions that most often obstruct our view of what is really there to be seen and known, that abstractions precisely deform the fundamental bonds we have with the truths or “things themselves” that call to be seen, felt, heard, known, or affirmed, that abstractions precisely distort what even seeing, feeling, hearing, knowing, and being as such are, and it is thus that, once such abstractions have settled at the bottom of our consciousness, we are not only diverted into so many intellectual blind-alleys and “pseudo-problems” but also gradually come to see, feel, hear, or know less than we should; it is thus that we come to think, and therefore live, wrongly. Even if we take to heart, as we should, the various, often powerful criticisms of phenomenology that have been proposed over the years, I am utterly convinced that, on this basic point, phenomenology is incontestably correct, and that there is never a question of getting around, going through, “overcoming,” “refuting,” or discarding phenomenology but only ever a question of doing better phenomenology. So, if we truly are to “rediscover the world in which we live, yet which we are always prone to forget,” we will have to adopt a reflective stance toward the world far different from the one to which philosophers are traditionally accustomed, for it will have to be one that precisely dispenses with the kinds of abstractions that typically make us overlook or forget what has always been there before our eyes or, better put, entangled inextricably with our “seeing,” sentient bodies. In order to see the world clearly, we will have to achieve a distance from the world that, far from absolutely estranging us from it, would be, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, one that is “deeply consonant” or “synonymous” with our proximity to it. Indeed, this is just what it means to see anything clearly, yet given just how poorly we in fact

6 *The Visible and The Invisible*, p. 135.
tend to “see things,” we might say that the effort and demand to see clearly is a radical, liberatory project. It is precisely this project that animates Merleau-Ponty’s entire philosophy, and it is precisely this project that animates my own wish to contribute, in some small way, to carrying Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy forward.

To be clear, phenomenology is far from “naïve realism.” What is precisely “naïve” is taking for granted as fundamental and necessary truths what are in fact false and derivative abstract schemas and constructs. Phenomenology does not reify everyday appearances because those appearances themselves are so often infested with reified concepts and schemas, the kinds of concepts and schemas that a rigorous attention to “lived experience” is precisely supposed to exorcise. The critical edge of phenomenology, then, is precisely a resistance to reification, and this means it is never simply a matter of describing the everyday ways in which things appear but is rather a matter of subjecting such appearances to interrogation, a matter of discerning to what extent such appearances, or to what extent our ways of articulating such appearances, let appear rather than dissemble the true being and meaning of worldly, appearing things. As Merleau-Ponty suggests, phenomenology is a matter of excavating those basic layers of being and meaning that so many everyday appearances, and that so many everyday ways of thinking and speaking, conceal but which are nonetheless immanent to them as such. The primary task of phenomenology is indeed to bring to renewed awareness the essential features of immediate, lived experience, yet paradoxically immediate experience is so often far from “immediate”; indeed, though the aim of phenomenology is to clarify the basic features of lived experience and to dissolve the persistent philosophical problems and confusions that arise from a failure to do so, it is also the case that lived experience can never, in principle, be rendered transparent; this, too, is a core phenomenological insight. In fact, phenomenology reveals to us that many of the
most basic structures of experience, being, and meaning are *radically absent*, that presence is necessarily grounded in, and saturated with, irreducible non-presence, that light always has its source in darkness. However, the aim of phenomenology is, at the very least, to dismantle the erroneous frameworks and constructs that gratuitously, and often dangerously, obscure lived experience (including, paradoxically, those features of lived experience that must, at least to some extent, remain in obscurity) so as to help us see, think, and live more wakefully.

A central insight of phenomenology, then, is that it is precisely unreflective, lived, carnal experience that furnishes us not only with the philosophical questions that we pose but also with the very categories and abstractions that often prevent us from seeing the answers to them or that, in some instances, lead us to answer them correctly albeit for the wrong reasons. Though lived experience is the source of the specious commitments and flawed constructs that suppress or distort it, it is also, for that very reason, the best and indeed only resource we have for dismantling them, for when our specious commitments and flawed constructs are specious and flawed precisely because they contradict and repress their own conditions of derivation and intelligibility, it is these conditions that provide or already embody the vital, fundamental truths that thwart them. In short, lived experience is the source of all of our truths and errors alike. This is what Merleau-Ponty means when he speaks of the “primacy of perception,” and there is no question of getting around this thesis. By “perception,” of course, Merleau-Ponty does not just mean our subjective engagements with things or the presentation of things to consciousness; rather, he means that which makes any subjective engagements with things – or any presentation of things to consciousness – possible in the first place. Thus, Merleau-Ponty’s usage of the term “perception” departs from its ordinary usage (including its usage in the sciences), for it precisely refers to our originary openness to a world that antecedes and founds the very distinction
between “the subjective” and “the objective” (a distinction that many philosophers and nearly all scientists take for granted as ontologically basic when in fact it is one of those abstractions that derives from, yet conceals, lived experience). Nonetheless, we may understand Merleau-Ponty’s “primacy of perception” thesis even according to the ordinary sense of term. In the ordinary sense of the term, perception is, of course, the source of all illusions, for illusions are perceptual phenomena; yet it does not logically follow that perception itself is a mere screen of illusions, for the intelligibility of an illusory experience presupposes an antecedent experience of truth: if no perception may be regarded as veridical, none may be regarded as false; if everything is illusory, nothing is. If there are, then, such things as truths that would dispel our illusions, these are simply themselves other perceptions, further appearances in the unfolding of conscious life.

Thus, as I remarked above, if perception is the generative condition of our falsehoods, so too is it the generative condition of our truths, and therefore it is that to which we must attend if we wish to exchange the former for the latter. If our errors arise from lived experience and consist in precisely concealing lived experience from us, then it is necessary, as best we can, to return to lived experience, to better harmonize reflective understanding with pre-reflective living, to think with rather than against the phenomena that always already motivate thinking, knowledge, and behavior. It is a failure to attend rigorously to lived experience that leads us into error, that leads us to reify our derivative abstractions as primary truths, and so the only means we have to resist such errors and abstractions is, precisely, to attend rigorously to lived experience, to learn to see what has been there “before our eyes” from the very beginning, what has always been concretely, materially, elementally enmeshed with us from the first moment we ever truly began to see and think, the first moment we ever took leave of prelapsarian ignorance and extended ourselves toward a reflective understanding of ourselves and the world.
As I have just suggested, rehabilitating what we immediately perceive and know in and through our everyday engagements with the world – or bringing to our renewed attention the constitutive structures and features of even our most ordinary experiences – may precisely be the most productively disruptive power of philosophy, for it is precisely these very things that we are most prone to forget; indeed, these are things that we are encouraged to forget not only by certain ideologies or systems of power that have a vested interest in their suppression, but even (as Merleau-Ponty claims) by the very nature of human thought itself, whose reflective accomplishments tend to conceal and even deny their sources in lived, pre-reflective, embodied experience, and which consequently lead us to live or to think divided against ourselves: that is to say, we come to conceptualize the world in a way that contradicts the manner in which we originally, always already experience and exist in it, we then retrospectively regard such a conceptualization of the world as a fundamental truth, and finally we allow that conceptualization to inform future conduct, shape future relationships and experiences, and motivate the direction of further thought. So, for example, though we inescapably and constantly exist in a world with others and immediately experience this world as a space of shared, public possibilities and meanings, and though our coexistence with others is a necessary condition of the possibility of consciousness and selfhood, one might nevertheless abstract one’s consciousness or self from the web of relationships that constitute it and come to regard oneself as preexisting, or as in some way fundamentally independent of, those relationships, or in other words as an isolated, radically autonomous individual; one might conceive of one’s own existence – of one’s own consciousness or selfhood – so “abstractly” that one even genuinely entertains doubts concerning the existence of others in the first place. Such a conception of oneself, of course, is ironically not achievable alone, in solitary meditation, but only by virtue of
thoroughly material – not at all abstract – conditions of existence, including political, socioeconomic systems and institutions (especially those systems and institutions that depend upon people conceiving of themselves as isolated individuals in the first place).

Here, I will be concerned with a similar false abstraction, namely the hierarchical “human(ity)”/“animal(ity)” binary, which is to say the supposed ontological isolation and moral supremacy – the categorical, exclusionary “specialness” – of the former term in opposition to the latter term. In other words, the false (and pernicious) abstraction which I intend to critique and expose as such is a framework of overlapping, mutually reinforcing metaphysical, epistemological, and normative commitments that we typically refer to as anthropocentrism, or human-centered speciesism. It should hardly need to be elaborated not only that such an abstract conceptual framework and value-system is wrong, but that taking it for granted as otherwise has had, and continues to have, far-reaching, severely harmful and destructive – biocidal and ecocidal – repercussions. Unfortunately, however, anthropocentrism continues to infiltrate how we think and live; in many forms, both explicitly and surreptitiously, it dominates how we conceptualize ourselves and our relationship with the world, how we construct for ourselves and enact a sense-of-self and a sense of community, indeed how we understand – or in fact fail to understand – just who or what this very royal “we” signifies in the first place, or how the sense of such a singular plural signifier ever comes to be determined at all. Thus, the points that I intend to elaborate and defend here – even those which may appear to be “simple” or “obvious” – are ones that urgently need to be elaborated and defended.

False abstractions are themselves already a kind of violence: the violence of conceptual and perceptual distortion, the violence of epistemic and ontological erasure, the violence of not “doing justice” to what Husserl called “the things themselves.” And in the worst instances, they
not only spring from, but also actively advance and retroactively rationalize, material violence and injustice. Maybe in the end we will have to admit that all concepts, insofar as they are power-laden, procrustean impositions of meaning, are forms of violence. Maybe in the end we will have to admit that all concepts, insofar as they impose exclusionary borders upon phenomena, entities, and a world that will always resist and exceed them, are fraudulent and unjust constructs, that indeed they are little more than pretexts for material (ethical and political) exclusions and injustices. Maybe in the end we will also have admit that, far from enabling us to think, concepts in fact disable genuine thinking. When we apply a concept to something or place something in a category, we typically assume that we know everything that is worth knowing about it, that we no longer need to engage with it or think overly much about it: it has its place in our tidy inventory of the universe. The problem, of course, is that the universe is anything but “tidy,” and the being of a thing tends never to be exhausted or adequately expressed by the categories into which we deposit it. Indeed, if there is such a thing as “thinking worthy of the name,” then it must mean, paradoxically, to think what is, in a sense “unthinkable,” that is, to engage with things that exceed our everyday horizons of thought or that precisely resist the categories through which we organize the world. If all we ever do, or if all we ever assume we need to do, is apply concepts to things that (we assume) neatly fit within their bounds, then not only is there so much we are not going to see or understand, not only is there so much whose being or meaning we are going to violate with that reductionism, but such an activity is hardly different from rote, clerical filing or bookkeeping and thus hardly involves anything like genuine “thinking.” The most important point, however, is that the loss of the ability “to think” has consequences, consequences for thought itself and especially for everything it leaves “unthought.” So, maybe it is time we admit that an obsession with conceptual analysis and with
categorization is eminently a form of thoughtlessness, and since our concepts or categories have
tangible effects on the world, it is one that is always ethically and politically fraught. Maybe, in
the end, we have to acknowledge not that concepts enable us to think but that, on the contrary,
they enable us to not have to think, that concepts in fact do our thinking (and thus our living) for
us, or that they are, indeed, crutches upon which we lean in order to excuse our common
thoughtlessness and the myriad normalized evils in which our common thoughtlessness is
implicated. Maybe the banality of evil already begins with (what traditionally passes for or
comes to be “conceptualized” as) “rationality,” or with those forms of thoughtlessness that
disguise themselves as precisely the opposite of thoughtlessness.

Of course, many philosophers claim that thought is impossible without concepts. I am not
sure whether or not that is true. However, perhaps it is at least reasonable to say that it is
impossible for human beings to think without concepts (and if that is the case, and if it is
furthermore the case that certain animals lack concepts, then perhaps that is one advantage that
such animals have over us). Yet, if concepts are inescapable for us, perhaps our situation is
nevertheless not hopeless; perhaps we may be able to create concepts that do not normalize evils
but rather help undo them; perhaps we may be able to create concepts that affirm and help

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7 A discussion and assessment of this claim is certainly beyond the scope of the topic at hand. However, the truth of
such a claim clearly hinges largely on what one means by “thought,” which is itself a concept that is often used
equivocally. Nevertheless, there are two points worth noting here: first, if one maintains that thinking is impossible
without concepts by definition — that to think just is to formulate and apply concepts — and that therefore the notion
of thinking without concepts is inherently contradictory, then the claim that thinking is impossible without concepts
reduces to a tautology: the claim that “thinking is impossible without concepts” becomes equivalent to the claim that
“thinking is impossible without thinking”; such a claim has the virtue of not requiring argumentative demonstration,
but is also one that hardly elucidates what thinking or concepts are. The second (and, I think, far more interesting)
point is that if we accept the central insight of Merleau-Ponty and others (as indeed we must) that thought is
necessarily embodied, then even if it is true that thought requires concepts, it must be the case that concepts are
profoundly different from — or much more than — the conventional ways in which they are, so to speak,
conceptualized. This further reinforces just how radical phenomenology (or phenomenologically informed ontology)
is and can be: if phenomenology or Merleau-Ponty is right to maintain and insist upon the essential carnality of
consciousness and cognition, it follows that we must “reconceptualize” what a concept is; it follows that we must
rethink our very concept of a concept.
strengthen rather than negate or attenuate the bonds of interdependence to which all forms of thought and life owe their being; perhaps we are able to critique those concepts that marginalize, hierarchize, exclude, and oppress in order to replace them with better ones, ones that are “better” in every valence of the term: ones that are truer, more apt reflections of the real conditions of things, ones that are in consonance rather than in tension or contradiction with lived experience(s), ones that allow to be seen and heard those beings always already in and amidst our lives who would otherwise be disappeared and silenced. Perhaps we can develop concepts that encourage us to register rather than repress the inherent limitations and violence of concepts so that we may be able to think at least more cogently and less violently, or so that we may have more hope of doing justice to “the things themselves.” This, at any rate, is perhaps the inherent optimism of phenomenological critique. Though it may be received today as a rather quaint or naïve notion, perhaps we may hope to come ever closer to Plato’s ideal of the union of the True and the Good. I think it is an ideal worthy of our aspiration, and one that recognizes the inseparability of ontology and ethics/politics; following the insights of phenomenology, however, we will have to look not to the heavens but rather to our immanent, messy terrestrial, incarnate existence in order to realize it.

Thus, phenomenology’s vigilance against reification, which I take to be the primary and most distinctive directive of phenomenology, has for me always been more than a mere intellectual principle, more than resistance to a mere logical fallacy; it has always been an ethical principle, an ethical vigilance, an ethical resistance. Husserl’s imperative “to the things themselves!” has always been an ethical imperative. “Doing justice” to the “things themselves” must be understood at multiple registers all at once, or as an ethical and political as much as an epistemological and ontological project; it means “getting things right” not simply in the sense of
formulating correct propositions about them or adopting a correct cognitive or perceptual stance toward them, but it also means everything that does – or that should – practically follow from a more appropriate and engaged cognitive and perceptual orientation in the world. For Merleau-Ponty, the central – and supremely difficult – task of phenomenology is “to know precisely what we see,”8 that is, to honor and bring to expression as carefully as possible the field of lived experience in all its paradoxical, dynamic, conceptually confounding aspects, and insofar as this involves the re-attunement of our sensibilities to features of the world, and to entities within the world, that we often misperceive, misconceive, or neglect to address even though they appear and appeal to us – indeed always already form and nurture us – in plain sight, this is as much an ethical task as it is an epistemological or ontological one.

It is precisely this ethical imperative and task of phenomenology that motivates everything to follow, even the arguments that may only seem to address epistemological or ontological issues. The ways we categorize the world, the habits of thought and perception through which things appear to us, the matrices of concepts and assumptions that inform if not determine our cognitive access to, and reception of, the world and its inhabitants, are inherently implicated in what we do and how we live, are inherently invested in relations of power, are inherently embedded in individual and collective flourishing (or misery), and are therefore inherently ethical and political. Epistemological and ontological issues are always already ethical and political issues as well, and we mark fixed divisions between them at our and others’ peril. There are, in fact, no “purely” amoral or apolitical concepts. No, we cannot logically derive “ought” from “is” provided we assume from the start an opposition between the two, but this is an opposition that – like all oppositions – demands to be interrogated. Of course, it often makes

sense to say – and is often urgently necessary to say – that the “way things are” is not necessarily the way things should be, that a current state of affairs is unacceptable, that the status quo is never inherently good or just, that “natural” is not synonymous with “right” or “desirable,” and so on. The Panglossian view that “whatever is, is as it ought to be” is clearly unacceptable; such a view does nothing but reify as “natural” or essential an oppressive status quo and thus does nothing but serve the interests of oppressors and oppressive institutions. It makes sense, then, to insist upon a distinction between “the way things are” and “the ways things should to be,” between descriptive and normative registers of analysis, between the “natural” and “the Good,” between “is” and “ought.” When, for instance, someone attempts to justify carnivorism because it is “natural,” or when someone attempts to justify speciesism because privileging the interests of one’s own species supposedly contributes to evolutionary fitness or survival (a friend of mine once pointed – literally pointed – to the sharpness of his canine teeth as evidence for the moral justifiability of human meat consumption, and another friend once seriously said to me “show me a species that isn’t speciesist, and I’ll show you one that’s extinct”), it is surely warranted to point out that such views commit a “naturalistic fallacy,” to say the least. And yet, I think that phenomenology in general, and that the specific phenomenological inquiry to follow, shows us that the supposed divorce between “value and fact,” between normativity and reality, between ethics/politics and ontology, is another dualism to be cast into the ash heap of all the others. This does not mean we relinquish our ability to critique “the way things are,” but it does mean that “values” do not get tacked on to “facts” (or on to “the way things are”) after the fact, that “values” (and their normative implications) are already built into the presentations of things in lived experience yet (like so many other aspects of lived experience) may become occluded or distorted by fallacious abstractions (especially ontological ones). The normative may not be
reducible to the ontological, yet it does not follow from that fact alone that the two are truly separable, and indeed I do not think that they are; in Merleau-Ponty’s technical understanding of this term, they are always intertwined: indeed, to exist in the world as a living being is already to be oriented toward what it is to flourish (or to fail to flourish) as the living being one is, and as an incarnate being my life, hence my flourishing, is already entangled with a carnal world, already entangled with other incarnate lives and flourishings. On this point, Aristotle was absolutely correct. Thus, it is not an accident that, time and again, we find that harmful, oppressive normative frameworks are constructed on the foundation of specious ontological presuppositions – erroneous notions of what it is to be – and that therefore in order to dismantle the former it is necessary to dismantle the latter. My contention is that one such framework is anthropocentrism (or human supremacism), and the task I have set for myself here is to show the extent to which Merleau-Ponty’s ontology indeed dismantles the ontological presuppositions upon which an anthropocentric worldview is based.

Philosophizing is always, as Nietzsche relentlessly insisted, laden with affect. Logos has never been, and never could be, “pure” (despite its efforts to present itself as such) but is always entwined with pathos, always enmeshed with our affective and bodily, hence value-laden, attachments to the world and to others. In fact, if we could summarize the basic and most important lesson of the past two hundred years of “Continental” philosophy, it would be that there is never any such thing as “purity,” that no being, that no source or form of existence and meaning, or that no category of identity is ever “pure” in any sense that may be attached to such a notion. The relevant point here is that there is no such thing as a form of consciousness, cognition, or “rationality” that is not always already suffused with the senses, cares, and passions that let things emerge as meaningful – as worthy of attention or concern – for us in the first
place. To be consciously engaged with something is always, in some way, to be affected by it, or to be emotionally engaged with it. For me, philosophical reflection has always been affectively prompted by a whiff of what Derrida, in *The Animal That Therefore I am*, describes as “bêtise”\(^9\) (which in the English translation of this work is rendered as “asinanity” but which we may alternatively, and more bluntly, render as “stupidity”, “idiocy,” “foolishness,” or perhaps “bullshit”); it is prompted, in other words, by a vague and inchoate sense (which of course demands to be sharpened and argumentatively supported) that some widely held belief is erroneous or that some widely accepted practice or institution or value system is unjust, or that the justification typically provided for some article of “common sense” is specious. As was the case for Hamlet, for myself and, I think, for most who are honest about why they began to do philosophy, philosophical reflection begins not so much with sanguine speculative curiosity or a desire for some abstruse, ‘capital T’ Truth, but rather more so with the notion – the often unbearably nagging, gnawing, haunting sense – that “something is rotten in Denmark” or that “the time is out of joint,” or in other words with the realization that commonly accepted frameworks of intelligibility – that those systems of concepts and values through which we derive meaning and a stable cognitive and practical orientation in the world – are somehow amiss, somehow inherently unstable if not downright untenable, somehow wrong; often, it arises from the sense that our concepts are inadequate and that, therefore, the boundaries they impress upon the world are no longer, or have never really been, adequate, secure, or “right” either: the sense that what was once clear and distinct or strictly separated has become (or was always already) blurred, or conversely that what was once blurred or occluded has become (or was always already) clear and distinct. As I often tell my students, philosophy does not begin in

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“wonder” as often as it begins in mortal and moral horror, in the traumas that, to quote Camus, “break the chain of daily gestures,”10 in the vertigo of losing one’s grip on once familiar and reliable frameworks of meaning; it begins when one confronts a world that is no longer congenial to one’s traditional constructions of identity and value, or rather when one’s traditional constructions of identity and value are no longer congenial to a wakeful, responsible awareness of the world; it begins, in short, when the ground that once provided one’s foothold in the world starts to quake, when, as Marx so eloquently puts it, “all that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned….11

Nothing more profoundly founds our orientation in the world, nothing more strongly harnesses how we conceptualize who we are, our place in the order of things, and thus everything that matters to us – nothing is more cherished, more supposedly solid and holy – than the barriers that seemingly define and allow us reflexively to invoke these very pronouns themselves, these “whos” and “ours,” these “we’s” and “us’s.” In other words, nothing more deeply constitutes who and what we are than the apparent barriers that commonly shape our notions of community or of the extension of this very “we” or “our,” the margins that constitute our sense of being/belonging-together or that, at the fundamental, bedrock level of thought and existence, delineate and center what we call our “humanity”; but so too, then, is nothing more deeply constitutive of who “we” are than those others these barriers were precisely erected to exclude, indeed those others upon whose repressed lives, bodies, knowledges, voices, agonies, and sacrifices these barriers were erected, those “animal” others outside the apparent margins of our humanity who must continually be “otherized”, ignored, doubted, silenced, objectified,

denigrated, vivisected, “tested,” imprisoned, “domesticated,” “broken,” or brutalized in order to secure such margins and who consequently, by dint of their tacitly disruptive alterities, or rather simply because their alterities co-constitute these very sanctified margins in the first place, in fact call these margins into question and threaten to profane if not obliterate the holy edifices at the center of them. It is my contention that justice – in every valence of the term – demands that we precisely do away with all such “centers” and “margins” and with the theoretical frameworks (and material institutions and practices) that uphold them so that we may begin to cultivate more responsive and responsible – or perhaps, I dare say, more “rational” – habits of seeing, listening, feeling, thinking, and knowing, more lucid, compassionate, and hospitable ways of being.

This project, then, begins with the sense that one such persistent, widely accepted framework of concepts, beliefs, and normative principles – one that is as common throughout the history of Western philosophy as it remains today throughout the world – is in fact clearly erroneous, and that all attempts to justify such a framework are therefore specious (indeed are less justifications than rationalizations). The framework or ideology in question is, again, *anthropocentrism*, or some general commitment to human separatism and supremacism, i.e., to a set of claims affirming human beings to be exceptional in ways that categorically isolate them from, and that mark their existence as intrinsically more important than, anything that is non-human, or anything that is oppositionally and collectively signified as belonging to “animality” or to “nature.” Anthropocentrism, in short, is the notion that human existence is or ought to be the center of all meaning and value in the Universe, the default yardstick according to which all other things or forms of life can only be at best derivatively meaningful or valuable, or that to which all other things, especially non-human animals, are or ought to be subordinate.
I have for quite some time harbored the intuition that if anything deserves to be considered “bêtise,” it is anthropocentrism, or human-centered speciesism: the underlying assumptions, abstract concepts, imaginaries, or “logics” that motivate it, along with the practices and institutions that unfold from it and in turn reinforce and perpetuate it. Worse still is that the assumptions endemic to the construction of an anthropocentric or human-supremacist worldview are so deeply and widely entrenched – so rooted, we might say, in our collective unconscious – that even many of the best-intentioned efforts to critique and dismantle them end up reinscribing them. My goal, then, is to use the resources of phenomenology in general, and the resources of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy in particular, to place what once began as an intuitive sense that anthropocentrism is wrong (in every valence of the term) on a cogently reasoned and experientially informed footing – to demonstrate that anthropocentrism is not logically justifiable, phenomenologically founded, or morally and politically acceptable – and to do so in a way that provides a corrective to other popular albeit flawed efforts to do the same, as well as avenues for further radical reconsiderations and reconfigurations of concepts that, even if indispensable, can certainly never be the same again as a result of such a critique, namely concepts such as subjectivity, identity, humanity, logos, Being, and community.

However, lest the above remarks suggest that an exclusively or overly negative set of attitudes motivate this project, I hasten to underscore that it also very much a labor of, and inspired by, love, an effort that is just as much prompted by a lifelong love for, and fascination with, non-human others, and especially by what various relationships and encounters with such others have taught me about what it is to love and to be loved, or even about what it is to be at all. If I have harbored an intuitive suspicion that anthropocentrism is little more than just another unsound and oppressive ideology – a thinly veiled excuse for marginalization, exploitation, and
cruelty – it is due to all the ways in which animals have affected me, taught me, and challenged me, all the ways in which they have not only illuminated and enriched familiar elements of my field of experience but have also opened up new horizons of meaning, thinking, and being that would otherwise be foreclosed by an “all too human” vantage point (and that help check the hubristic prejudices that typify such a vantage point). Some version of Thomas Nagel’s famous question, “what is it like to be a bat?,” was likely the first philosophical question to have ever captivated me, yet it was always the case that such a question was prompted by deep connections with non-human forms of life that contravene or at least temper our common, ready-made skeptical or pessimistic responses to such a question.

None of this is to say, as I will further insist, that non-human forms of life or subjectivity are perfectly, translucently intelligible to us, or that there are no significant differences between different forms of life, differences that might present interpretive or epistemic, as well as ethical, quandaries and ambiguities. Indeed, no form of life or subjectivity – including especially our own – is ever perfectly, translucently intelligible, and of course significant differences obtain between all different forms of life, however interconnected they may be. “Interconnected” does not mean identical or undifferentiated, and differentiated does not mean disconnected or opposed. As Foucault remarks, “we should keep in mind that heterogeneity is never a principle of exclusion; it never prevents coexistence, conjunction, or connection.” Merleau-Ponty, however, argues not only that heterogeneity is compatible with “coexistence,” “conjunction,” or “connection” but that it entails it. These points seem rather simple and obvious, yet few have ever adhered to them consistently or correctly drawn their implications, and indeed once we

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examine such points more closely we “enter into a labyrinth of difficulties and contradictions”\textsuperscript{13} – we encounter “the paradoxes of which vision is made,”\textsuperscript{14} the “figured enigmas” and “incompossible details”\textsuperscript{15} of which even Being as such is composed – and thus begin to understand why it is so easy to lapse into either reductive (i.e., monistic, mechanistic, positivistic, or totalizing) or oppositional (i.e., dualistic or supernatralist) ways of thinking, both of which equally deny or repress rather than confront those very “difficulties,” “paradoxes,” “enigmas,” or “incompossibles.”\textsuperscript{16} Here, in particular, we confront the paradox of alterity: in order to have any relationship at all with a genuine Other, that Other cannot be utterly outside one’s own horizons of experience and intelligibility, for then the other would not appear as such or even be conceivable at all. And yet, the Other must also exceed those very same horizons of experience and intelligibility or must remain to some extent inaccessible or irreducibly transcendent, for otherwise the Other would not present any “otherness” – would not be other – at all. Thus, the main difficulties – hermeneutic as well as ethical – that attend efforts to understand or express the being of a non-human other, or the difficulties of explaining how one’s own human subjectivity provides access to, and indeed is already structured by relations with, non-human subjectivities or alterities, are not different \textit{in kind} from those difficulties we generally confront when we address exclusively \textit{human} intersubjectivity. In every case these are the difficulties of doing justice to otherness. Doing justice to otherness precisely means honoring – finding adequate ways to explain, express, affirm, and appreciate – the nature of otherness without otherizing others beyond the scope of justice, that is, beyond the boundaries of epistemic-phenomenological accessibility or ontological and ethical relationality.

\textsuperscript{13} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{The Visible and The Invisible}, p.3.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., p.4.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., p.4.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., p. 14.
My thesis, then, is the one that Merleau-Ponty came to by the (premature) end of his philosophical career, namely that human subjectivity is constitutively embedded in relations with non-human subjectivities, that human selfhood is constituted by non-human otherness just as pervasively and fundamentally as by human otherness, that the scope of “intersubjectivity” – as a (quasi-transcendental) condition of subjectivity – always already includes overlapping networks of human and non-human beings alike. Briefly stated, my thesis is that all identities and subjectivities – hence all goods – are intrinsically enmeshed. My goal and my hope, motivated as much by love as by anything else, is to use Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy – especially the ontology developed in his later writings – in the service of justifying this thesis, in the service of knowing, hence doing justice to, “what we see,” or in the service of letting be heard the voices and truths that are affirmed and understood at one level of our awareness only to be silenced and denied at another. The goal is not to show that Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy is without flaws (for indeed no philosopher’s thinking is without flaws or limitations) or without its own anthropocentric prejudices and lacunae (which it has), but rather that despite such flaws it offers the best resources for founding a genuinely non-anthropocentric ethical framework: a truly, consistently non-human-centered conception of ‘the Good.’ The goal is to articulate what I wish to call Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of radical community (that is, to trace the development of this ontology from his early writings on perception and intersubjectivity to his later concepts of “Flesh,” écart, and the chiasm), to articulate the profound consequences this ontology has (and which Merleau-Ponty himself suggests) for how we understand the relationship between “the human” and “the animal,” and furthermore to draw the ethical consequences of this ontology, or more specifically to demonstrate the extent to which this ontology – what we might call Merleau-Ponty’s “radical communitarianism” or ontology of radical difference (which, for me,
are synonymous) – dismantles the anthropocentricity, or necessitates the displacement of the human-centered perspective, of traditional moral and political (as well as metaphysical and epistemological) theories and thus provides the basis for a genuinely non-anthropocentric concept of moral and political community. The goal is to put Merleau-Ponty’s ontology in the service of elevating to renewed, enriched awareness and appreciation the community of human and extra-human subjectivities – the radical community of all communities, the primal differentiation and attendant overlapping of bodies – that in fact opens up and aliments every possibility of thinking, living, and flourishing, possibilities that are, as such, not centrally, exclusively, monolithically, or solipsistically “human.”

Lastly, I wish to remark on my use of the term “animal” in the discussion to follow. The use of this term as a shorthand reference to any living being that is “not human” has been much contested in certain corners of contemporary philosophy, and with good reason. A point that is almost too banal to be worth mentioning (at least after Darwin) is that human beings are, of course, animals themselves, so there is no categorical or ontological opposition between human beings and non-human beings, which such a use of the term may suggest. This is often rectified by substituting “non-human animal” for “animal.” More importantly, the term “animal” – and especially any reference to “the animal” or to “animality” as such – tends to group together monolithically, and thus erase, what is in fact a prodigious diversity of forms of life, “an irreducible living multiplicity of mortals.”¹⁷ Thus, not only does such a term often suppress the continuity between human and non-human beings, but in doing so it also suppresses the rich and important differences between the multifarious non-human forms of life with whom we share a world. Indeed, even to substitute “non-human animal” for “animal” – or even to refer to “non-

¹⁷ Derrida, ibid., p. 41.
human animals” – is nonetheless to homogenize what is irreducibly heterogeneous. Another concern is that insofar as the term “non-human” is intelligible only in contradistinction to the term “human,” its use likely depends upon an uncritically assumed conception of “the human,” as though “human” or “humanity” admits of an unproblematic, fixed or stable, essential or univocal definition any more so than “animal” or “animality”; and in fact, since the terms of a conceptual dyad are interdependent (even though one of them may protest otherwise), if one must abandon or, at the very least, radically problematize one of them, so too must one abandon or problematize the other. To problematize the category of “the animal” is necessarily also to problematize the category of “the human.”

Moreover, insofar as the term “non-human” implies “the human” as the primary standard of reference or default standpoint against which all forms of life are derivatively understood and valued, those forms of life designated as “non-human” are hierarchically subordinated (if not also opposed) to “the human,” and such categories thus uncritically assume or reproduce an anthropocentric framework (which is perhaps the very kind of framework that their user otherwise wishes to resist). It is telling that we do not typically organize the world in terms of the distinction between, say, “the elephant” and “the non-elephant” or “the spider” and “the non-spider,” and in fact it was Plato, in the Statesman, first suggested that it is just as arbitrary to carve the world into “the human” and the “non-human”\(^\text{18}\); furthermore, it would clearly be repugnant if we did so in terms of the distinction between “the white skinned” and “the non-

\(^{18}\) After “Socrates the Younger” proposes to subdivide the art of “herding” into two arts corresponding to “two kinds of living beings, the human race and a second one, a single class, comprising all the beasts,” the “Stranger” responds:

“…Perhaps, if there is any other animal capable of thought, such as the crane appears to be, or any other like creature, and it perchance gives names, just as you do, it might in its pride of self oppose cranes to all other animals, and group the rest, men included, under one head, calling them by one name, which might very well be that of beasts. Now let us try to be on our guard against all that sort of thing.” See 263C4-D13, in Plato, Statesman, Philebus, Ion. Trans. Harold N. Fowler & W.R.M. Lamb (Loeb Classical Library, 1925), p.27-29.
white skinned,” the “male” and “the non-male,” “the Christian” and “the non-Christian,” and so on, as though there is something ontologically primary or ethically exceptional about whiteness, maleness, or Christianity and, correlatively, something derivative, privative, or inferior about their counterparts; indeed, it is impossible to equate “female” or “feminine” with “non-male” or “non-masculine” in a way that does not implicitly adopt a patriarchal or phallocentric conceptual framework and value system (which, for example, is precisely the very framework Aristotle assumed when he defined "woman" as a "mutilated male"\textsuperscript{19}). Likewise, one simply cannot use the terms “non-human” or “animal” (provided “animal” is taken to be equivalent in meaning to “non-human”) without adopting a humanist, anthropocentric or human-exceptionalist standpoint. We must, then, regard the category of “the animal” or of “the non-human,” and consequently the category of “the human,” as analogous to those I have just mentioned, and therefore as inherently chauvinistic and oppressive. Given the fact that nearly every historical effort to rationalize or “naturalize” the marginalization, exploitation, or oppression of others – that nearly every effort to exclude certain others from full, equal membership in an ethical and political community – has involved “otherizing” such others as “animals” (or as at least being closer to “animality” than to full “humanity”), we are already compelled to suspect that the categories of “the human” and “the animal/non-human” are never value-neutral, apolitical or “natural” signifiers but are fundamentally normative and power-laden constructs, indeed are essentially instruments of hegemony and exploitation, categories deployed for the sole purpose of bio/necropolitical control and domination.

The human/animal binary is not only, like every false binary, an obfuscation of reality, but it is also, like many such obfuscations, ideologically motivated, coded, and instituted, and not

simply a failure of propositional correspondence or conceptual adequation (which it is).
Likewise, it is naïve (and itself ideologically suspect) to think that racism and sexism are just sets
of false factual beliefs or weak empirical inductions; of course they often manifest as that, but
they are also embedded in, and buttressed by, complex webs of socially entrenched, historically
emergent institutions and relations of power; they embody supremacist conceptual frameworks
and value-systems, or already established unjust hierarchies, that tacitly, structurally inform
perception, thought, and behavior, or that interpellate the privileged and oppressive subject-
positions of which our status quo bigotries are but surface symptoms, and as such they blur the
supposed boundary between the descriptive and the normative, the ontological or empirical and
the ethical/political; they designate not merely unacceptable propositional attitudes, but
unacceptable worlds; they are not merely epistemically wrong descriptions of reality but already
themselves normatively, ethically and politically wrong realities, already wrong ways of
dwelling in the world, already wrong ways of making or reproducing the world in which one
dwells.

Indeed, as I suggested above, ontology and ethics/politics are always intertwined, which
is to say the boundary between them can never be entirely sharp or decidable. Questions such as
“what is a woman?” or “what is it to be white?” are obviously loaded, which is to say not merely
descriptive in meaning. Questions such as “do women and men share similar aptitudes for
science?” or “are black people more inclined to violence than white people?” are also, to put it
lightly, problematic and not merely questions of empirical fact, yet questions such as “what is it
to be human?” or “what makes humans different from other animals?” or “can elephants
recognize themselves in the mirror?” or “can horses do simple arithmetic?” are not relevantly
different. If someone applies for a grant to study the cognitive abilities of dogs or whether rats
are capable of altruistic behavior, we hardly think anything of it, and indeed there are many ethologists today who are engaged in investigating such matters and who have yielded many wonderful and fascinating insights into the minds of dogs and rats. Yet, if someone were to apply for a similar grant to study the cognitive capacities of Jews or the altruistic capacities of Native Americans, such an application would certainly and reasonably raise eyebrows, to say the least. None of these questions, however, are categorically different from one another, and it is long past due that we learn to regard them that way. There is no such thing as value-free science or value-free ontology, and only a naïve, long-discredited positivism could suggest otherwise. Every conceptual framework is ideological, every schema or mode of knowledge-production is normative. It may seem to be an ad hominem or reductively psychologistic point, but whenever a question in philosophy (or in any academic field of inquiry, including especially the so-called “hard” sciences) is presented for consideration (not to mention funding), our first response to such a question, in the spirit of Nietzsche, ought to be to ask a few questions of our own about it, namely “who wants to know it?,” “why do they want to know it?,” and “what do they intend to do with the answer to it if indeed they ascertain one?” To put the point another way, and to borrow loosely from the rich tradition of American pragmatism, the meaning of a question is inherently, largely if not entirely, a function of what we wish to do, or of what we will or will not do, with the answer to it once we acquire it. The meaning of any and every question is partly constituted by the consequences such a question will have in the world, the difference that knowing (or not knowing) the answer to it will (or will not) make in lived experience. Such questions are simply inseparable from the particular social conditions that enable or motivate us to ask them in the first place.
Likewise, concepts are things we apply to the world – typically, they are tools we use to classify or group things together according to certain apparently salient and shared characteristics – and so regardless of whether or not, in the end, we consider them to be “merely” mental or extra-mental objects, they always have extra-mental, material effects; no matter how “abstract” they may be, they are always woven into human experience and agency, and therefore they always leave their mark on the world and on the bodies they either include or exclude; in short, abstractions are never purely abstract but are always already concrete, or always already contaminated with the materiality of the world to which they apply or from which they are derived, and they – or rather their applications – always have consequences; even if their consequences are not matters of much moral or political weight and substance, even to lack such weight or substance is a manner of having it: something may only “lack” normative significance against or amid a background of values and goods already in place, values and goods it either advances, opposes, or leaves intact. Thus, even if something lacks normative “significance,” that is itself a normative, hence not truly insignificant, truth about it. Nevertheless, all concepts – even those that seem to have nothing to do with matters conventionally or paradigmatically regarded as normative – are inherently normative to the extent that they are necessarily exclusionary, or to the extent that they always dictate whether something should be counted as belonging within or outside their scope. As I remarked above, phenomenological analysis and critique consists fundamentally in a resistance to reification, in the refusal to substitute ‘the abstract’ for ‘the concrete’ and in the refusal to let such illicit substitutions – especially the false binaries they generate and lead us to take for granted as fundamental truths – guide our thinking, and now we see that yet another false binary or abstraction we must not reify is precisely the very binary of ‘the abstract’ and ‘the concrete’ itself, in addition to that of the ‘descriptive’ and
the ‘normative’ or that of ontology and ethics/politics. Show me a question or a concept that seems to be as removed as possible from questions of value or matters of conduct, show me a question that appears to be of purely epistemic, empirical, or metaphysical import, or show me a concept that appears devoid of normative valences, and I will show you one that is nonetheless thoroughly entangled with ethical, political, or broadly normative matters, circumstances, and phenomena.

This is not to say that matters of empirical or ontological investigation are necessarily nefarious, nor is it to say that all concepts are necessarily oppressive, but it is to say that they are always, to paraphrase Foucault, dangerous. Certain concepts, for example, may not be inherently or irredeemably oppressive, for they may be necessary (strategically or otherwise) in order to name and make visible real instances of oppression (e.g., the very concept of oppression in the first place). Certain concepts seem to play an integral, unavoidable role in any emancipatory politics or commitment to social justice (such as the very concepts of emancipation and justice themselves), and it never serves the interests of the oppressed to presume that their conditions and lived experiences of oppression are ineffable; what does serve their interests is to develop concepts that can empower them to articulate their own oppression, concepts or terms or means of expression that may best enable their narratives and histories to be told, heard, and understood; even if they are unable to voice clearly their own lived experiences and oppressions themselves (as is the case with many non-human animals and many traumatized humans, for example), such concepts or means of expression may nevertheless help impart voice and visibility to their lived experiences, or may help others bear witness to, and thereby help undo,

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their oppressions. As I suggested above, then, concepts may indeed be indispensable components of human experience, thought, and action, and so the point is not to dispense with them altogether but rather always to be critically vigilant of them, always to be cognizant of their (often repressed) limitations and genealogies, always to be attentive to their intrinsic materiality and power, to the social and political conditions, subject-positions, and discursive contexts with which they are constitutively ensnared, to the phenomena they may help reveal but also occlude, to the truths they perhaps allow us to think and speak but also to the innumerable others they silence, deny, or would exclude from the realm of thought and expression. In short, the point is never to deploy concepts uncritically but always to register, always to suffer their tragic inadequacy, their – and thus our – utter weakness in the face of those things that most call for thinking, recognition, and responsible – even loving – engagement, their weakness in the face of the irrecoverable excess of the phenomena and truths that most demand our understanding and testimony. If we cannot dispense with concepts, then we may at least heed their inexpugnable violence and perhaps hope to develop those that, again, may help us think and dwell in the world in less needlessly or unjustly violent ways, or that may help open up new horizons of just and flourishing living that other concepts or conceptual schemas forbid us to “conceptualize.” As Leonard Lawlor argues concerning the manner in which we conceptualize the relationship between “humans” and “animals,” the point is not – indeed can never be – to eliminate violence altogether; rather, the point is to promote the least, not the worst, violence, and I think this point is applicable to any philosophical issue. Violence can be deployed for either oppressive or liberatory ends, and if there is something ineradicably violent about our concepts, may we at least aspire to create and mobilize those that are conducive to the latter and aggressively

antithetical to the former. Philosophy has, or at least ought to have, no other aim than this, and it is my contention that Merleau-Ponty’s interrelated concepts of the lived body, perception, Flesh, the chiasm, dehiscence/écart, “fecund negativity,” intercorporeity, and “interanimality” (if we can even call them “concepts”) are especially suited to it.

Similarly, questions concerning “what something is” are not necessarily to be eschewed or suppressed, for indeed such questions are often unavoidable, yet they are never as “value-neutral” or as ethically/politically innocuous as they may seem, for they will always, in fact and in principle, have consequences for how we treat the thing in question. And in many cases, contingent arrangements of power, background schemas of knowledge, and at best questionable taxonomies of Being will have already decided for us the answers to such questions before we ever pose or think to ask them; the task of philosophy, however, is not only to decide the answers to such questions for ourselves, but ceaselessly to interrogate why these questions are worth asking in the first place, to clarify what (if anything) is at stake in them and, if necessary, to pose different, better and more penetrating questions and even to imagine alternative possibilities for questioning and thinking, indeed to challenge commonly assumed limits of the questionable and thinkable. The questions with which I am concerned here – questions concerning the nature of subjectivity and its relationship to the world and to other subjectivities, questions concerning the existence of others and concerning the nature of otherness as such, questions concerning the meaning of “humanity” and “animality” or concerning the relationship between “the human” and “the animal,” questions concerning the constitution of any identity or relationship, questions at the basis of how we conceptualize what it is to be in the world, what it is to be with others, what it is to be “other” and indeed what it is to be at all – are eminently and urgently questions worth asking, for they are self-evidently questions endemic to how we think and live; and since such
questions disrupt and, in the final analysis (provided we have thought them through correctly), destroy the concepts and assumptions that found a human-supremacist worldview, and since a human-supremacist worldview dominates how we human beings perceive, think, and act in the world, or since human supremacism continues to delimit the questions we human beings ask, what we human beings (think we) “know” and the kinds of knowledge we seek, as well as the worlds or communities – the very “We’s” – we can envision or desire for ourselves, so too do they promise to break open new, better, more expansive possibilities of thinking, imagining, wondering, knowing, questioning, world-making, and flourishing.

So, the determination of “humanity” as the exclusion of “animality,” the sense of “the animal” as everything that is categorically, absolutely not human, or the derivative or privative definition and assessment of “animals” relative to an already bootstrapped Archimedean human center of reference, is precisely what we need to interrogate; it is analogous to other binary frameworks that are patently unacceptable for ontological and ethical reasons, and it may indeed be the foundation of them. The binary, and usually hierarchical, opposition of “the human” and “the animal” typically coincides with other classical binary and value-laden hierarchical oppositions that we know better than to accept uncritically or at all, such as those between “reason and non-reason/emotion,” mind and body, form/ideality and matter, universality and particularity, subject and object, self and Other, male and female, masculinity and femininity, whiteness and blackness/coloredness, culture/nurture and nature, autonomy and heteronomy, etc., and such coincidences, it seems, are not merely empirical curiosities or historical accidents, but evidence of conceptual entailment. All dualisms and all supremacisms are logically analogous and perhaps even inseparable. Indeed, if it is true that all oppressions are intersectional, it must be the case that the “logics,” conceptual schemas, or imaginaries that
undergird them are as well. So, in the final analysis, to reject any dualism is to reject all
dualisms, and to reject any supremacism is to reject all supremacisms. Dualistic worldviews are
not only bad ontologies, but also bad ideologies, and supremacist worldviews are not only bad
ideologies, but also bad ontologies. As I have suggested, bad ontology is already bad ideology,
and bad ideology is already bad ontology, for there are no ideology-free (amoral or apolitical)
ontologies, nor are there any ontology-free ideologies. And it is nearly always the case, as
Nietzsche insisted, that dualisms are implicitly also supremacisms, that is, hierarchies in which
one term is valued or privileged at the expense of the other. The binaries I just mentioned (which
are of course the binaries that have historically dominated Western philosophy and culture) do
not simply posit each of their terms as mutually exclusive but also tacitly posit one of them as
more fundamental or as “better” or “more important” than the other.

For all of the reasons I have just elaborated, I entirely agree with Derrida’s view that
since the term “animal” is so problematic and under/overdetermined – indeed, since it is
fundamentally “asinine” and unjustly violent – it ought to be jettisoned from our lexicon
altogether:

It follows that one will never have the right to take animals to be species of a kind that would be named
The Animal, or animal in general. Whenever “one” says “The Animal”, each time a philosopher, or
anyone else, says “The Animal” in the singular and without further ado, claiming thus to designate every
living thing that is held not to be human…well, each time the subject of that statement, this “one”, this
“I”, does that he utters an asinanity. He avows without avowing it, he declares, just as a disease is
declared by means of a symptom, he offers up for diagnosis that statement “I am uttering an asinanity.”
And this “I am uttering an asinanity” should affirm not only the animality that he is disavowing but his
complicit, continued, and organized involvement in a veritable war of the species.”

Indeed, everyday uses of the term “animal” are sure signs of thoughtlessness, or sure examples
of allowing unexamined and overly simplistic categories do our thinking for us. To the extent
that the user of such a term takes the unique characteristic of humanity to be “rationality” (which

\[22\text{Derrida, The Animal That Therefore I am, p.31.}\]
is yet another term that we typically use without any rigorous determination of its meaning), then his/her usage of the term ironically demonstrates precisely his/her own lack of that very characteristic. And perhaps the more profound point is that if we must reject or, at the very least, radically rethink the category of “the animal,” so too must we radically rethink the category of “the human,” for each is unintelligible apart from, or is defined only relative to, the other. I will further address these concerns in chapter five, but I hasten to register them here at the outset because I will nevertheless continue to use the terms “animal(s),” “non-human(s),” “non-human animal(s),” and sometimes “other-than-human animal(s)/other(s)” or simply “animal other(s)” or “other Other(s)” interchangeably, and in every instance I am aware of the problems that attend their usage. Language is, of course, a blunt (and often oppressive) instrument, but for the sake of simplicity – or for the lack of a whole new conceptual vocabulary – I will conform to the conventional usage of these terms, and they should be received with all of these concerns in mind. In closing, then, this dissertation is indeed a meditation on “bêtise”: a meditation on “animality,” and principally a meditation on all of the specious – indeed “asinine” or “brutish” – ways in which we conceptualize it in opposition to an equally, correlatively specious, asinine, or brutishly conceived sense of “humanity.”

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23 It is noteworthy that the term “bêtise” derives from the term bête, which of course means “beast,” “brute,” or “animal.” Thus, in French the term “bêtise” can mean not only “stupidity,” “idiocy,” “foolishness,” etc., but also “animality,” and it is obvious that Derrida is exploiting this dual-valence of the term here. This is why Derrida remarks here that those who uncritically deploy the term “animal” ironically avow in themselves precisely what they, in deploying that very term, disavow from themselves, namely their own lack of “rationality” and therefore also their own “animality” (insofar as they construct animality as signifying an incapacity for rational thought).
Chapter One

“The Incomparable Monster of Solipsism”
Merleau-Ponty’s Confrontation with Dualism and the Classical Problem of Other Minds

“We witness every minute the miracle of related experiences, and yet nobody knows better than we do how this miracle is worked, for we are ourselves this network of relationships.”

— Merleau-Ponty

“There is more reason in your body than in your best wisdom.”

— Nietzsche

There are certain traditional philosophical problems that are rightly regarded as

“scandalous.” For Kant, it is scandalous that we lack a compelling proof for the existence of an external world. Heidegger retorted that what is truly scandalous is that we even seek or demand proof for the existence of an external world in the first place. I wish to add here that if any other perennial philosophical problem is justly considered “scandalous,” surely it is the “problem of other minds.” The fact that for so long philosophers have lacked (or even needed to seek in the first place) a compelling “proof” of the existence of minds other than their own is unquestionably one of the greatest scandals – indeed, one of the most risible embarrassments – of philosophy. Merleau-Ponty would also likely agree with such an assessment of the problem, yet he never simply dismisses it and in fact explicitly addresses and attempts to “solve” it. Merleau-Ponty addresses the problem of other minds consistently throughout his career and even, as we shall later see, considers it to arise naturally from the very nature of human subjectivity itself. For

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Merleau-Ponty, the “incomparable monster of solipsism” – the illusion of radical, atomistic isolation, the false notion of absolute aloneness in the world, the destabilizing sense of oneself as utterly bereft of sure and essential attachments to others – is not merely an invention of philosophical parlor games but a chimera largely endemic to human consciousness as such, yet it is one that he sought to vanquish once and for all.

Before I proceed to elaborate the problem of other minds and Merleau-Ponty’s responses to it, I wish to reply briefly here to the potential concern that my discussion in this chapter (and in the following chapters) may at times seem to conflate or slide between epistemological and ontological registers of analysis. That is, I may seem to move too quickly from questions concerning whether and how we know that others exist to questions concerning whether and in what manner others do exist. In certain places I may seem to slide from arguments concerning

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29 It is also important to note that such a notion is commonly inculcated and reinforced by certain ideologies – namely, classical liberalism and its offshoots – whose core commitment is individualism. For now I simply wish to indicate that I think this is a point Merleau-Ponty would accept, and that it would be uncharitable to attribute to him a radically transcultural, ahistorical, or apolitical account of human subjectivity, even if he does identify reasonably universal, cross-cultural phenomenological features and structures of lived experience (in fact, Merleau-Ponty repeatedly discusses the historicity and cultural embeddedness of human subjectivity, though I cannot discuss this aspect of his thought here). So, as will become clear later in this chapter, when Merleau-Ponty suggests that the notion of “solipsism” emerges “naturally” from consciousness itself, all he means is that there is necessarily an element of individuation or privacy endemic to consciousness, and such a thesis is hardly contestable. Indeed, such individuation or interiority makes otherness possible, and vice versa. The problem is that the individuation of subjectivity is often misconstrued (by, say, Cartesianism and liberalism) as radical independence or separation from others, when in fact it is, as Merleau-Ponty argues, necessarily accomplished through differentiating intersubjective relations, variable distances from others that are, at the same time, bonds of continuity with them: in short, there is such a thing as “individuality” or selfhood, but individualism is a false abstraction. There are “individuals” or “selves” (for otherwise there would be no such thing as life or consciousness at all, as self-reflexivity is a fundamental structure of life and consciousness), but they are constituted as such by relations with others all the way down.
what we can or cannot know to arguments and conclusions concerning *what is*. For example, in the discussions to follow I may seem to confuse skepticism about human and animal minds (the claim that we cannot *know* whether other human and/or non-human minds exist) with antirealism about other human and animal minds (the claim that other human and/or animal minds *do not* exist). I agree that there is a real conceptual distinction between skepticism and antirealism and that therefore there is, of course, a broader and more basic distinction between epistemological and ontological arguments and claims. However, I nevertheless maintain that my apparent “slippage” from the former register to the latter is neither careless nor illicit, for epistemology and ontology mutually implicate one another; they are always intertwined, even though we must admit that the latter is the foundation of the former. The point here is simply that any epistemological position or theory necessarily presupposes (even if only tacitly) certain ontological commitments. Knowledge, of course, signifies a kind of *relationship*, namely a relationship between a knower (subject of knowledge) and a known (object of knowledge). Thus, every epistemology assumes something about the *nature* of the subject and object of knowledge. Forms of skepticism, for example, depend upon the claim that subject and object are constituted or situated in such a way that the latter is exterior and inaccessible to the former. As I suggest above, ontology (not to mention ethics and politics) is always at stake in epistemology: questions of knowing can never be disentangled from questions of being (as well as from questions of value), and this is especially evident with respect to phenomenological considerations of knowledge, selfhood, and alterity. Indeed, it seems to me that one of the central insights of phenomenology is that there is no clear boundary between the order of being and the order of knowing (as well as the order of values). As will soon become apparent, skepticism about other minds (human and non-human alike) depends *entirely* upon a false understanding of the nature of
consciousness. In short, it presupposes dualism; indeed, it is viable if and only if dualism is true. This is precisely why I may often seem to slip between epistemological and ontological registers of analysis. Indeed, to demonstrate that skepticism concerning other minds is false is also to demonstrate that “anti-realism” concerning other minds is false, for to show such skepticism to be false is to show that the dualism upon which it is predicated is false, and to show that such dualism is false is to advance a conception of consciousness as fundamentally embodied: but since embodied consciousness just is a living body, it follows that every living body is a form or expression of “consciousness.” Thus, to refute skepticism concerning the existence other minds is at once to refute an anti-realist position on the issue. After all, if knowledge of some “subject” or “object” is possible, it must be the case that such a “subject” or “object” exists in the first place. Moreover, it is especially easy to “conflate” epistemological and ontological arguments in Merleau-Ponty’s work precisely because his phenomenological argumentation blurs the supposed boundary between them; often, his argumentative strategy is to show how certain abstract concepts or schemas tacitly presuppose yet conceal and distort what is “really there” or “really real,” and in showing this he dissolves the apparent problems that are generated by the reification of such abstractions. The upshot, of course, is not only that such problems are dissolved, but that we also learn something about what is (always already lived as) foundationally real.

The traditional problem of other minds (hence the threat of solipsism) is posed by the following question: How do I know that other minds like my own – that is to say, other sentient beings, other perceiving, feeling, thinking, and willing subjects - exist? How do I know that there really are other minds or conscious entities in the world besides my own? Merleau-Ponty summarizes this problem as follows:
…How can the word ‘I’ be put into the plural, how can a general idea of the I be formed, how can I speak of an I other than my own, how can I know that there are other I’s, how can consciousness which, by its nature, and as self-knowledge, is in the mode of the I, be grasped in the mode of the Thou…?\textsuperscript{30}

To start, the problem depends upon the notion that consciousness is essentially insular self-presence, something entirely private and internal, something whose nature is exclusively defined by, and thus something that is only accessible from within, what we call the “first-person” perspective: consciousness is directly visible or accessible only to itself, and it is precisely this interiority that defines consciousness as such. Yet, such a definition of consciousness rends the conscious subject’s ties to the world, to its body, and to those things that figure as “objects” of consciousness: since consciousness is defined as a domain of pure interiority, it is thereby set over and against, or abstracted from, the domain of material, external things, processes, and phenomena, and thus we face the insuperable problem of how the two – how subject and object, consciousness and world, interiority and exteriority – may be ontologically and epistemically reconciled. Consciousness is withheld entirely from public inspection or presentation and thus signifies a domain of reality entirely and uniquely removed from that of perceptible things and properties. Consciousness is defined by this privileged, immediate, reflexive, incorrigible access that it has to itself (that is, to its own “states,” “qualia,” and “representations”). In this way, consciousness is taken to be a purely private or internal theatre of appearances, something uniquely defined by the fact that it cannot be accessed or observed from any vantage point outside itself, and which is therefore itself a vantage point on the world that somehow has no place in it.

This conception of consciousness is motivated by the obvious fact that only “I” can live through my experiences and that I can never truly live through the experiences of another. Just as

\textsuperscript{30} Ph\textit{enomenology of Perception}, p. 348.
no one else can truly make my decisions for me, so too can no one else truly experience my experiences (insofar as they are mine). Thus, I perceive other moving bodies in the world, but (as Descartes wonders in the Meditations) how can I know that these bodies are “inhabited” by other consciousnesses and are not just complex automata (or “zombies”)? Might this animate body that I take to be conscious really be nothing more than an empty, pantomiming husk, a mere mimicry of sentience, a thing with no inner life at all? How can I really know that “you” are conscious if I cannot leap inside your consciousness to find out? As Thomas Nagel correctly points out, even if I could transport myself inside your flesh, I still would not be able live through your experiences; I would only be able to live through my experiences in “your” (but which would then really be my own) body. This is to say that if my consciousness is necessarily always only “mine,” then I can never escape my own consciousness in order to discover and live through another’s. As Kant argued, my experiences are possible only if this very sense of “mineness” always accompanies them, or only if in each case they are indexed to something called “me,” namely the subject whose experiences they are. This “me” or this “subject” – what Kant calls the “transcendental unity of apperception,” and what Husserl will later call the transcendental ego – is not the “biographical,” personal, or empirical self or ego, but is rather simply the locus or dative pole to which all experiences must centripetally refer, that which makes a unified, hence minimally coherent, representation of the world possible in the first place. So, I can never know “what-it-is-like” for you to be you (assuming that there is anything that-it-is-like for you to be you in the first place), for even in the most fantastical science-fiction scenario I would only ever be

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32 This notion is also close to what Descartes had in mind when he posited the necessary unity or indivisibility of the mind: that is, while we can conceive of cutting a body in half, it is not conceivable to cut a mind in half; if you cut a body in half, you have two halves of one body, but if you “cut a mind in half,” you would have two separate, individual minds, not two halves of one and the same mind.
able to know what-it-is-like for me to be “you,” which is not what it is like to be you at all. In short, I can only ever see the world through my own eyes. So how is it the case, then, that I may suppose that there are any other eyes that see, that there are any visions of the world beyond the one I can never abandon? As Levinas puts it, it is “tragically impossible” to “get rid of” oneself:

The I always has one foot caught in its own existence. Outside in face of everything, it is inside itself, tied to itself. It is forever bound to the existence which it has taken up. This impossibility for the ego to not be a self constitutes the underlying tragic element in the ego, the fact that it is riveted to its own being.³³

Even if, as an exercise in empathy, I imaginatively transport myself into the supposed perspective of another, it is still inescapably myself that is thus transported; in imagining the standpoint of another person, I nevertheless thereby adopt that standpoint as my own or imagine what it would be like for me to have that standpoint.

We simply cannot escape the inwardness or first-personal givenness of experience. As Husserl (following Kant) correctly observes, experience is always in the dative case (that is to say, appearances must appear to someone), and yet the dative referent of experience (the subject to whom appearances appear) is always “me” (or, at any rate, my transcendental ego): the individual, unifying condition or gravitational center of my experiences. And since every appearance is inescapably “mine,” it seems impossible to explain how appearances that are not mine – hence any intimation of alterity - may appear to me as such:

Insofar as I constitute the world, I cannot conceive another consciousness, for it too would have to constitute the world and, at least as regards this other view of the world, I should not be the constituting agent. Even if I succeeded in thinking of it as constituting the world, it would be I who would be constituting the consciousness as such, and once more I should be the sole constituting agent.³⁴

If the only perspective upon the world that I may inhabit is my own – if it is always my (transcendental) ego that undergirds and constitutes the content of all of my experiences – then how is it possible for any other perspective upon the world to invade or displace my own, or how

³⁴ Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, p. 350.
is it possible for my unique, individuated perspective to open me upon, or to be entangled with, perspectives that transcend me, perspectives or objects of experience that my ego does not and cannot constitute, a world that is truly *public*? If all of my possible experiences necessarily refer to “me” as their sole constituent subject – if, as Levinas puts it, I am forever “riveted to my own being” – then it seems that I can never escape the orbit of my own subjectivity; it seems that I can never really perceive, touch, or in any way “know” other subjectivities; in short, it seems that I am condemned to solipsism.\(^{35}\)

So, we may say that a table is a public entity, for it is (at least in principle) available to direct observation from a multiplicity of possible perspectives; it is an extended, material thing composed of an ensemble of sensible properties; I may experience it simply by looking at it, and I may move around it so as to disclose its other profiles; I may even touch, taste, or smell it. But my experiences of the table are not public as the table itself is. You and I may experience (what we assume to be) the same table, but I cannot experience your experience of the table, nor can you experience mine. Again, I may have only my own experiences and never the experiences of an-other precisely because the experiences of an-other would obviously cease to be that other’s own experiences were I to experience them. Numerically distinct individuals have numerically distinct experiences, and so the question that arises is whether and how we may ever suppose that numerically distinct individuals have *qualitatively* identical or similar experiences (which is, of course, the problem presented by “inverted spectrum” thought experiments). But since, again, the only experiences that I can live through or investigate are my own, not only does it become problematic to suppose that others may have experiences that are qualitatively identical or similar to my own, but more importantly (or more disturbingly) it becomes problematic even to

\(^{35}\) Of course, Husserl famously addresses precisely this concern in his fifth *Cartesian Meditation*, which I discuss in chapter five.
suppose that others have any experiences at all (which is to say, it becomes problematic to suppose that there are any “others” in the world at all). Not only is it problematic for me to suppose that, say, my “red” is your “red,” but it is also problematic for me even to suppose that you perceive red at all, and this is the case with respect to any supposed object of perception. And if I cannot know whether you perceive any specific thing or quality, then how may I know that you indeed perceive anything at all?

So, to summarize the problem, a table can be perceived, but the perception of a table (that is to say, the actual experience of a table that is had by the subject who perceives it) cannot be. I can see a table, but you cannot see the table exactly as I see it. You may presumably see the same table that I see, but I will never see (or “inhabit”) your vision of it. In fact, I may doubt that the table that appears to me really exists, and I may doubt that a table is even appearing to you at all when you look at what appears to me to be a table, but I cannot doubt that I am having the experience of a table. I cannot doubt that a table (or that a table-like appearance) is appearing to me. The singular, interior space of such experiences and apodictic certitudes – that to whom appearances uniquely and incorrigibly appear – is traditionally defined as mind, self, or consciousness. But since, according to this account, consciousness is not the kind of thing that can in principle be displayed for an outside observer – which also means that consciousness is essentially not the kind of thing that exists in a bodily or material way, not the kind of thing that can be “thing-like” at all – the question that presents itself is how I may ever reasonably suppose that any consciousness other than my own even exists in the first place. If when I see an entity that I think is conscious I only directly see its body and not its consciousness (because, again, its consciousness is not the kind of thing that I can truly “see”, for in order to see it I would have to inhabit it myself, which is impossible in principle), then how can I claim to know that this body
that I see is indeed conscious at all? If to see your body is not to see your consciousness, how may I justifiably claim that you are conscious when all that I can see is your body?

The problem of other minds (hence the threat of solipsism) only emerges if we assume that such an account of consciousness is true, but if such an account of consciousness is true then the problem (and the skepticism it suggests) defeats itself as soon as it is posed: If consciousness is truly private, then how can I have a notion of other consciousnesses (qua other) such that I can even imagine and verbalize the problem in the first place? If consciousness is taken to be essentially inaccessible from anything but the first-person perspective, if the only consciousness I can know is my own, if consciousness has nothing ontologically in common with anything in the external world that can be an object of consciousness – that is, if the being of consciousness is essentially divorced from any bodily manner of being or appearing – then why would any bodily properties, movements, or appearances prompt me to believe in the existence of other consciousnesses in the first place? Why am I not entirely absorbed in my own communion with myself, forever sealed away in the cocoon of my own experiences, everywhere transfixed by the reflection of my own mind’s eye/‘I’? Why am I not utterly unperturbed by intimations of minds or experiences other than my own? A point I will return to below – and one that Merleau-Ponty emphasizes in many places – is that if consciousness were entirely private and thus disconnected from the supposedly external, material world toward which it is directed, then not only would consciousness itself be impossible, but so too would any perception or conception of otherness. If, however, we acknowledge that consciousness is not totally closed in on itself, or if we affirm that consciousness is necessarily incarnate, which is to say continuous with the sensible world from which it is nonetheless differentiated – or if we simply reject mind/body dualism – then we forfeit the premise from which the problem of other minds emerges, for then it would no longer be the
case that your body stands in the way of your consciousness; it would no longer be the case that your consciousness is something that I can never encounter directly (and may therefore only posit inferentially). But again, if consciousness is wholly closed in on itself, then the problem of “other” minds still does not get off the ground, for this premise entails that one cannot have any notion of minds other than one’s own in the first place: strictly speaking, if the only mind to which I have access is my own, or if the features that define mindedness are only accessible from the first-person perspective, then the problem of “other minds” would really have to be the problem of other “me’s,” which is absurd. If it were true that the mind is entirely private, self-reflexive, self-transparent, and disembodied – if only features that are exclusively or purely “internal” constitute mindedness – then it would be impossible for anything in the external world to suggest the presence of another mind: if the only mind that is a possible “object” of experience is my own, there is no possible object of experience that could prompt the notion of a mind that is not my own. Thus, the problem of other minds seems to efface itself as soon as it is raised: either I cannot and do not have a conception of consciousnesses other than my own, in which case the problem of other minds could never occur to me, or I do have veridical experiences of others, in which case the only “problem” is not whether I have such experiences, but rather to explicate the essential features and conditions of such experiences, and it is precisely this task that Merleau-Ponty takes up in many of his works.

The point I have just raised is one that I will return to in chapter five: doubt concerning the existence of others always tacitly depends upon a prior awareness and knowledge of others. Such skepticism or solipsism is self-defeating because it necessarily presupposes the truth of its own negation. Now, though I think this accurately captures Merleau-Ponty’s position on the

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36: These considerations constitute Merleau-Ponty’s main criticism of traditional analogical solutions to the problem of other minds, which I discuss below.
problem, he does not deal with it as quickly or dismissively as such an account may suggest; indeed, he takes the problem of other minds seriously: he admits that it is a well-founded problem and labors to formulate a compelling answer to it. As I have just discussed, the problem of other minds presupposes what we might call the “privacy of perception” thesis: the thesis that experience is a private spectacle arrayed before the gaze of an atomic, self-transparent consciousness. That is to say, the traditional problem of other minds presupposes the thesis that subjectivity only exists in the first-person singular, that the seat of subjectivity is a monadic, isolated, and disembodied subject, or that the “inner life” of the conscious subject is so “inner” that it has no conceivable continuity with anything “natural” or outwardly perceptible, no possible rapprochement with anything “external.” According to such an account, subjectivity is constitutively, irreconcilably separated from the “objective,” extra-mental, external world; it is an absolute rupture from materiality or visibility, a presence that can only be, and which uniquely is, present to itself, a no-thing-ness that has no place among things, a negation of nature, a “gap in the world” or a “flaw in the great diamond” of Being.  

As M.C. Dillon succinctly puts it, “there is a problem of other minds because others are conceived as minds.”\(^{38}\) That is to say, the essential presupposition of the problem of other minds – the ontological commitment that motivates it and that also renders it unsolvable\(^ {39}\) – is dualism: the idea that “everything that exists exists as a thing or as a consciousness, and there is no half-way house.”\(^ {40}\) This account of conscious life renders the conscious lives of others forever out of reach and indeed unintelligible in principle, but since it is clear that we are conscious of others –


\(^{39}\) Of course, one attempted solution is the traditional argument from analogy, but, as Merleau-Ponty argues and as I discuss below, such arguments from analogy are fallacious, and dualism does indeed render the problem of other minds unsolvable.

\(^{40}\) *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 37.
and since it is moreover the case (as I will elaborate in chapter five) that consciousness itself depends upon a consciousness of others, or that there is no self prior to community, no subjectivity without intersubjectivity – it is an account that Merleau-Ponty vehemently, and rightly, rejects. In short, if we reject any form of dualism – that is, if we accept the claim (as we must) that consciousness is truly embodied, or if we come to see the living, behaving body itself as the site and immediate expression of conscious existence – then consciousness ceases to be imprisoned within the space of its own “immanent” content; experience is no longer a wholly internal play of appearances or representations; it is no longer the private spectacle of a transcendental, homuncular ego. The “ego” or subject is, on the contrary, essentially an incarnate subject – a living body – that is as such always already outside itself, constituted in and through its incessant contact and inextricable entanglements with a world and with others.

Thus, to solve the problem of other minds is to solve the paradox of a “consciousness seen from the outside, of a thought which has its abode in the external world.” Dualism renders a solution to the problem of other minds impossible because it takes the internal domain of consciousness (the domain of immanence) and the external domain of sensible objects or bodies (the domain of transcendence) to be mutually exclusive (“incompossible”) domains of reality, such that the notion of a “consciousness seen from the outside” (that is, the notion of an embodied consciousness) is a contradiction in terms, a “paradox” that cannot be undone. But such an apparent paradox is, in fact, undone in every moment of pre-reflective experience, or every time I simply feel or perceive something. Indeed, this seemingly paradoxical yet exceedingly familiar rapport and complicity with what is outside oneself – or what we might call this basic ecstasy of the self: one’s implicitly and constantly felt participation in that which

41 Ibid., p. 349.
resists and exceeds oneself, which is otherwise simply known as auto-affection or corporeal reflexivity – necessarily constitutes what we call “interiority” or a “self” in the first place. This may seem paradoxical or abstruse, but it is in fact attested by the most rudimentary and mundane sense-experiences we can have. As I cannot touch something without at the same time being touched by it – and thus, as I cannot touch something without also reflexively, albeit tacitly, sensing or “touching” my very own tangibility, which is to say my continuity with that which nevertheless transcends me – so too is it the case that, in general, I may have a reflexive sense of myself (hence be a “self”) only through my contact with an external, carnal world. In short, it is only by virtue of its participation in what is other than itself that a self or form of life exists at all. Just as I may see myself only if I am visible, or just as I may touch myself only if I am tangible, so is it the case with any self-relation or form of reflexivity: there can be no interiority that is not necessarily coupled with exteriority, no “inside” that is not always already doubled by an “outside,” hence no consciousness without a body, no selfhood without otherness. As Merleau-Ponty claims, “inside and outside are inseparable. The world is wholly inside and I am wholly outside myself.”42 Contact is always contact-with-otherness. Auto-affection is necessarily hetero-affection. Thus, for Merleau-Ponty “there is an indivision of my body, of my body and the world, of my body and other bodies, and of other bodies between them.”43 Interiority is constituted as such only through a peculiar involution wherein it is woven into, yet not completely dissolved into, the fabric or “flesh” of exterior things and phenomena. As I will further elaborate later in this chapter, the contact with oneself (the self-presence or self-reflexivity) that minimally defines what it is to be a mind or self is possible only if such self-contact is not absolute, or only if such

42 Ibid., p. 407.
contact does not seal the self away in a vacuum of pure, impregnable solitude but is rather
*contact-at-a-distance* with what is irrecuperably outside or not itself. In short, self-presence is possible only if it is not self-coincidence, and this non-coincidence of the self with itself that makes self-presence (hence interiority or consciousness) possible is cleaved by the intercession of the sensible, carnal world. In other words, consciousness is mediated precisely by its continuity with, or its extension into, what is precisely outside or other than itself. It is only because consciousness is continuous with the public, corporeal world toward which it is directed that it can be directed toward such a world – hence be minimally “conscious” – at all. This is one of Merleau-Ponty’s main arguments for the claim that consciousness must be incarnate, that experience is always “in the flesh.”

No matter how obvious this truth about consciousness or experience may appear to be, it is intractably paradoxical or downright unthinkable for much of classical thought, and it entails nothing short of a radical rethinking of ontology, a radically new conception of the nature of subjectivity, world, and Being, which is precisely what Merleau-Ponty aims to develop. Again, the Cartesian opposition between mind (subject) and body (object) renders the notion of an embodied mind absurd. If the mind is essentially a non-extended substance and if the body is essentially an extended substance, then the idea of an embodied mind would have to be the idea of an “extended non-extended thing,” which is as patently incoherent as the idea of a square circle. Thus, despite Descartes’ insistence in the sixth *Meditation* that “I [my mind] is not present in my body as a sailor is present in a ship,”\(^{44}\) this is in fact the only account of the mind-body relationship that his dualism entitles him to accept (and which therefore ought to be a sufficient

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reductio of his dualism). Descartes’ ontology simply renders the supposed “intermingling” or “unity” of mind and body impossible in principle, and this problem has been discussed ever since Descartes first published the Meditations. Consciousness must be embodied, but Merleau-Ponty recognizes that the embodiment of consciousness remains unintelligible as long as we begin from a dualistic standpoint. Thus, Merleau-Ponty rejects any alternative to dualism that tacitly trades on what he calls “bad ambiguity,” which is to say a conception of the relationship between consciousness and the body as a mere “mixture…of interiority and exteriority,” for such an account presupposes and reinstates the very dualism it pretends to overcome. Such a “mixture” or “intermingling” of opposites is unintelligible and can only be established by definitional fiat. If we begin from the standpoint that mind and body belong to mutually exclusive domains of reality, we will never be able to bring them together. What we need, then, is an account according to which “mind” and “body” are not “things” that need to be “brought together” in the first place. What we need is precisely a “middle term” beneath or beyond the poles of subject and object – something that is neither pure subjectivity nor brute materiality, something that is neither “mind” nor “body” as traditionally conceived – in order to account for how subjectivity can truly have a place in the world (as well as a place amid other subjectivities), and this middle term is precisely what Merleau-Ponty calls the “lived body” (or “corporeal schema”). In this way, Merleau-Ponty solves the classical problem of mind/body interaction (as well as the classical problem of other minds) by rejecting the ontological categories that logically entail it in

45 In a letter to Descartes from June, 1643, Princess Elizabeth goes so far as to suggest that it would better to attribute materiality or extension to consciousness than to conceive of consciousness as an immaterial, non-extended substance and to posit an inexplicable capacity for such a substance to interact with one that is material and extended:

“…I admit that it would be easier for me to concede matter and extension to the mind than it would be for me to concede the capacity to move a body and be moved by one to an immaterial thing.” – Quoted in Daniel Garber, Descartes Embodied (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 172.

the first place, which is to say that he dissolves the problem: the mind/body problem is no longer a problem because we no longer begin with the assumption that mind and body are two absolutely distinct kinds of things that must somehow be united (or “intermixed”); the traditional binary opposition of mind (subject) and body (object) is not, in fact, an ontologically or epistemically foundational and immediate given, but is rather an abstraction that is tacitly founded upon the lived body and later reflectively inflected or reified as primary. So, in order to overcome dualism in all of its forms, we must not begin from the traditional opposition between subject (mind) and object (body) but must endeavor to think below or outside this opposition, which (as Merleau-Ponty insists in his later works) entails a radical revision of the very categories of subject and object and thus, again, a radical revision of ontology itself.47

I cannot fully elaborate all of Merleau-Ponty’s criticisms of dualism here, though it suffices to say that a main aim of Merleau-Ponty’s early work is precisely to show that all forms of dualism are reification fallacies and to use phenomenology in order to expose how reified abstractions or idealities emerge, often inevitably, from our concrete, thoroughly corporeal, pre-reflective engagements with a world. From a phenomenological perspective, the cardinal sin of reason is reification,48 or what Whitehead names the “fallacy of misplaced concreteness.”49 In

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47 Merleau-Ponty will later clarify that the lived body, as that which antecedes and founds the distinction between subject and object, discloses the nature of Being as such, for Being is precisely neither subject nor object (and is therefore also not a “substance”). Thus, Merleau-Ponty writes:

“Our purpose is not to oppose to the facts objective science coordinates a group of facts that “escape” it – whether one calls them “psychisms” or “subjective facts” or “interior facts” – but to show that the being-object and being-subject conceived by opposition to it and relative to it do not form the alternative, that the perceived world is beneath or beyond this antinomy, that the failure of “objective” psychology is – conjointly with the failure of “objectivist” physics – to be understood not as a victory of the “interior” over the “exterior” and of the “mental” over the “material”, but as a call for the revision of our ontology, for the reexamination of the notions of “subject” and “object.”” - The Visible and the Invisible, p. 22.

48 There are many different alleged examples of this fallacy throughout the history of philosophy. One such example, according to Nietzsche (and Buddhism), is the notion of an enduring, discrete and substantial ego; another example, according to Marx, is the notion that certain social conditions and relations are “necessary”, “inevitable”, or “natural” when in fact they are historically emergent (hence contingent) and the sense of their necessity or
general, this fallacy is the illicit substitution of the abstract for the concrete; it is, as Merleau-
Ponty puts it, the substitution of a map for the terrain, the confusion of a re-presentation for what
originally presents itself to consciousness; that is, it involves the inflection of a conceptualization
or idealization as a reality prior to, and independent of, lived experience, when in fact such a
conceptualization or idealization always already presupposes lived experience for its formulation
and intelligibility (or as its “condition of possibility”); in other words, it involves what Merleau-
Ponty calls a “retrospective illusion”\(^{50}\) in which a derivative, second-order acquisition or
construction is registered as a primary, first-order fact or reality. Merleau-Ponty indicts not only
philosophers but also especially the sciences for their tendency to reify abstractions, that is, to
confuse the models and idealizations through which they attempt to explain reality with reality as
such:

The entire universe of science is constructed upon the lived world, and if we wish to think science
rigorously, to appreciate precisely its sense and its scope, we must first awaken that experience of the
world of which science is the second-order expression. Science neither has, nor ever will have the same
ontological sense as the perceived world for the simple reason that science is a determination or an
explanation of that world…To return to the things themselves is to return to this world prior to
knowledge, this world of which knowledge always speaks, and this world with regard to which every
scientific determination is abstract, signitive, and dependent, just like geography with regard to the
landscape where we first learned what a forest, a meadow, or a river is.\(^{51}\)

In this famous passage from the Phenomenology of Perception, Merleau-Ponty suggests, as I
have just mentioned, that reification is the substitution of the map for terrain; again, it is to
regard as ontologically and epistemically primary what is in fact a derivative or secondary
reflective accomplishment. The sciences (particularly given their reliance upon mathematical

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\(^{50}\) Phenomenology of Perception, p. 50. See also Structure of Behavior. Trans. Alden Fisher (Pittsburgh: Duquesne

\(^{51}\) Ibid., p. xxii.
models and formulae) often regard what are in fact second-order, derivative acquisitions as first-order, *a priori* truths; they often regard certain idealizations as ontologically basic and autonomous when such idealizations always already derive their sense from lived, prescientific experience. Of course, it is absurd to regard a map as in any sense prior to or “more real” than the landscape to which it applies. It is our living experience of the landscape that enables, informs, but also exceeds any possible map or representation of it we may construct. Every map presupposes an originary, irreducible encounter and living rapport with the terrain to which it applies, and in general it is the lived *presentation* of the world that affords the possibility of any re-presentation or formal account of it. Thus, Merleau-Ponty writes that “scientific thinking, a thinking which looks on from above, and thinks of the object-in-general, must return to the “there is” which underlies it; to the site, the soil of the sensible and opened world such as it is in our life and for our body…”52 The point that is most pertinent to the present discussion is that the concept of the living body as a “mere” object, or in general any mechanistic or reductionistic analysis or representation of the (living) body, and therefore the conceptual opposition of subject(ivity) and object(ivity), is precisely one such abstraction that scientists and philosophers alike have tended to reify and which has profoundly impeded the progress of both. Insofar as the sciences reduce the living body to the status of a mere object and thus implicitly adhere to a rigid distinction between subject and object, they accept without question what is in fact not a “scientific” schema or empirical truth at all but rather a basic commitment of Cartesian metaphysics and epistemology.

So, since the traditional opposition between subject (mind) and body (object) is a product of *reflection* (i.e., is a conceptual abstraction), for Merleau-Ponty it is necessary to direct our

attention to *pre*-reflective (lived) experience. Such an abstraction tacitly depends upon yet suppresses real, elemental features of our existence, especially our living bodies and the webs of “reciprocal relations” between self, world, things, and others in which we are always already entangled through our bodily being. Lived experience (or what Merleau-Ponty otherwise calls “perception”) is precisely below the opposition between subject and object; indeed, it refers to the primordial, immediate openness to a world that enables and informs any act or accomplishment of reflection, including the conceptual opposition between subject and object. The lived body is the body that unreflectively orients and sustains my engagements with a world, the body through which I am directed toward, and always already involved in, practical tasks and possibilities; it is the body that I experience (kinesthetically, affectively, agentially) before I reflectively apprehend (that is, objectify) it, the body through which I am individuated, thrown into projects and relations with others, and given to myself before I ever think or utter the word “I.” Thus, in this turn to lived experience Merleau-Ponty discovers the “good ambiguity” of the lived body, for the *lived* body is neither purely subject nor object but partially both *at the same time*, and is therefore the basis of the very distinction (and supposed separation) between subject and object in the first place. Again, for Merleau-Ponty the supposed subject/object divide is not ontologically basic but is rather an abstraction derived from the lived body and its constitutive engagements with a world. The lived body stages precisely an intertwining or enmeshment of subject and object that antecedes and resists the alternatives of dualism and reductive (usually materialistic or positivistic) monism.⁵⁴ Subject and object, interiority and exteriority do not

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⁵³ *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 55.

⁵⁴ Of course, in a very broad or highly qualified sense Merleau-Ponty may be said to be a “materialist,” “naturalist,” or “monist,” since he does not think that there is anything “supernatural,” which is to say anything that exists outside the carnal, sensible world. For Merleau-Ponty, there is no world beyond *this* one, no “second-world” or reality “behind the scenes,” nothing that can exist in a truly timeless or incorporeal manner. Thus, I think it is accurate to
designate absolutely segregated kinds of things or domains of existence, but are rather two co-
constitutive poles of one and the same phenomenon, two compresent aspects of one and same
movement and site of givenness; they are “two abstract ‘moments’ of a unique structure which is
presence,” 55 “the nodes and antinodes of the same ontological vibration,” 56 which is to say two
inseparable yet distinct aspects of one and the same ground and genesis of meaning (sens) – two
sides of “an openness upon a world” (ouverture au monde) 57 – that are only later rent asunder
into antithetical and autonomous categories of being.

say that Merleau-Ponty’s ontology is, as Deleuze would put it, an ontology of “immanence” (where “immanence” is
taken to mean not the internal domain of consciousness but rather the contrary of supernatural, theological ideality
or transcendence). However, “materialism”, “naturalism”, or “monism” tend to connote some form of reductionism
according to which reality consists of nothing but matter in motion and the mechanistic laws that govern it, or
according to which subjectivity is exhaustively explained, determined, and described by, say, physics, physiology,
neurochemistry, stimulus-response mechanisms, modes of behavioral conditioning, and so on, and Merleau-Ponty
resists and criticizes such views just as much as he criticizes forms of dualism or supernaturalism. As Merleau-Ponty
recognizes, dualism (Cartesian or otherwise) on the one hand, and reductionism or monism (the most common form
of which is mechanistic materialism or behaviorism) on the other, are really two sides of the same coin. That is to
say, most reductionistic accounts of consciousness, or most “monistic” accounts of reality, presuppose a conceptual
opposition between the mental and the physical and thus sustain or reproduce the very dualistic framework that they
purport to repudiate. For instance, once Descartes set up an opposition between mind and matter, the most
commonly suggested solutions to the “problem of interaction” involved denying the fundamental reality of one or
the other (it hardly needs to be mentioned that other non-monistic solutions to the problem of interaction, such as
occasionalism and parallelism, merely explain the inexplicable on the basis of something equally or even more
inexplicable): either reality only consists of matter in motion and material properties (materialism), or reality only
consists of minds and mental properties (Berkeleyan idealism); either reality only consists of extended substances
(material things) and their modifications, or reality only consists non-extended substances (minds) and their
modifications. Of course, both views assume from the start a categorical opposition between mind and matter, and to
that extent they do not really overcome or “solve” dualism at all but rather “compensate for one abstraction with a
counter-abstraction” (The Visible and the Invisible, p. 68). Thus, for Merleau-Ponty, such supposed solutions to
dualism are not only problematic on their own terms, but they also concede too much to the dualism they reject.
Merleau-Ponty rejects dualism because he takes this very opposition between mind (subject) and matter (body,
object) to be a false abstraction, but in thus rejecting dualism he also rejects those reductionistic or monistic
alternatives that equally presuppose such an opposition. Moreover, while Merleau-Ponty’s later ontology of “flesh”
may suggest a kind of monism, it is potentially misleading to categorize it as such because the term “monism” also
tends to connote an ontology of substance, which Merleau-Ponty rejects (as we will see, he explicitly denies that
“the flesh of the world” is a “substance”). This is a point I will raise again in chapter five, for it is here that we see
how Merleau-Ponty’s early phenomenology of the lived body informs his later ontology. Throughout all of his
works, but especially in his later considerations of Being and nature, Merleau-Ponty attempts to develop a third
alternative beyond the classical alternatives of dualism and (reductionistic) monism: a genuine ontology of
difference.

55 Ibid., p. 430.
56 Merleau-Ponty, The Visible and The Invisible, p. 115.
57 See, for example, ibid., p. 35.
So, at the level of lived experience (or at the level of the lived body), there is simply no radical separation between “consciousness” and “the body”: the lived body is not a “mere” object, for it is precisely that through which I have any access to objects at all. My living body is not a mere object among other objects because it is precisely that which mediates my relations with objects in the first place; it is not a mere “thing,” for it is precisely the condition of the possibility of any perception or reflective apprehension of “things”; it is “our general medium for having a world.”\(^5^8\) Moreover, only a dead or inanimate body is a “mere” object, and it is only through an act of reflection, whereby we view our bodies from the detached perspective of a medical examiner or surgeon, that we come to conceptualize them in such a manner. But at the same time the living body is clearly not \textit{not} an “object” either; it is not absolutely divorced from the order of “things” (as only an incorporeal spirit would be), for it too is flesh; neither a “mere” thing nor a negation of “thinghood,” neither interiority without exteriority nor exteriority without interiority, the living body “forms between the pure subject and the object a third genus of being.”\(^5^9\) Indeed, the notion of “the body” as a brute object or mechanism is simply the counterpart to the notion of the mind as an incorporeal spirit or (to borrow Gilbert Ryle’s famous expression for it) “ghost in the machine,” and so to give up one of these notions is also to give up the other. If consciousness is not a “ghost in a machine,” then the (living, or “minded”) body is not a mere “machine” (or interior-less object), either. Again, the lived body – my body such as I experience it pre-reflectively – is not an ordinary object because it is precisely that which affords me access to objects in the first place, and by the same token it is not a pure subject either, for the concept of a pure subject is intelligible only in contradistinction to that of a brute object:

\(^{58}\) Merleau-Ponty, \textit{Phenomenology of Perception}, p. 146
\(^{59}\) Ibid., p. 350.
since the concept of an object is founded upon the lived body, so too is the concept of a subject. It follows that the opposition between subject and object is founded upon the lived body, and the lived body is therefore something that does not belong entirely to either side of that opposition. To regard subject and object as absolutely opposed to one another and to regard such an opposition as ontological basic is, then, to reify a derivative, reflective conceptualization; such a conceptualization – indeed, any dualistic, subject/object conceptual schema – implicitly depends upon yet represses our being as living bodies engaged with, and thus embedded within, a material, sensible world. Like all false abstractions, the oppositions between subject and object, mind and body, spirit and matter/mechanism, consciousness and nature/world are dismantled by the very conditions that enable and even naturally motivate their formulation in the first place.

So, since my (lived) body is precisely a “thing” that subtends and institutes my very access to things, a thing that primordially anchors and orients my existence in the world, and since, therefore, my body is a sentient body – a body that touches, sees, and otherwise senses the world, and moreover a body that implicitly touches, sees, and senses itself in and through sensing the world – it is not a “mere” thing or object, but at the same time it is sentient by virtue of its continuity with the things or phenomena that it senses (that is, by virtue of its own inherent tangibility, visibility, or general perceptibility):

To make the body appear as a subject of movement and as subject of perception – if that is not verbal, it means: the body as touching-touched, seeing-seen, the place of a kind of reflection and, thereby, the capacity to relate itself to something other than its own mass, to close its circuit on the visible, on a sensible exterior...this circuit of the body touching itself, nearly closing itself in on itself, [is] closed by the synergic prehension of a thing...they [the things] “touch me” just as much as I touch them. Not surprising: they are that on which the synergy of my body opens; they are made of the same stuff as the corporal schema; I haunt them at a distance, they haunt me at a distance. I am with them in a relation of Einfühlung; my within is an echo of their within.60

To perceive a thing is to be reflexively (albeit initially unreflectively) exposed to one’s own embeddedness in an external world, that is, to one’s own corporeity. The most rudimentary level of experience – even the “simplest” perception – reveals to me “my body in its doubleness, as thing and vehicle of my relation to the things,” which is also to say it reveals to me my essential implication in, or apparently paradoxical continuity with, that which is other than me, my indissoluble, umbilical adhesion to a transcendent world and to those other bodies (sentient and non-sentient alike) that equally belong to it. Thus, “the usual alternative: the body as one of the things, or the body as my point of view on the things, is put back in question: it is both…”.

The living body is self-reflexive and intentional, and the reflexivity and intentionality that defines life or consciousness is constituted only in and through its exposure to, or enmeshment in, a carnal world:

The visible can thus fill me and occupy me only because I who see it do not see it from the depths of nothingness, but from the midst of itself; I the seer am also visible. What makes the weight, the thickness, the flesh of each color, of each sound, of each tactile texture, of the present, and of the world is the fact that he who grasps them feels himself emerge from them by a sort of coiling up or redoubling, fundamentally homogenous with them; he feels that he is the sensible itself coming to itself and that in return the sensible is in his eyes as it were his double or an extension of his own flesh.

Consciousness must already be incorporated into the tissue of phenomena. Consciousness is inherently reflexive, and reflexivity entails integration – what Merleau-Ponty will later call a “strange kinship” – with otherness: integration with a corporeal world and with other living corporealities. This reflexivity of perception means that perception itself is necessarily implicated in the world one perceives; it means that “my body simultaneously sees and is seen,” that “that which looks at all things can also look at itself and recognize, in what it sees, the “other

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61 Ibid., p. 223.
62 Ibid., p. 224.
63 Merleau-Ponty, The Visible and the Invisible, p. 113-114.
side” of its power of looking,”⁶⁵ and in general it means that what we call “the self” is always included in that from which it is differentiated as such, that the self emerges “through the inherence of sensing in the sensed”⁶⁶; it means that one’s openness to what is outside oneself (one’s life, intentionality, or interiority) must be embedded within, or must not be entirely outside, that which is precisely “outside” oneself; it means that consciousness must itself share an exteriority with the very exteriority of those things toward which it is directed, which is also to say that consciousness must be a modality of worldly, bodily being.

So, Merleau-Ponty argues that subjectivity and corporeity, self and world are inextricably, internally entangled; they are distinct yet inseparable and interdependent, which is to say neither syncretically unified nor dualistically opposed; such an intertwining of consciousness, body, and world is beyond the classical alternatives of identity (sameness) and non-identity (negation). Indeed, this intertwining antecedes, subtends, and enables the ways in which it later comes to be distorted as either an antinomy or subsumptive totality. It is only later that we bifurcate consciousness and carnality/world – interiority and exteriority – into “being-for-itself” and “being-in-itself,” res cogitans and res extensa, respectively. Merleau-Ponty therefore characterizes the relationship between (embodied) subjectivity and the world (in its emergence into meaning or presence) as essentially dialogical (or co-constituting):

The sensor and the sensible do not stand in relation to each other as two mutually external terms, and sensation is not an invasion of the sensor by the sensible…and in this transaction between the subject of sensation and the sensible it cannot be held that one acts while the other suffers the action, or that one confers the significance on the other…The sensible gives back to me what I lent to it, but this is only what I took from it in the first place. As I contemplate the blue of the sky I am not set over against it as an acosmic subject; I do not possess it in thought, or spread out towards it some idea of blue such as might reveal the secret of it, I abandon myself to it and plunge into this mystery, it ‘thinks itself within me’, I

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 163.
am the sky itself as it is drawn together and unified, and as it begins to exist for itself; my consciousness is saturated with this limitless blue.\(^67\)

Thus, I am “conscious of the world through the medium of my body” and at the same time I am “conscious of my body via the world.”\(^68\) Merleau-Ponty repeatedly emphasizes the reciprocal, bilateral constitution of subjectivity and world, claiming (against Sartre) that “if it is through subjectivity that nothingness appears in the world, it can equally be said that it is through the world that nothingness comes into being.”\(^69\) As we have seen, for Merleau-Ponty this intertwining of subjectivity and world (which will later inform not only his account of intersubjectivity, but also his mature conception of Being as chiasm, or as the genesis of identity and meaning through differentiation) is attested by the reflexivity of the living body (which is itself exemplified by the touching-touched relation). Insofar as the living body senses itself it is differentiated from ordinary (“mere”) things,\(^70\) but at the same time this reflexivity of the living body implicates its inherence in the world of things from which it is thereby differentiated; such reflexivity is simultaneously disjunctive and conjunctive, which is to say it is (like a literal decussation\(^71\)) a site of intersection or a point of ingress and egress through difference, a particular divergence that not only enables but also is convergence; it is a spacing (écart) that, like the skin, simultaneously separates and brings together the poles of “inside” and “outside,” an

\(^67\) Phenomenology of Perception, 214.
\(^68\) Ibid, p. 82.
\(^69\) Ibid., p. 452.
\(^70\) See, for example, ibid., 93.
\(^71\) Indeed, Merleau-Ponty will later refer to the kind of relationship exemplified by such reflexivity – the kind of relationship that constitutively obtains between mind and body, body and world, self and other, and so on – as a “chiasm” (see below), and he borrows this term from biology, where it refers to the crossing of optic nerves in the brain that enables stereoscopic vision. But of course, the term “chiasm” etymologically derives from the Greek letter chi, which is written in the shape of an X.
openness or distance that is not an ontological void\textsuperscript{72} but rather a “pregnancy of meaning”\textsuperscript{73} and the very “vinculum of the self and things.”\textsuperscript{74}

The hand that touches is at the same time a hand that is touched, and indeed the agency of touching is necessarily reflexively coupled with the passivity of being-touched: in order to touch a thing, it is therefore necessary that I myself am tangible, which is to say ontologically continuous with the object I touch. However, this continuity (or “indivision”) is not identity or coincidence, for if it were there would be no distinction at all between my sentient body and the thing that I touch or sense, which means that there would be no sentience – no experience of anything – at all:

When I find again the actual world such as it is, under my hands, under my eyes, up against my body, I find much more than an object: a Being of which my vision is a part, a visibility older than my operations or my acts. But this does not mean there was a fusion or coinciding of me with it: on the contrary, this occurs because a sort of dehiscence opens my body in two, and because between my body looking, my body touched and my body touching, there is overlapping or encroachment, so that we must say that the things pass into us as well as we into the things.\textsuperscript{75}

For Merleau-Ponty, “my body in its doubleness, as thing and vehicle of my relation to the things” means that there are “two “sides” of an experience, conjugated and incompossible, but complementary” whose “unity is irrecusable.”\textsuperscript{76} In other words, the reflexivity endemic to

\textsuperscript{72} See, for example, \textit{The Visible and The Invisible}, p. 272. Merleau-Ponty’s term “écart” designates the separation or spacing between foreground and background that enables perception as well as the differences between signs that engender linguistic meaning. He later extends the insights of Gestalt psychology and structuralist linguistics to ontology and uses this term to refer to the differentiation that is necessarily constitutive of \textit{any relation} or distinct manner of being. It is very close to what Derrida will designate as “\textit{différence},” and I think it is equivalent to what Deleuze will call “difference in-itself” or simply “difference,” but to justify such comparisons would be beyond the scope of the present discussion. I will draw more attention to these connections in chapter five.

\textsuperscript{73} \textit{Phenomenology of Perception}, p. 431.

\textsuperscript{74} Merleau-Ponty, “The Philosopher and His Shadow”, in \textit{Signs}, Trans. Richard C. McCleary (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 166. In his later writings (including this one), Merleau-Ponty refers to this “vinculum” – this field that brings things together precisely by differentiating them from one another – as “flesh,” which I further discuss in chapter five.

\textsuperscript{75} \textit{The Visible and the Invisible}, p. 123.

\textsuperscript{76} \textit{Nature}, p. 223.
experience is at once an opening from within and onto a world (a “dehiscence”\textsuperscript{77}), which is to say a kind of relationship that does not obey a classical logic of identity and negation, for it is one wherein a “subject” is constituted as such only in and through its differentiating contact or continuity with a world and other things. That is to say, the relationship between subjectivity and an extra-subjective or pre-subjective, public (“objective”) world – hence the relationship between subjectivity and corporeity, and by extension the relationship between my (embodied) subjectivity and other (embodied) subjectivities – is not oppositional, but neither is it reductively assimilative or syncretic (or sublative); rather, it is what Merleau-Ponty will later call a chiasm, or intertwining. Subjectivity – that is, the reflexivity or intentionality that defines what it is to be “a subject” – does not emerge in isolation from the world; it does not exclude or negate exteriority, which is to say it does not have its seat in the “interiority” of its private reflective awareness of itself, or in what is otherwise known as the “cogito.” As Ted Toadvine explains, for Merleau-Ponty “the auto-affection that comes to fruition in perception and reflection is not achieved within the immanence of consciousness…reflection would therefore be understood as the coming-to-self of the a-subjective life of things.”\textsuperscript{78} Consciousness is always consciousness

\textsuperscript{77} Dehiscence” is yet another artful term (borrowed from botany) that Merleau-Ponty uses for “divergence” or differentiation. Since this word originally means the splitting or opening of a plant at maturity, it is the perfect term for how Merleau-Ponty wants to think difference. The first thing to notice is that this kind of difference or differentiation is never oppositional or absolute separation; that is, the parts of the plant that split apart from one another remain part of the same plant (which is itself rooted in the world). Thus, “dehiscence” for Merleau-Ponty illustrates a non-oppositional differentiation, a differentiation that entails overlapping: it refers to a generative opening-upon-being that is immanent to Being itself and exemplified by the reflexivity of the flesh of the living body. While “dehiscence” is synonymous with “écart” (for both terms refer to that separation that constitutes relationality as such), I think it is perhaps preferable to use the former term since it seems to be more “verbal” or less “static” than the latter; it suggests that Being is not just a static network of what Merleau-Ponty calls “chiasmatic” relations (see below), but is rather a process – what in the Nature lectures Merleau-Ponty calls a “primordial…autoproduction of meaning” (Nature, p. 3) – through which such relations are instituted and sustained. Despite the spatial metaphors that Merleau-Ponty often uses in order to articulate chiasmatic relationality, we must not forget that temporality is also constitutive of such relations, and that such relations are therefore always emergent and processual.

\textsuperscript{78} Ted Toadvine, Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2009), p. 75.
“of” the world not only in the sense that it is directed toward the world but also in the sense that it is, through its body, “caught in the fabric of the world,”\textsuperscript{79} and if it were not “of” the world in this latter sense of the preposition, it could never be so in the former sense. For this reason, Merleau-Ponty claims that we should conceptualize subjectivity not (as Sartre does) as a “hole” in being but rather as a “hollow” or “fold,”\textsuperscript{80} as an irremediable absence that is nevertheless not opposed to bodily, behavioral presence but is rather the “other side of it,”\textsuperscript{81} which is to say immediately given with it, precisely, for example, as the concave is given with the convex,\textsuperscript{82} or as the hidden profiles and contours of a thing are given with those that are disclosed to direct perception, or as form is given with matter, or as the meaning of a sentence is given with its words and letters, or as sorrow and joy are given with the countenance of a face or the timbre of a voice or melody.

Descartes famously claimed that while I cannot doubt that I have a mind, I can doubt that I have a body. Now, while Descartes fallaciously infers from these two premises that mind and body are separate substances,\textsuperscript{83} we can now see that we may also reject the second premise: I

\textsuperscript{79} Eye and Mind”, in The Primacy of Perception, p. 163.
\textsuperscript{80} Phenomenology of Perception, p. 215. As we will see, Merleau-Ponty also uses the terms “hollow” and “fold” to describe subjectivity throughout his later writings (and especially in The Visible and The Invisible).
\textsuperscript{81} See, for example, The Visible and The Invisible, p. 259.
\textsuperscript{82} Merleau-Ponty explicitly compares the relationship between mind and body to the relationship between the concave and the convex, which I mention below.
\textsuperscript{83} As many commentators have noted, Descartes’ dubitability argument commits the “intensional fallacy”, in which one illicitly takes an intensional predicate (a predicate that describes a propositional attitude) to be a “real” or extensional predicate (a predicate that describes the thing that a proposition is about). For example, Lois Lane may not be able to doubt that Superman can fly, and yet she may be able to doubt that Clark Kent can fly, but it clearly does not follow that Superman and Clark Kent are numerically distinct individuals. Likewise, while I may not be able to doubt (the proposition) that I have a mind, and while I may be able to doubt (the proposition) that I have a body, it does not follow that my mind and my body are separate substances. From the fact that I can doubt the existence of my body and from the fact that I cannot doubt the existence of my mind, it follows that “I have a body” and “I have a mind” are different propositions, but it does not follow that my body and my mind are different or separable things; “dubitability” and “indubitability” are simply not real properties of things. Thus, this argument for dualism is invalid. Here, however, I am also suggesting that one of the premises in the argument is false: it is not in fact the case that I can doubt that I “have” a body.
cannot doubt that I “have” a body any more than I can doubt that I “have” a mind; both are equally indubitable, for there is no sentience (hence no “mindedness” or interiority) without self-reflexivity and intentionality, and there is no self-reflexivity and intentionality without contact with an external world, and there is no contact with an external world – no contact with things outside oneself, which is simply to say no contact with anything at all – without exteriority or an “outside,” without (a shared) flesh. Indeed, even the claim that I “have” a body is as misleading as the claim that I “have” a mind (as though there is such a thing as a “me” that is distinct from my mind): since my mind is embodied, I am my body just as much as I am my mind; more accurately, I am a living body, which is simply to say an embodied mind or self:

My body does not appear to me as an object, a set of qualities and characteristics linked to one another and thus understood. My relation to it is not that of the Cogito to the cogitatum, the “epistemological subject” to the object. I and it form a common cause, and in a sense I am my body. Between it and me there cannot properly be said to be a relation, since this term designates the behavior of one object in reference to another. Here it is a question of presence, adherence, and intimacy.84

I may doubt that I have a body only because I think of my body as something that I “have” in the first place and thus overlook or forget my (ontologically non-objectifiable) living body, the body that I precisely am. The fundamental relation between mind and body is not a relation between a subject and an object (and to that extent, as Merleau-Ponty suggests, it may in a certain sense be misleading even to consider it to be a “relation” at all85) but is precisely that which precedes, founds, and makes intelligible any relation between a subject and an object in the first place.


85 Since, for Merleau-Ponty, there is nevertheless a real difference between consciousness and the body (that is, since, for Merleau-Ponty, consciousness and the body are not reducible to one another), I think it still makes sense to speak of a “relation” between them, though it is a kind of relation that has traditionally not been recognized or conceptualized in philosophy (Merleau-Ponty will later refer to this kind of relation as “reversibility” or a “chiasm”); the remark I have quoted comes from an early essay published in 1936, long before Merleau-Ponty formulated his concept of chiasmatic relationality, and it should also be noted that this essay is a piece of commentary on Gabriel Marcel’s book of the same title). Here, it seems that Merleau-Ponty hesitates to speak of a “relation” between mind and body because he is equating the concept of a relation with that of an external relation.
Thus, contrary to Descartes, it is in fact a *disembodied* mind that is inconceivable. If a mind were truly disembodied, it would not be localized or situated anywhere and would thus not be individuated as such. That is, if consciousness truly had no “extension,” then there would be no limit between consciousness and anything else: there would be no way to distinguish where consciousness ends and, say, the rest of the world begins; but if that were the case, then consciousness would have no exposure to, or no directedness toward, anything other than itself (for consciousness would not be differentiated from anything in the first place), and that means that consciousness would in fact not be “conscious” at all, since consciousness must be intentional: it must be (either pre-reflectively or thematically) directed toward something other than itself. And to say that consciousness would not be directed toward anything outside itself is not to suggest that it would be only self-directed, for if it is not differentiated from anything, then it has no identity or distinct existence or “selfhood” to be directed toward at all.

Moreover, if the mind is essentially non-extended, then it is absurd even to say (as Descartes does) that it is “in” a body. Where in a body would we locate it? To say that it is located in, for example, the brain is not to solve the problem, for where “in” the brain should we locate it? We cannot say that consciousness is confined within a single portion of the brain, nor can we say that it is “spread” throughout the whole brain, for it cannot be restricted to or spread throughout any region of space if it is not extended.\(^{86}\) We see, then, that the self-presence that

\(^{86}\) A telling indication of the inconceivability of a disembodied consciousness is perhaps the fact that ghosts or spirits are never depicted as *utterly* incorporeal or formless; they are always given some kind of form, “body”, or localizable existence, for otherwise they would not be perceptible at all; and they are also always depicted as able to interact with the physical world. Even in certain religions committed to the idea of an afterlife, the soul that is supposed to depart from the body is taken to be a different kind of “body” (say, an “astral body”). All of this is parodied, for example, in the *Ghostbusters* films, in which ghosts are portrayed as made of “ectoplasm.” More seriously, however, the point I have been making is perhaps an underappreciated tenet of the Christian tradition, according to which not only is the human person *essentially* an embodied being (hence the Christian conception of the afterlife consists not in the ascension of a disembodied soul to a supernatural Heaven – a notion imported from Plato – but rather in the *resurrection of the body*), but moreover, and even more radically, so too is *God*. That is
essentially characterizes the *cogito* is impossible without, and immediately implicated in, corporeality. As Dillon writes:

Only with the emergence of the explicit (Cartesian) *cogito*, which is a relatively late and sophisticated development, does consciousness become thematically aware of itself. The point here…is that the autonomy of thought which is presupposed by Cartesian dualism (and which makes the task of explaining its incarnation impossible) is neither primordial nor absolute: what degree of independence thought acquires it must work to gain, and it remains always to some extent circumscribed by its original incarnation.\(^87\)

If consciousness were not situated in a world – if it were not incarnate – it would have no perspective upon, or no place from which to perceive, anything, and a view from nowhere is, of course, no point of view at all. And again, the lived/living body (that is, an embodied mind) is not a “union” or mere “mixture” of spirit and matter, for such a concept of it assumes the very dualism at issue.

We can also test the conceivability of a disembodied consciousness by performing a kind of thought experiment or phenomenological reduction (similar to the one that Husserl performs in order to test solipsism or the conceivability of a truly isolated ego). We can try to strip away from experience anything that in any way depends upon the living body for its intelligibility. First, we have to eliminate visual perception and anything whose meaning derives from it; second, we clearly have to strip away the senses of hearing, smell, and taste. Lastly, and perhaps most radically, we must strip away the sense touch. So, can we really imagine what it would be like to exist without these perceptual capacities? Have we arrived at something like “pure” thought in communion with itself? To borrow a phrase from analytic philosophy of mind, would

there be *anything that it is like* to exist in such a way? Would such a consciousness even be able
to formulate or entertain any ideas or “representations”? Of course, we can reasonably question
what such representations would be *about* if such a consciousness has never had any kind of
perceptual awareness of anything: whenever we form a mental image of something, and even
when we think about the most abstract concepts (like mathematical concepts, for example), we
always in a way “visualize” them internally; we place them before our mind as the object of a
kind of vision. Of course, the mental visualization of a number is different from the visual
perception of a color, but it seems that we cannot but borrow from vision even when we entertain
the most putatively “private” and abstract ideas. Moreover, as Merleau-Ponty argues, even the
most abstract concepts – geometrical space and relations, quantifiable time and motion,
measurable figures and magnitudes, and so on – tacitly depend upon the lived body and its
perceptual engagements with a world. For example, I can construct and represent to myself
objects or shapes in geometric space only by virtue of a prior non-representable spatiality or
orientation toward things, a perspectival presentation of the world to, through, and around my
body that is prior to any re-presentation of that world in imagination or on graph paper. I can
formulate geometrical concepts only because my living body, as what Husserl calls an “absolute
here” or “zero-point of orientation,” grounds and radiates certain sense-directions or vectors of
organization without which such concepts are unintelligible. That is, vectors such as “left”,
“right”, “up”, “down”, “above”, “below” “on”, “under”, “in”, “through”, “parallel”,
“perpendicular”, “diagonal”, “straight” “across”, “adjacent”, and so on, necessarily refer to and
depend upon my body and its pre-reflective orientation in space, and thus geometric idealizations
– indeed all mathematical idealizations – implicitly derive their meaning from these bodily
vectors of orientation.
Even more to the point, it is most difficult, and perhaps impossible, to imagine experience without *touch*. Touch is a “sense” that is so fundamental that we easily take it for granted. As Aristotle suggested, it is wrong to consider touch to be one sense among the others, for touch seems to be the very basis of all of the other senses, and indeed it seems to be the very basis of experience itself. To try to conceive of what it would be like to exist without touch is to try to conceive of what it would be like to exist without any kind of contact with anything external to oneself, and for Merleau-Ponty this is precisely inconceivable. In order to conceive of conscious existence without a sense of touch, it is not even adequate to try to imagine what it be like to suffer from so-called “locked-in syndrome.” Such a condition (as depicted in the autobiography and film *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*) is one in which all (or most) of a person’s body is paralyzed and immobilized, and so one feels “locked” or “trapped” in one’s body. Now, while the term “locked in syndrome” is problematically Cartesian, such a syndrome demonstrates precisely the antithesis of a Cartesian account of consciousness. Such a condition is so horrific precisely because consciousness is embodied: in this condition, we are painfully all too conscious of our embodiment. In lived experience, one typically does not notice one’s body as an object set over and against oneself, and that is precisely because one’s body is primarily *not* external to oneself as an ordinary thing or instrument but is rather the very condition of one’s access to things or instruments, the “vehicle” of one’s existence in the world. It is precisely because one’s existence in the world is fundamentally structured by what Merleau-Ponty calls a “corporeal schema” that a condition such as “locked-in syndrome” is so disruptive and even possible in the first place. The inability to feel, move, or in any way exercise control over one’s body is perhaps the most profound – and most horrifying – upheaval in one’s being-in-the-world, but it would not be so if lived experience did not thoroughly depend upon the body and its vital
potentialities, or if one’s embodiment were merely an accidental or contingent rather than fundamental feature of one’s existence. Indeed, the cognitive-intentional structure of “locked-in” syndrome is itself a mode of corporeal intentionality: one wants to sense and animate one’s body, but tragically one is unable to do so; all of one’s desires and efforts to engage the world freely with one’s body are thwarted, and that is why the condition is so disturbing. The subject of The Diving Bell and The Butterfly (Jean-Dominique Bauby) was initially taken to be in a vegetative state, and at first the most painful aspect of his condition was his inability to communicate his presence to others. This begins to show that the desire and ability to communicate with others is also essentially a particular mode or expression of corporeal intentionality; indeed, all communicative acts are bodily. When Bauby did successfully communicate with his nurse, he did so by blinking his left eyelid, which was the only part of his body that he could move (and he composed the text of The Diving Bell and the Butterfly letter-by-letter by blinking his left eyelid when the appropriate letter was mentioned as his nurse recited the alphabet). It hardly needs to be mentioned that such an activity was entirely bodily. So long as we are alive, we never cease to communicate – and never cease to need to communicate – with and through our bodies.

So, what makes so-called “locked-in” syndrome so terrible is precisely the fact that consciousness is never truly “locked in” the body, as the Cartesian name for this condition suggests. Here, however, it is perhaps more philosophically important to notice that even when Bauby would fantasize about leaving his body and taking flight, he did not so much fantasize the existence of a pure, disembodied spirit but rather (explicitly and implicitly) fantasized the experience of a different bodily manner of being (he would imagine himself as a butterfly, hence the title of the book). Lastly, to imagine consciousness without a sense of touch, it is not enough to imagine suffering from “locked-in” syndrome, because even locked-in syndrome does not
abolish touch altogether. A person (like Bauby) who suffers from such a condition still to some extent feels the “weight” or “mass” of his or her own body; such a person still feels tethered to carnal, terrestrial reality, for if that were not so it would be impossible even to make sense of the experience or possibility of such a condition: one would not feel “locked” or “trapped” in anything at all.

So, a truly disembodied consciousness – a consciousness with no sense of touch – is, if it is possible at all, even more alien than what an experience of locked-in syndrome is like. And, as I have mentioned, there is good reason to think that such a consciousness is not possible. One might say that a disembodied consciousness would at least be conscious of itself, but without a body – without especially any sense of touch or sight – it seems impossible that such a consciousness could differentiate itself from anything, and if one cannot in any way differentiate oneself from anything, then one simply does not have a “self” of which to be conscious in the first place. Without a body and its sensory/perceptual-motor capacities, one cannot conceive of having an existence that can in any way be localized: as Husserl and Merleau-Ponty observe, without any “here,” there can be no sense of any “there,” and vice versa. Thus, it seems that whenever we attempt to imagine a genuinely disembodied existence we always in some way carry our bodies with us; such a “reduction” to a disembodied sphere of being fails because we always end up smuggling into it the very embodiment we are attempting to exclude from it. Even if we concede that a disembodied consciousness is ontologically possible, we still have said enough to show that one of Descartes’ main arguments for dualism is unsound. Descartes asserts (without justification) that I can conceive of myself existing without a body (and that I can therefore doubt that I have a body), but our phenomenological reflection has shown that I cannot conceive of existing without my body; even if, in general, a disembodied mind is logically or
metaphysically possible, the issue for us here is whether we can consistently conceive of it, and that does not seem to be the case. If we consider the experiential content that remains after all bodily constituted meaning has been subtracted from experience, it seems that we are left with hardly anything, and likely nothing, that is recognizable as “experience” at all.

We have to understand that the lived/living body (embodied consciousness) precedes the classical, reflective bifurcation of reality into mind (res cogitans) and body (res extensa), subject and object, and is thus not exclusively one or the other. So, for Merleau-Ponty my corporeality – the embeddedness of my existence in an external, perceptible world – is just as certain as my own consciousness. The certainty of one’s own carnality is implicitly given with the certainty of the Cartesian cogito, for the reflexivity and intentionality of reflective consciousness begins with, and always depends upon, the pre-reflective reflexivity and intentionality of the living body\(^{88}\) in its constitutive exposure to a (carnal) world.\(^{89}\) It is precisely its necessary openness to a (carnal) world.\(^{88}\) In the Phenomenology of Perception, Merleau-Ponty refers to this pre-reflective reflexivity as the “tacit cogito,” for it denotes the presence of the self to itself prior to conceptual or linguistic articulation (see, for example, Phenomenology of Perception, p. 404). However, Merleau-Ponty later abandons this term for a number of reasons. First, the notion of the tacit cogito seems to be too similar to Sartre’s notion of the pre-reflective cogito: while Sartre takes the pre-reflective cogito to mark a radical rupture from the sensible world or a negation of the being of “things,” for Merleau-Ponty the tacit cogito registers our inextricable enmeshment with the sensible world, which is to say our carnality. Thus, the main reason that Merleau-Ponty eventually abandons the term is that it may seem to reinstate the sort of dualistic subject-object framework that he seeks to overcome (whether tacit or explicit, a “cogito” nonetheless seems to be a subject set over and against an object or world). Merleau-Ponty wants to make clear that the pre-reflective reflexivity of the lived body is an event of differentiation (a “dehiscence”) that precedes, institutes, and couples the poles of subject and object. Second, Merleau-Ponty eventually abandons the term due to the extent to which it might connote a sort communion of the self with itself prior to thought (and especially prior to language), the notion of which he rejects. Indeed, he rejects the notion that there is ever anything like a singular, “pure,” “primitive,” prelapsarian origin for the meaning or being of anything, and eventually makes it clear that phenomenology, in attempting to return to lived, pre-reflective experience, paradoxically can never have as its aim returning to anything like a self in unmediated communion with itself prior to thought and language.

\(^{89}\) Though this may initially appear to be a strange comparison, I think that Merleau-Ponty’s argumentative strategy here resembles that of Kant’s refutation of idealism in the Critique of Pure Reason. Of course, given how different these two thinkers are, one should not push this comparison too far, but their respective arguments seem to be similar in at least one important way. Setting aside the details and merits of his proof of an external (mind-independent) world, Kant intends to “turn the tables” on the idealist or skeptic by showing that the very thing that the idealist or skeptic takes to be indubitable (i.e., “inner experience,” or one’s own conscious existence and representations) in fact entails that which he/she denies or doubts (the existence of an external world); that is, Kant attempts to demonstrate that the reality of an external world is just as certain as the reality of one’s own
world that demonstrates the incarnation of consciousness. Thus, “we have no idea of a mind that
would not be doubled with a body…”\footnote{Merleau-Ponty, \textit{The Visible and The Invisible}, p. 259.}

As I mentioned above, the embodiment of consciousness – which, again, ontologically
precedes and founds yet therefore disrupts the traditional opposition between subject and object
– is attested at the most basic, immediate level of experience, but that is also precisely the reason
it is naturally taken for granted and overlooked. Nevertheless, at the most basic or immediate
level of experience there is no absolute disjunction between subject and object, mind and body,
but rather “I apprehend my body as a subject-object, as capable of ‘seeing and suffering,’”\footnote{Merleau-
Ponty, \textit{Phenomenology of Perception}, p. 95.} as simultaneously agential/intentional and passive/affective. What \textit{is} foundationally real is the \textit{lived body}, which enables the very distinction between subject and object in the first place and which
therefore cannot be placed entirely on either side of that distinction:

Naïve consciousness does not see in the soul the cause of the movements of the body nor does it put the
soul in the body as the pilot in his ship. This way of thinking belongs to philosophy; it is not implied in
immediate experience…Our intentions find their natural clothing or their embodiment in movements and
are expressed in them as the thing is expressed in its perspectival aspects. Thus, thinking can be “in the
throat”, as the children questioned by Piaget say it is, without any contradiction or confusion of the
extended and the non-extended, because the throat is not yet an ensemble of vibrating cords capable of
producing the sonorous phenomena of language, because it remains that privileged region of a qualitative
space where my signifying intentions manifest themselves in words.\footnote{Merleau-Ponty, \textit{The Structure of Behavior}, p. 188-189.}

My lived/living body – the body that opens me to a world prior to reflection – is neither a body
“united with” a mind nor a mind “lodged in” a body but is a body that simply \textit{is} minded or
conscious, a body that, precisely by virtue of being a \textit{living} body, immediately expresses what
we call consciousness or intentionality (in much the same way that a work of art expresses a meaning, or in much the same way that the words on this page express a thought). We tend to think that thinking is something we do independently of our bodies, or that thought is a faculty that is somehow “in” our body (say, “in” our heads) but that is nevertheless not “of” or “performed with” or “accomplished through” our bodies. We tend to think of thinking in this way particularly when we withdraw into intense, solitary meditation (as Descartes does at the beginning of his *Meditations*), for this is when we are most prone to forget our bodies. Moreover, we tend to become keenly aware of our bodies precisely when (say, due to injury or illness) they seem to resist our conscious volitions and interrupt our intellectual and imaginative labors, and therefore we view them as *obstacles* to thinking (and acting); in such experiences I find myself alienated from my body, and thus I come to see my body as an object distinct from my conscious, thinking and willing self. As Heidegger famously discusses toward the beginning of *Being and Time*, tools that are “read-to-hand” (i.e., incorporated into and pre-reflectively deployed through our practical schemas and comportments in the world) originally and most often only become “present-to-hand” (i.e., objects of reflective awareness) when they *break down*, and though it is incorrect to categorize the living body as a “tool” (for to do so is already to objectify it), it is nevertheless analogously true that we become aware of our bodies as *objects* when they precisely disrupt or cease to cohere with our habituated modes of bodily coping and comportment.

Of course, the point here is that the lived/living body is irreducible to the body as an object, yet it is the former that we naturally tend to overlook, for it is the latter that most often captivates us, and to which indeed we only have access, reflectively. Thus, as Merleau-Ponty observes, our lived/living bodies are *always* to some extent absent or opaque to us, and for this
reason we typically forget that we are (living) bodies. While I am always aware of my (living) body, this awareness is always only implicit and lacunary:

...I observe external objects with my body, I handle them, examine them, walk around them, but my body itself is a thing which I do not observe: in order to do so, I should need the use of a second body which itself would be unobservable.93

Merleau-Ponty does not mean here that I am never aware of my living body. What he means is that I can never be aware of my living body as an external object (and that my living body is not merely an external object) because it is the very condition of my awareness of external objects in the first place. The living body is certainly not a disengaged spectator, self-transparent subject of experience, or an impenetrable, interior citadel of introspection, but at the same time neither is it merely an external object of experience. As Merleau-Ponty suggests, the lived body is analogous to the punctum caecum that enables the visual perception of an object: “I have the utmost difficulty in catching my living glance when a mirror in the street unexpectedly reflects my image back at me...In so far as it sees or touches the world, my body can therefore be neither seen nor touched.”94 Thus, my living body is always present to me, but it is only present implicitly or unreflectively; it is always present, but it is always a present absence. So, when I am aware of my body as a “mere” object it is not, in fact, my lived body – not the body that I am, or not the body through which I exist – of which I am aware, for again my lived body is precisely that through which I can apprehend anything as an object in the first place. When I reflectively distance myself from my body, it is not my lived body from which I distance myself, for it is only through my lived body that there are any conceivable or real “distances.”95 Interestingly, it is

93 Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, p. 91.
94 Ibid., p. 91-92.
95 It may seem to be the case that Merleau-Ponty simply reiterates Husserl’s distinction between Körper (the body as an external, material object, or what Sartre calls the “body-for-others”) and Leib (the phenomenal or personal body, or what Sartre call the “body-for-itself”, which is to say the body that I experience as my own, the body that I
my non-objectifiable lived/living body that allows me to objectify my body and consequently entertain the notion that I am essentially a disembodied subject. Ironically, then, to pretend to conceive of oneself as a disembodied subject it is in fact necessary to be embodied, and one only conceives of oneself as disembodied insofar as one forgets or represses the lived/living body that one always already is, the bodily being that enables, hence escapes, objectification.

The crucial point that I wish to make here, then, is that when I come to see myself – that is, when I come to see my mind or mental activities – as separable from my body and from the world in which my body is embedded, or when I come to see consciousness, thought, or even “intelligence”96 as something that my body does not or cannot possess and manifest in its own right, it is because I overlook my lived/living body in favor of my body as a physiology textbook would depict it, namely as a dead, vivisected, detached object. However, my living body is

experience “from the inside” as the locus of my sensations and volitional movements), but in fact this is not the case. Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the lived body is sometimes confused with Husserl’s concept of “Leib” or Sartre’s concept of the body-for-itself, and indeed Merleau-Ponty himself often invites this confusion (Husserl, for example, often refers to “Leib” as the “lived” body). While he is certainly influenced by Husserl’s distinction between Körper and Leib, Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the lived body is not strictly equivalent to Husserl’s Leib or Sartre’s body-for-itself. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty develops a sustained critique of Sartre’s (and by extension Husserl’s) distinction between the body-for-itself and the body-for-others, for in the end this distinction amounts to a new dualism (indeed, it introduces what some have called a “body-body” problem). For Sartre, the body-for-itself and the body-for-others belong to mutually exclusive orders of reality; for Sartre, it is not simply that they do not exactly coincide with one another, but rather that they “exist on two incommunicable levels” (see Dillon, Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology, p. 140), and this is precisely what Merleau-Ponty denies. As I have attempted to make clear, for Merleau-Ponty the “lived body” is neither the objective body (Sartre’s “body-for-others”) nor the subjective or phenomenal body (Sartre’s body-for-itself), but rather antecedes and founds the distinction between the two. The lived body precedes and opens up the distinction between subject and object such that I can even mark a distinction between my body as a subject of experience and my body as an object of experience in the first place. For further discussion of Merleau-Ponty’s critique of Sartre’s conception of the lived body, see Dillon’s “Sartre on the Phenomenal Body and Merleau-Ponty’s Critique” (published in The Debate Between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, ed. Jon Stewart (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1998), p. 121-143), and for a clear account of Merleau-Ponty’s critique of Husserl’s conception of the lived body, see Taylor Carman’s “The Body in Husserl and Merleau-Ponty” (published in Philosophical Topics Vol. 27, NO 2, Fall 1999, p. 205-226).

96 I have qualified “intelligence” here in quotation marks for good reason. Though I do think there is a sense in which (in the spirit of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy and also following Nietzsche, who I quote below) we may ascribe “intelligence” to any form of behavior once we have discarded the Cartesian mind/body dichotomy (which is the basis for conceptuizing the body as a mere “machine,” hence as an entity devoid of consciousness and certainly without any characteristic or faculty we could rightly call “intelligence”), Merleau-Ponty is suspicious and critical of the very notion of “intelligence” insofar as it seems unavoidably entangled with precisely a Platonic/Cartesian distinction between consciousness/logos and “mere” materiality/mechanicity. This is precisely what Merleau-Ponty suggests in a passage in his Nature lectures, which I discuss in chapter five.
inherently conscious or intentional. My living body is irreducible to any reflective, objectifying conceptualization, model, or analysis of it for the simple reason that it is not a mere object, or not simply one object among others. A body dissected under a microscope, or a body seized “as between forceps” by the gaze of a surgeon, medical examiner, anatomist, or scientist in a laboratory, is simply not a living body. The body viewed on an operating table, much like the manner in which a mechanic or plumber views a car or a sink, is a derivative abstraction. As Merleau-Ponty suggests in the passage quoted above, it is indeed the case that my (living) body “thinks,” and moreover we can say, as Nietzsche does, “that the body is a great intelligence,” that there is indeed a “rationality” that is distinctive of, and intrinsic to, every kind of living body, an expressivity, intentionality, or communicative agency that precisely constitutes it as such. In short, we do not (or cannot) conceive of our bodies as inherently conscious or “minded” only insofar as we conceive of them as (mere) objects or machines. “Thus,” Merleau-Ponty

97 Merleau-Ponty, The Visible and The Invisible, p. 128.
99 Here, we may notice that Merleau-Ponty suggests an objection to yet another one of Descartes’ famous arguments for dualism, namely the “divisibility” argument. In the Meditations, Descartes argues that since the body is divisible and since the mind is not divisible, it follows (assuming the contrapositive of the principle of the indiscernibility of identicals, i.e., if two things do not share all of the same properties, then they are not one and the same thing), that the body and the mind are separate and distinct things. Descartes’ argument is valid, and criticisms of it typically target the premise that the mind is not divisible. However, Merleau-Ponty suggests a novel (and arguably more compelling) criticism that targets the other premise, which has traditionally been considered unassailable: the premise that the body is divisible. Is this premise true? That depends on what is meant here by “the body.” All objects are extended in space and all things extended in space are divisible, so of course the objective body is divisible, since it is an object extended in space. The problem here is that Descartes either conflates the “objective” body with the lived/living body or does not even distinguish between the two at all. The “objective” body is indeed divisible, but (as we have seen, and as Merleau-Ponty goes to great lengths to demonstrate) the objective body is not the lived/living body, and the latter simply cannot be understood as a partitionable entity or as a “mere” object whose components exist partes extra partes. The lived/living body involves a dynamic, holistic intentional orientation toward, and involvement within, the world that enables any perception or conception of objects in the first place. So, though Descartes is probably correct to assert that a peculiar unity characterizes consciousness and distinguishes its manner of being from that of ordinary material objects, a similar unity also characterizes what Merleau-Ponty calls the lived body. It is true that the mind is not a divisible object, but it is also true that the lived body is not a divisible object, and so the ontological difference between mind and matter – between conscious existence and corporeality – is not, as Merleau-Ponty continually labors to demonstrate, the impassable chasm, or the binary opposition, that Descartes took it to be; at the very least, the supposed difference between mind and body to which Descartes appeals no longer necessarily supports the conclusion that they are
concludes, “the permanence of one’s own body, if only classical psychology had analyzed it, might have led to the body no longer conceived as an object of the world, but as our means of communicating with it…” To begin with a distinction between subject (mind, thought, or self) and object (body) as things that designate and belong to essentially separate orders of being is to reify a derivative abstraction as ontologically primitive, when in fact what is ontologically primitive is the intertwining of the two, or that which is not entirely one or the other but (ambiguously) both: the lived/living body. If we recognize this reification for what it is, we can finally account for the embodiment of subjectivity: we can see that living bodies themselves just are forms of “thought” or subjectivity.

One might notice that Merleau-Ponty’s conception of (embodied) subjectivity is very close to Aristotle’s conception of the soul (psyche), and a comparison of the two may be instructive. In a provocative passage at the end of Book I of the Nichomachean Ethics, Aristotle suggests that reason (logos) and non-reason (to alogon, which encompasses desire and the passions) are two intertwined aspects of the soul, though he does not proceed to argue for this claim:

categorically distinct or separable: the mind is not a divisible object, but neither is the lived body. Thus, Descartes’ argument is only sound if one equates “the body” with the “objective body,” yet they are not the same. In short, Descartes’ argument succeeds in showing that the objective body is separate and distinct from the mind, but the lived body is not the objective body, and so it does not demonstrate that embodiment as such is separate and distinct from mindedness or that mindedness is disembodied. Neither the mind nor the lived body are divisible objects, and this is not an accident: as Merleau-Ponty shows, to be “a mind” is to be a living body, and to be a living body is to be a mind. Descartes assumes that something may be either a body or a mind but not both, and he assumes this because, as we see in his divisibility argument, he equates “the body” with the “objective body,” or because he is only able to conceptualize the body in the manner of a physiologist or forensic pathologist. The lived body is not a mere (divisible) object, yet it is also not not an object either; thus, as we have seen, it defies Descartes’ ontological categories inasmuch as it is neither an object or decomposable mechanism nor an immaterial subject or spirit, and as such it is the only kind of thing that can resolve (or rather dissolve) the problem concerning the relationship between body and mind precisely because it is already, in a sense, both at once, or rather because it is something that antecedes the distinction between both: it is the only kind of mind that is truly conceivable or worthy of the name, namely an embodied mind.

100 Phenomenology of Perception., p. 92.
Now some things about the soul are said in an adequate way even in popular writings, and one ought to make use of them, for example, that there is an irrational part of the soul and a part having reason. Whether these are distinct in the same manner as the parts of the body, or of any divisible thing, or else two in meaning while they are inseparable in nature, as are the convex and the concave in the circumference of a circle, makes no difference for the present concern.101

Though Aristotle does not pursue this point here, I think it is clear that it is one that he accepts; indeed, his suggestion that the rational and irrational “parts” of the soul may not, in fact, be properly understood as “parts” at all makes a very significant difference. Aristotle’s comparison of the relationship between reason and non-reason in the human soul to the relationship between the convex and the concave in the circumference of a circle marks a profound departure from the traditional, Platonic/Cartesian account of rationality (and I think that it is indispensable for understanding the account of human praxis and virtue he develops elsewhere). It is clear that Aristotle conceives of the relationship between the rational and non-rational “parts” of the soul in this way because it is clear that he does not conceive of the soul as a partitionable entity at all; it is not, for him, a “thing” composed of discrete, independent parts (often in agonistic competition with one another), and it is also not something that descends into and magically animates the body like a pilot in a ship. In De Anima, Aristotle applies his hylemorphic understanding of natural beings (developed in the Physics and in the Metaphysics) to a special class of natural beings: living (or ensouled) beings. Aristotle maintains that the soul just is the actualization (energeia, or “being-at-work”) of a living body, the organic ordering and expression of vital bodily powers and processes. Thus, the human soul just is the actualization or putting-to-work of the potentialities of a human body. While the human soul, then, is not to be strictly identified with the human body, it is not “disembodied” either, for it is precisely the characteristic movement or activity of a human body, the functional unfolding or mobilization of a human

body’s distinctive manner of being-in-the-world. Similarly, grasping is not the same as the hand itself that grasps, but it is the enactment of a material power endemic to the hand as such. For Aristotle, the soul can no more be separated from the body than the activity or gesture of grasping can be separated from the hand, or seeing from the eye, or digestion from the stomach. In short, the soul is related to the body as actualization is related to potency, or as form is related to matter. The soul is not radically disjunct from the body, for it is precisely the actualization of the potentialities of a living body, potentialities for a certain style of embodied coping. The human soul, then, should not be understood “substantially” (as a “thing with parts”) but verbally, as a special kind of self-organizing movement (kinesis) or work (ergon). This means that when Aristotle speaks of “parts” of the soul, these should be understood not as the “parts” of an entity but as moments of a movement, activity, or process. Thus, as Aristotle remarks, soul and body are – like the convex and concave – “two in meaning” but inseparable in nature, conceptually distinguishable – indeed irreducibly different – yet ontologically interwoven or copresent aspects of one and the same phenomenon. Remarkably (and perhaps not coincidentally), we find that Merleau-Ponty also claims that the relation between mind and body is analogous to the relation between the concave and the convex:

The bond between soul and body is not a parallelism...it is to be understood as the bond between the convex and the concave, between the solid vault and the hollow it forms – No correspondence (parallelism or of pure occasionalism) is to be sought between what takes place “in the body” and what takes place “in the soul” in perception...the soul is planted in the body as the stake in the ground, without point by point correspondence between ground and stake – or rather: the soul is the hollow of the body, the body is the distention of the soul. The soul adheres to the body as their signification adheres to the cultural things, whose reverse or other side it is.”102

Thus, for Merleau-Ponty (and similarly for Aristotle), mind and body, consciousness and behavior are distinct yet inseparable and co-given. This is why Merleau-Ponty refers to

102 The Visible and The Invisible, p. 232-233.
consciousness here as a “hollow,” for it is distinct from the body yet nevertheless immanent “within” it; it is other than “brute” matter yet not a “nihilation” of materiality; it is not pure nothingness, but neither is it a mere thing.

There is, then, a kind of “thinking” or “intelligence” that is immediately manifested in and through the behavior of a living, behaving body, or in the manner in which a living body copes with its world and signifies itself as such. This is not to say that there is no distinction at all between my subjectivity and my (living) body (which would be reductive), but it is to say that my subjectivity is inseparable from, and enacted by, my living body. Thus, “…we must go back to the working, actual body – not the body as a chunk of space or a bundle of functions but the body which is an intertwining of vision and movement…We see only what we look at. What would vision be without eye movement? And how could the movement of the eyes bring things together if the movement were blind? If it were only a reflex? If it did not have its antennae, its clairvoyance? If vision were not prefigured in it?“103 The dynamic comportments, the affective and projective engagements of a living body – even the “simple,” unreflective glances and adjustments of our eyes – are the most basic expressions of intentionality. The holistic, pre-conceptual understanding that a living body has of its “parts” and capacities in relation to one another and to other things, and the inexorable expression of such an understanding in and through its projects, habits, and behavior, just is consciousness, intentionality, “thinking,” or “intelligence” at the foundational level. For example, I am able to handle things without having to calculate (as a computer program or robot would) the precise distances and angles that obtain between them and the relevant parts of my body, nor do I need to take stock of my body’s powers in order to deploy them in various actions and projects. I can reach for and take hold of

103 “Eye and Mind”, in The Primacy of Perception, p. 162.
the computer mouse beside my keyboard, I can cross my legs and adjust the glasses on my face and scratch my head, I can move from the refrigerator in my kitchen to my oven and then from my kitchen to my bedroom, and so on, all without any knowledge of trigonometry or kinesiology:

If I stand holding my pipe in my closed hand, the position of my hand is not determined discursively by the angle which it makes with my forearm, and my forearm with my upper arm, and my upper arm my trunk, and my trunk with the ground. I know indubitably where my pipe is, and thereby I know where my hand and my body are, as primitive man in the desert is always able to take his bearings immediately without having to cast his mind back, and add up distances covered and deviations made since setting off.\(^\text{104}\)

Thus, “my body has its world, or understands its world, without having to make use of my ‘symbolic’ or ‘objectifying’ functions,”\(^\text{105}\) and to not consider this manner of “having” or “understanding” a world to be consciousness or thought “worthy of the name” – to not see mindedness “in” the comportments of a living body, or to not see behavior as the enactment or presencing of subjectivity – is either to assume the living body to be a mere thoughtless mechanism (which is itself to assume a dualistic conception of the distinction between the being of consciousness and the being of the body), or it is to assume that perceiving, thinking, and “knowing” is accomplished by a subject reflectively set over and against an object (or representation), that the “subject” of perception, thought, and knowledge is the classical “epistemological subject” who stands absolutely detached from the things he/she seeks or claims to know. However, we have seen that lived, embodied experience – that the relation between consciousness and the body and between embodied consciousness and the world – is below or beyond such binaries and abstractions. So, as Merleau-Ponty suggests, we can rightfully say that the hands that grasp, search, caress, or gesticulate “think,” that the feet and legs that walk or

\(^{104}\) Phenomenology of Perception, p. 100.

\(^{105}\) Ibid., p. 140.
dance “think,” that the eyes that survey a landscape or a painting or that shed tears in sorrow or joy “think,” that the ears that perk up to listen to something amid clamor and that immediately hear meaning in the sounds of the world “think,” that the throat that stretches to speak or sing “thinks,” that the body that orients itself in space, that fluidly navigates and adjusts itself to its milieu, that perceives, greets, and mimics other bodies as they do the same, that becomes tense with fear or dread, that becomes ecstatic with love and desire, that extends itself beyond its skin into various tools or instruments,\textsuperscript{106} “thinks.” It is not an immaterial, homuncular ego – not an absolutely disengaged (and therefore disembodied) spectator or “kosmotheoros”\textsuperscript{107} – that thinks: it is the whole living body in its affective, motivated, meaning-laden, synergistic involvements with a world and with other living bodies that does so; it is the living body that is always a form and therefore direct manifestation of thought itself.

With respect to the topic under discussion here, the most crucial point, then, is this: since we can (and must) conceive of subjectivity as genuinely embodied, my experiences of other subjectivities are no longer inexplicable or doubtable. Since subjectivity is grounded in and

\textsuperscript{106} One such example that Merleau-Ponty employs is the way that blind people can in-corporate walking sticks into their corporeal schemas; through practice and skillful coping, a walking stick becomes an extension of a blind-person’s body, and everyone can (to greater and lesser degrees) master instruments in this way. “…Those actions in which I habitually engage,” Merleau-Ponty writes, “incorporate their instruments into themselves and make them play a part in the original structure of my own body” (\textit{Phenomenology of Perception}, p. 91). Thus, there comes a point at which a blind person’s walking stick is no longer an “instrument” at all: the walking stick becomes a part of the blind person’s corporeal schema: it becomes as much a part of the structure of his or her body as is the arm with which he or she wields it:

Once the stick has become a familiar instrument, the world of feelable things recedes and now begins, not at the outer skin of the hand, but at the end of the stick…Habit does not \textit{consist} in interpreting the pressures of the stick on the hand as indications of certain positions of the stick, and these as signs of an external object, since it relieves us of the necessity of doing so. The pressures on the hand and the stick are no longer given; the stick is no longer an object perceived by the blind man, but an instrument with which he perceives. It is a bodily auxiliary, and extension of the bodily synthesis. - ibid., p. 152.

This in-corporation (or habituation) of instruments is one of the best examples of the expressivity of the body, for it shows that the body does not end at the skin; it shows that the body can prosthetically extend and transform itself, that the structure of my body is never \textit{entirely} fixed, that living flesh is not a brute substance but rather a dynamic, responsive, and labile power or style of existence.

\textsuperscript{107} See e.g., Merleau-Ponty, \textit{The Visible and the Invisible}, p. 113.
enacted through the living body – since every living body is inherently conscious or intentional – I immediately (non-inferentially) encounter other subjectivities when I encounter other living bodies: I encounter other subjectivities or intentionalities in and through the living bodies and behaviors with which they are suffused and co-given as such. The fact that consciousness is not entirely “private” or self-enclosed – that is, the fact that consciousness is not wholly divorced from materiality or exteriority but is rather internally coupled with it – is not only a necessary condition for consciousness as such, but is also especially a necessary condition for any awareness of other consciousnesses. It is only because subjectivity is essentially embodied and engaged with a world – it is only because “subjectivity is not motionless identity with itself,”\(^{108}\) or it is only because “knowledge and communication sublimate rather than suppress our incarnation”\(^ {109}\) – that not only subjectivity but also intersubjectivity is possible.\(^ {110}\) As I will further elaborate below, if the mind is necessarily incarnate, then there is no longer a “problem of other minds.” If consciousness is necessarily “in” the flesh, then my awareness and putative knowledge of other consciousnesses is no longer intractably mysterious or problematic; moreover, my awareness or knowledge of other consciousnesses is no longer restricted to an awareness or knowledge of other human consciousnesses, for non-human animals are living bodies (that is, incarnate consciousnesses) as well. We can solve (or dissolve) the problem of other minds (human and non-human alike) if and only if we overcome dualism, or if and only if we affirm and are able to conceptualize rigorously the embodiment of thought and consciousness, the flesh of the mind that already roots it in symbiosis with the world and with other (enfleshed) minds.


\(^{110}\) As I will later elaborate, this is also why subjectivity is always already intersubjectivity.
Among the many arguments Merleau-Ponty provides against dualism, perhaps the one that is most important here is the one that might initially appear to beg the question against the Cartesian skeptic and dualist, namely one whose central premise precisely affirms the commonly accepted fact that we have knowledge, or veridical awareness, of other subjectivities. In short, the argument in question is that since dualism makes intersubjectivity – any genuine knowledge or awareness of others – impossible, and since it is clear that we are always, inextricably and necessarily, embedded in real webs intersubjective relationships, it follows that dualism must be false. This argument is valid and its premises are true. It is the second premise, of course, that would seem to beg the question against the Cartesian skeptic or dualist, yet it is one that has already been implicitly addressed and independently supported in the foregoing discussion of Merleau-Ponty’s critique of Cartesian ontology, and it is one I will elaborate further in chapter five, where I will articulate the profound ontological consequences of Merleau-Ponty’s account of intersubjectivity, namely how such an account leads Merleau-Ponty to formulate an ontology of radical difference, which is also to say an ontology of radical community. For now, however, I wish to take some time to examine in further detail the premise that dualism makes intersubjectivity impossible, or that it is impossible to account for our experiences and knowledge of “other minds” from within a Cartesian framework.

As we have seen, Merleau-Ponty argues that the only way to overcome skepticism concerning other minds is to overcome the Cartesian ontological presuppositions that motivate and entail it. In order to refute skepticism about other minds, it is not only sufficient but also necessary to refute dualism, and this is precisely what Merleau-Ponty seeks to do in his early works. So far, however, while we have seen Merleau-Ponty’s case for why refuting dualism is sufficient for refuting skepticism concerning other minds, we have not yet discussed in much
depth why, for him, it also necessary to refute dualism in order to refute other-minds skepticism. So, it may seem that there is yet the possibility that one may reject such skepticism without having to reject the dualism that usually supports it. However, for Merleau-Ponty there is no such possibility: dualism logically renders any conception or awareness of otherness impossible. Dualism is essentially inconsistent with any awareness or supposed knowledge of other minds.

So, on the one hand, Merleau-Ponty aims to dismantle Cartesian solipsism (and by extension, as we will see, the anthropocentrism and classical liberal individualism it founds and of which it is the purest expression) by dismantling the dualism upon which it depends, yet on the other hand Merleau-Ponty also advances an argument from the opposite direction: while he presents the argument that Cartesian solipsism is false because dualism is false, so too does he argue that dualism is false because Cartesian solipsism is false. One of the key premises of the latter argument is one that has just been mentioned, namely that dualism renders any awareness or conception of alterity logically and phenomenologically impossible. And though Merleau-Ponty’s defense of this premise has already been mentioned briefly, I think it is important to take some time to explicate it more fully by considering his critique of traditional efforts to ground the possibility of our awareness and knowledge of other minds. The reason for this is not only that Merleau-Ponty’s repudiation of traditional attempts to ground our supposed knowledge of other minds not only answers potential lingering objections to his claim that dualism is essentially inconsistent with such knowledge, but also that it directly informs – indeed, logically entails – his subsequent repudiation of anthropocentric delimitations of such knowledge. In this way we will be able to develop a better understanding not only of Merleau-Ponty’s positive alternative to conventional accounts of our knowledge of other minds but also of the extent to
which this alternative radically challenges conventionally assumed and speciously (and speciesistly) imposed boundaries concerning who or what may count as “other” or as “minded.”

Cartesian dualism engenders a number of problems that Descartes himself was unable to solve and that are, in fact, inherently unsolvable from within a Cartesian or dualistic framework. If consciousness is ontologically divorced from materiality or from “nature,” if “subject” and “object” designate and belong to entirely separate, irreconcilable domains of existence, then by definition there is no possible causal, ontological, or epistemic relationship between them. This point is essentially tautological, yet it has been, and even continues to be, frequently overlooked. If mind is separate from body and world, then it is impossible to explain how, for example, one can claim to “know” that anything “in” the mind – that the content of any thought or experience, that any perception or appearance or “representation” – “corresponds” to anything outside of it, and it is likewise impossible for anything thus defined as “mental” to appear or have any sort of place among those things categorically opposed to it as mere “things,” no place at all among those things defined as “material” or “natural.” Indeed, on these terms, one cannot claim to know that there is anything “outside” one’s purely internal theatre of appearances – any material, natural world external to consciousness – in the first place. If I may only have direct cognitive access to my own mind, then I can never have direct, certain knowledge of anything that would be beyond it: anything outside my own mind and its representations would be accessible only indirectly and would therefore be quite far removed from the realm of certainty. Dualism simply posits consciousness as a sphere of impregnable isolation, as an “inside” with no “outside”; like Narcissus, it is frozen within its own reflection upon itself, eternally imprisoned within its own relationship with itself, forever closed off from anything that might be outside or other than itself. Therefore, we are left with skepticism concerning not only the putative existence of any
specific external entity or state of affairs (including, in particular, other people and their “inner” lives), but also concerning the existence of an external, material world in the first place.

Nevertheless, in the wake of Cartesian dualism, many philosophers attempted to construct a bridge between mind/subject and body/object, between self and world, or between the ‘interior’ and the ‘exterior.’ All such attempts, however, were doomed to fail for the simple (again, tautological) reason that “separate” means separate: once mind is sundered from body/world, once the interior domain of conscious experience is absolutely segregated from the domain of exterior things and phenomena, one will never be able to bring them together. In general, if two kinds of things are defined as essentially “separate and distinct” (as Descartes defines the mental and the material), then it will be a fool’s errand – indeed, a category mistake – ever to attempt to unite or reconcile them. Cartesian ontology carves a diremption in Being that can never, in principle, be overcome or sutured. However well-intentioned it may have been for a number of post-Cartesian thinkers to attempt to salvage or rationally ground from within a dualistic, Cartesian framework our supposed knowledge of the existence of extra-mental things such as material objects, a material world, or other minds, all such attempts seem to forget what “separate and distinct” means, or they forget the theoretical commitments that make knowledge of such things problematic in the first place; to his credit, Descartes himself did not forget. Descartes understood the implications of his dualism, and for this reason he (in)famously needed to rely upon an appeal to divine beneficence in order to neutralize the skepticism and solipsism that his ontology otherwise entails. Descartes also (in)famously denied that animals had minds (or “souls”), and consequently regarded them as nothing more than machines; yet, in the end it was merely certain theological commitments and prejudices – not genuine logical consistency – that permitted him not to extend this same skepticism or anti-realism to other (apparent) humans.
In any case, Descartes is able to claim that he knows that other human bodies are “ensouled” only because God exists and would naturally never deceive him about such an irresistible, “clear and distinct” notion. Of course, if one needs to smuggle in God Himself as a *deus ex machina* in order to rescue one’s philosophy from unacceptable and even absurd logical consequences, then logically one’s philosophy likely is not worth rescuing, or is not able to be rescued, in the first place.

Merleau-Ponty understands that in order to solve such problems, it is necessary to abandon the erroneous ontological commitments, or the entire conceptual framework, that generates them. That is to say, in order to “solve” such problems one must, in fact, *dissolve* them by repudiating the matrix of false assumptions and abstractions that entail them in the first place. Among the big, “scandalous” problems we inherit from Cartesian dualism is, again, the “problem of other minds.” In case the point is not already sufficiently clear, it is worth elaborating that this problem is logically entailed by mind/body dualism and is therefore one that cannot be solved from a dualistic starting point or from within a dualistic conceptual schema; it can only be “solved” by genuinely dismantling dualism itself, or by refusing to accept from the start a categorical, binary opposition between subject and object, interiority and exteriority,

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111 An apposite response on the part of a critic of Descartes’ view of animals might have been to insist that he/she has a “clear and distinct” idea that animals do indeed have minds based upon all of the complex and diverse behaviors they exhibit, so why would God deceive him/her about that? What would Descartes have been able to say in response to someone who claimed to possess a “clear and distinct” notion that animals have minds? Is there any argument he could provide, without begging the question, that would be able to establish that one could not have such a clear and distinct idea? In other words, Descartes would seem to have to insist that one cannot have a clear and distinct idea that animals have souls because it is obviously false that they do, but of course that is exactly the point that the critic denies in the first place. So, in the end it seems that the only reply Descartes would be able to offer would be simply to assert without argument that God only imbued humans with souls, which precisely lays bare the arbitrary prejudice upon which his denial of animal mindedness rests (and which is rather ironic given that Descartes’ explicit project is to establish a science of knowledge independent of theological authority or revelation, as ultimately the latter is what he would have to rely upon in order to insist that animals lack souls).
consciousness and world. It is, of course, precisely this radical project that occupies Merleau-Ponty’s entire philosophical career.

However, a considerable number of philosophers have in fact sought to resolve the problem of other minds without abandoning dualism. In many such cases, it is not so much that these philosophers explicitly embrace a traditional dualistic metaphysics and seek to render our knowledge of other minds consistent with it, but rather that they simply attempt to resolve the problem in such a way that presupposes or (re)inscribes a dualistic standpoint. At any rate, it is precisely just such a “solution” to the problem of other minds that dominated discussion of the problem, and which was taken to be the only conceivable albeit imperfect solution to it, until the development of phenomenology in the early twentieth century. The supposed solution in question is the famous argument from analogy for other minds, according to which knowledge of other minds may be genuinely founded inductively, or more specifically may be considered a particular kind of warranted analogical inference: namely, the inference that another body is conscious because it exhibits movements and behaviors that are typically if not invariably associated with conscious states or volitions in one’s own case. Bertrand Russell advances a representative version of this argument:

From subjective observation I know that A, which is a thought or feeling, causes B, which is a bodily act, e.g., a statement. I know also that, whenever B is an act of my own body, A is its cause. I now observe an act of the kind B in a body not my own, and I am having no thought or feeling of the kind A. But I still believe, on the basis of self-observation, that only A can cause B; I therefore infer that there was an A which caused B, though it was not an A that I could observe. On this ground I infer that other people’s bodies are associated with minds, which resemble mine in proportion as their bodily behavior resembles my own.\textsuperscript{112}

That is to say, I know in my own case, introspectively, that my mental states or volitions are commonly accompanied by, and are even in most cases apparently the proximate causes of, various bodily states, movements, and behaviors, and so since I observe other bodies like mine in

appearance and constitution move and behave in the world in ways similar to my own, I may	rightfully infer that these other bodies are likewise conscious, that these other bodies I see
moving about the world around me are not, as Descartes wondered, mere “automata” but are
residences of minds as well. Of course, as Russell himself admits, it is never certain that the
movements or behaviors of other bodies might not have causes different from the mental or
volitional kind of which I am aware in my own case. Though I must admit that my knowledge
of the existence of others falls quite short of the apodicticity that characterizes my knowledge of
my own existence, I may claim to possess genuine knowledge of the existence of others
nonetheless, provided I do not take, as Descartes did, apodicticity to be a necessary condition of
knowledge. Absolute certitude is, after all, far too high a bar for knowledge. Knowledge need not
be founded upon pure deduction or bear the imprint of a priori indubitability. As A.J. Ayer
remarks in an essay in which he elaborates and defends his own version of the argument from
analogy:

Let us allow it to be necessarily true that I cannot know the experiences of others in the way that I know my own. It
by no means follows that I cannot have good reasons to believe in their existence. Such reasons will indeed be

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113 The classical “problem of interaction” also clearly rears its head here. In the passage cited above, Russell does
seem to suppose that mental states may be the causes of bodily effects. Of course, any argument from analogy for
other minds (such as the one that Russell himself proposes) presupposes a dualistic conception of mind and body
that renders any sort of causal interaction between them impossible in principle. That is, the argument from analogy
assumes that mind and body are essentially disjunct such that it is impossible for a body to directly manifest mental
states or characteristics; this is, after all, the reason why it is assumed in the first place that we can only ever infer,
rather than know by direct acquaintance, that a body possesses a mind. The problem, of course, is that this assumed
disjunction between mind and body is inconsistent with the notion that states of the former may causally interact
with states of the latter, and vice versa.

Such a problem, however, may not be fatal, for it may be replied that all that is necessary to warrant such
an analogical inference are frequently observed correlations between mental states and bodily appearances or
movements. It is sufficient to observe in one’s own case that certain bodily behaviors and phenomena tend to follow,
or to be accompanied by, certain mental states. One need not be committed to the existence of a robust, traditional
causal connection between mental and bodily/behavioral phenomena. Thus, it is noteworthy that David Hume, who
of course famously suggests that it is fallacious to infer what we call “causality” from observed spatiotemporal
contiguities, provides an argument from analogy not only for the existence of other human minds but also for the
existence of animal minds (for this argument, see Hume’s A Treatise of Human Nature, “Of The Reason of
Animals”). Such arguments from analogy, then, need not assume any sort of conventional causal interaction
between mind and body, and are fatally flawed for other reasons (which I discuss below).
supplied to me by experiences of my own…But they may be good reasons nonetheless. Even if knowledge is defined so strictly that one can never rightly claim to know what others think or feel, it will be true that we can attain to states of highly probable opinion. It may well be thought perverse to insist on speaking of highly probable opinion in cases where attention to ordinary usage should lead us to speak of knowledge; but this is not a point of any great importance. What is important is that many of the statements which one makes about the experiences of others are fully justifiable on the basis of one’s own.

Even though absolute certitude is surely great if we can acquire it, most would feel compelled to admit that we may genuinely “know” – or at least may justifiably believe – things with probability rather than strict certainty or logical necessity, and that induction is also, therefore, a legitimate source of knowledge; in fact, it is the source of most of what passes as “everyday,” “common sense” articles of knowledge. Though there are perhaps a number of things that we can and do indeed know with absolute certitude, we need not stipulate that such certitude is required for all plausible instances of knowledge, for it seems that there are many kinds of things we may reasonably claim to know on the basis of an adequate degree of probability (such as scientific principles and predictable everyday states of affairs). If the weight of our evidence or the strength of our reasons suffices to make it at least probable that a claim is true, so too does it suffice to establish that we “know” (or are at least justified in believing) it to be so. Evidence may be defeasible yet strong nonetheless.

So, there are all kinds of things that we may rightly claim to know, and that we can only know, inductively, and other minds are simply one of these things. As Ayer suggests, if our lack of absolute certitude concerning other sorts of truths we come to believe through induction (such as the fact that the sun will rise tomorrow) does not distress us, neither should our lack of absolute certitude concerning the existence of other minds. Claims concerning the content and mere existence of other minds may be, and indeed can only be, justified through analogical

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induction, but this is sufficient to ward off skepticism or solipsism. I may not be able to know
that others exist in the same way or with the same certitude that I know my own existence and
interior life, yet analogical reasoning of the sort elaborated above is nevertheless adequate to
establish that I know that others exist, that other interiorities likewise accompany and animate
those bodies that constantly address me in the drama and flow of everyday experience.

Though it has been subjected to much debate and criticism and has undergone a number
of revisions and refinements as a result, some version of this argument from analogy for other
minds is advanced by numerous post-Cartesian thinkers, from Bishop Berkeley and David Hume
to John Stuart Mill, A.J. Ayer, and Bertrand Russell. Indeed, the merits of this argument, or at
least in general the merits of founding knowledge of other minds on the basis of some form of
induction, continue to be discussed today. Since Cartesianism is supposed to be long dead, it is
remarkable that discussions of the problem of other minds and of attempted inductive solutions
to it persist in contemporary epistemology and philosophy of mind. In fact, it is largely taken for
granted that some form of inductive reasoning is the only conceivable way to establish
knowledge of other minds, and to that extent the specter of Cartesian dualism has yet to be
exorcised.

Here, I am not going to engage all of these contemporary discussions concerning the
problem of other minds and analogical or inductive solutions to it. I will not elaborate all of the
different, more refined and nuanced formulations of the classical argument from analogy that
have been proposed, nor will I discuss all of the criticisms of such arguments that have been
made. The point I wish to draw our attention to here is simply that if any such argument from
analogy for other minds succeeds, then it is not the case that dualism condemns us to solipsism.
If it is possible to establish analogically our knowledge of the existence of others, then whatever
other reasons one may have to repudiate Cartesian metaphysics, the threat of “the incomparable monster of solipsism”\textsuperscript{115} cannot be one of them (as indeed it is for Merleau-Ponty). Merleau-Ponty, again, argues that dualism renders knowledge or even any rudimentary perception of otherness impossible in principle, but if that is correct, it must be the case that all efforts to found one’s knowledge or perception of otherness upon inductive inference must fail, for such efforts are precisely consistent with, and are in fact necessitated by, a dualistic conceptual framework. So, in order to vindicate my (and Merleau-Ponty’s) contention that knowledge of other minds, or that the basic presence of others in experience, requires a radical alternative to Cartesian ontology, it is necessary to examine attempts to secure such knowledge on inductive grounds and to show why they fail (as indeed Merleau-Ponty himself does in nearly every work in which he addresses intersubjectivity).

As we have seen, since a Cartesian account of the nature of consciousness entails that I can only ever have direct access to my own consciousness, so too does it entail that I can only ever, at best, have indirect access to other consciousnesses. This means that if one wishes to rescue Cartesianism from solipsism, one must provide an account of how this indirect access to other consciousnesses is possible, which is to say one must explain how it is possible for one’s supposed knowledge of other consciousnesses to be based upon inductive inference. The aforementioned argument from analogy is precisely the primary argument that aims to establish how it is possible to know that other minds exist when the only mind to which I have direct or immediate access is my own. For these reasons, Merleau-Ponty in fact explicitly addresses supposed analogical solutions to the problem of other minds and aims to show that all such solutions are irremediably flawed. Although, as I have mentioned, there a number of different

versions of the argument from analogy that have been propounded, Merleau-Ponty’s criticisms apply to all conceivable versions of it, and thus to all conceivable attempts to rescue dualism from solipsism. Ultimately, then, if his criticisms of such arguments are correct, Merleau-Ponty’s contention that dualism necessarily renders others cognitively and experientially inaccessible, and that it is therefore necessary to dismantle dualism in order to provide a cogent account of not only subjectivity but also especially of intersubjectivity, is justified. Moreover, Merleau-Ponty’s positive, phenomenological alternative to traditional approaches to the problem of other minds destroys not only skepticism concerning other human minds but skepticism concerning non-human minds as well, and thus has profound implications for how we understand the nature and scope of intersubjectivity; it begins to help us see, or helps us relearn to see, the community of living bodies (or of embodied minds) that allows us to withdraw into meditation and imagine ourselves as alone or as one of a kind – as either the only individual mind, or as the only generic kind of mind, in the world – in the first place.

Dualism abolishes my access to anything outside my first-person perspective, which of course includes not only my access to an external, material world, but also my access to others who might, and who in fact do, share this world with me. Dualism defines consciousness as utterly disembodied, or as ontologically excluded from anything considered “material” or “sensible” or externally observable, which means it also defines consciousness as a purely internal and uniquely private space of appearances and representations, as that which exclusively and only has direct access itself. Dualism, therefore, entails that the mind is only ever directly accessible from its own immanent, first-person vantage point, which is to say the only mind to which I may have direct and immediate, hence certain, access – the only mind whose existence and states of being I can genuinely claim to know for sure – is my own. Consciousness is
knowable only introspectively, never extrospectively. Since consciousness is taken to be essentially unavailable to direct public perception or scrutiny, it follows that I may only ever be acquainted with other minds at best indirectly, which is to say inferentially. When I encounter others in the world, I only directly encounter their bodies, so if we accept a classical dichotomy between mind and body, it follows that I never directly encounter an other’s mind when I encounter his or her body. The body will always stand as a barrier – never a direct bridge – between my consciousness and the consciousness of an ostensible Other. So, insofar as I take a body to be conscious or “minded” – insofar as I take a body to be the body of a genuine “Other” – it can only be because this body somehow indirectly signifies its consciousness or alterity, or it can only be because this body somehow motivates me to infer, or to posit through a mediated act of judgment rather than through immediate, direct acquaintance, its consciousness or alterity.

So, it is clear enough that if mind and body are relegated to mutually exclusive domains of being, or if the only mind to which I have direct and immediate access is my own, then the body of a supposed other can never afford me direct access to that other’s mind (or otherness). But how, then, is it really possible to have any epistemic or perceptual access to the existence of others? The traditional answer, as we have seen, is our capacity for analogical inference. As Merleau-Ponty tells us, however, there is a crucial, fundamental question (which has traditionally been overlooked) concerning how such analogical inferences themselves are possible. It is typically assumed or asserted without argument that bodily appearances, expressions, or movements naturally constitute evidence that moves us to posit (analogically) an animating consciousness beyond, “behind,” or “within” them. But why or how would anything I observe from a “third-person” perspective ever prompt me to infer the existence of another consciousness, provided that the very characteristics taken to be essential to consciousness are
defined as precisely inaccessible from a “third-person” perspective? If the features that uniquely define consciousness cannot be disclosed from a third-person perspective – if indeed consciousness is condemned to its own unique, internal first-person perspective – then how is any “second-person” perspective possible? How in fact can the ‘I’ ever perceive a ‘Thou’ if anything other than itself must be ontologically categorized as merely an ‘it’? How, indeed, would one ever acquire a sense or concept of alterity in the first place, such that one might ever harbor doubts, or ever be prompted to make any inferences concerning, the existence and interior lives of others? As Merleau-Ponty argues, if we begin with an opposition between subject and object, and if we define the subject in terms of characteristics that are essentially perceptible only from within the subjectivity of the subject itself, then it is impossible for the subject ever to perceive anything outside itself that would for it be anything other than a mere object; that is, it would be impossible for a subject ever to perceive another subject, for nothing in the external world would exhibit those characteristics defined as essential and exclusive to subjectivity:

Perhaps we can say that it [my cogito] is ‘transferable’ to others. But then how could such a transfer ever be brought about? What spectacle can ever validly induce me to posit outside myself that mode of existence the whole significance of which demands that it be grasped from within? Unless I learn within myself the junction of the for itself and the in itself, none of those mechanisms called other bodies will ever be able to come to life; unless I have an exterior others have no interior. The plurality of consciousness is impossible if I have an absolute consciousness of myself…if it is perfect, the contact of my thought with itself seals me within myself, and prevents me from ever feeling that anything eludes my grasp.116

Merleau-Ponty’s trenchant criticism of arguments from analogy for other minds largely consists, then, in indicating that if dualism is strictly accepted, even mere “correlations” between mental states and bodily appearances that I observe in my own case would not logically or epistemically warrant the analogical inference that other bodies have minds, for if dualism were true – if consciousness really were divorced from embodiment or materiality – there would be no reason

why any bodily or material phenomena would or should ever register as relevant evidence, or as any sort of signifier, of consciousness in the first place. That is to say, even if I observe certain regular correlations between certain mental states and certain physical states or movements in my own case, if I am truly committed to a radical ontological division between the mental and the physical, why would I ever take any physical states or movements to bear any meaningful relationship to the structures and features of my inner, subjective life? And why moreover would they ever register to me as intelligible indications of other inner lives? Why or how would a bodily movement or appearance function as an outward signifier of some internal, mental signified? These questions, of course, are rhetorical, for indeed if I adhere to dualism consistently, then nothing that belongs to the body or to the outer, material world could or would ever count as having any intelligible relationship to anything that belongs to consciousness. As M.C. Dillon explains, there is simply no escape from solipsism that would be logically consistent with a Cartesian conception of consciousness:

If one takes the Cartesian cogito as one’s philosophical foundation…then the alter ego becomes a problem that cannot be solved. The Cartesian cogito, thought reflecting thematically on itself, functions as the paradigm of what it is to be a conscious subject and how it is possible to know a conscious subject. But these two aspects coincide in the Cartesian cogito in such a way that, if one accepts the paradigm, then the only way to know a conscious subject is to be that conscious subject reflecting on itself…because I cannot witness your cogito, I cannot know that you exist as a thinking thing. Consequently, if one defines human being as res cogitans, the only human being I can be certain is a human being is myself. Solipsism is intrinsic to Cartesian thought.\[117\]

Thus, as Merleau-Ponty claims, it is only possible to perceive (and thus ever be motivated or in a position to infer) that other bodies are minded if from the start “I learn within myself the junction of the for-itself and the in-itself,” that is, only if I “know” that mind and body are in fact not divorced or separable from one another through the very phenomenon of my own lived/living body, which is precisely the intertwining of the two before any incision of reflective thought.

\[117\] Dillon, Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology, p. 113.
categorizes them as otherwise. If it is at all possible for me to perceive or comprehend any material, bodily being as conscious, then I must, at the very least, be pre-reflectively aware of consciousness as precisely a modality of material, bodily being. The only way it is possible to perceive or infer that an “object” in the world is indeed a “subject” is if, in fact, we already know through lived experience that to be a “subject” is precisely not to stand or exist in opposition to the being of objects – that to be a subject is not to be a “pure” subject, or a subject such as it has been traditionally conceived – but is rather to be already incarnate, already suffused with and situated through flesh, already ecstatic or inherently coupled with an irrecusable exteriority. In short, in order for a “subject” to perceive an “object” as another subject it is necessary that the former not be a “pure” subject and that the latter not be a “mere” object but rather that they both be (to put it imperfectly, as Merleau-Ponty does on a number of occasions) at once a “subject-object,”\textsuperscript{118} which is to say neither exclusively one nor the other but something else altogether, namely (as I have already elaborated) a \textit{living body}. Only if interiority is not purely “interior” but also always already inextricably enmeshed with exteriority (i.e., with flesh or a body) may the exteriority of a supposed other ever disclose that other’s interiority or otherness. In general, one simply cannot sunder consciousness from the external, material or natural world and then claim it is possible for it to appear or have any place there. Only if consciousness is truly embodied – which is to say, only if consciousness is not “in” a body but is rather a form and enactment of bodily existence itself – may a body ever manifest consciousness.

One may reply that arguments from analogy do not depend upon other bodies directly exhibiting characteristics of subjectivity, for these arguments recognize that such characteristics are entirely internal. Indeed, if bodies really could directly exhibit mental characteristics, we

\textsuperscript{118} See, for example, \textit{Phenomenology of Perception}, p. 95.
would not need to infer their mindedness analogically in the first place. The claim, rather, is that bodies may constitute or express *probable signs* of mental states and attributes; it is from such signs, of course, that we presumably infer them to be inhabited by minds. Again, if we begin from the assumption that mind and body are absolutely separate kinds of things, and if we define the mind as inaccessible from any standpoint outside itself – if we stipulate that the only mental qualities or interior experiences to which I may have direct access are my own – then it is impossible for a body to *directly* presence a mind. Thus, provided we assume a dualistic conceptual schema, then insofar as I take a body to possess a mind, it can only be because this body *somehow indirectly* indicates the presence of a mind. Since I can never directly perceive a mind when I perceive a body, the only manner in which I may take a body to be minded is on the basis of certain bodily *signs* that *somehow* prompt me to *infer* that it houses a mind. Since I cannot have direct access to another’s interiority, I must *somehow* achieve indirect access to another’s interiority through his/her exteriority.

However, it should already be clear that the above reply entirely misses the point of Merleau-Ponty’s aforementioned objection to analogical “solutions” to the problem of other minds. Provided that Being is bifurcated into the domain of subjects and the domain of objects and that neither the twain shall ever meet, the rub here is how indeed a body, which of course belongs to the domain of objects, may “*somehow*” indirectly suggest or prompt one to infer the existence of a subject. Of course, Merleau-Ponty argues that dualism in fact renders this “*somehow*” inconceivable. Dillon, in his exposition of Merleau-Ponty’s account of intersubjectivity, thus reiterates a crucial point elaborated above, namely that Cartesianism simply does not permit any external, corporeal entity or phenomenon to manifest consciousness
in any manner (whether directly or otherwise) precisely because it posits consciousness as strictly, entirely internal and incorporeal:

The traditional problem of other minds grows out of the mistaken assumption that we begin life in a solipsistic mode and learn somehow to recognize other human beings as such. The “somehow” remains inexplicable because the minds that define humans as human are conceived as hidden to all but first-person experience.\(^{119}\)

Merleau-Ponty’s point, then, is not only that dualism obviously makes it impossible for a body to exhibit consciousness directly (which presumably the Cartesian dualist readily admits), but that dualism also makes it impossible for a body to exhibit consciousness indirectly – or to present any characteristics that might stand as signs of consciousness – as well; indeed, if a body could never directly exhibit consciousness, it would never do so at all. If those attributes defined as essentially and exclusively mental are also defined as completely withheld from material, third-person presentation, then it is impossible in principle for material, third-person phenomena to present them in any manner (even “indirectly”). Given the supposed divorce between internal, first-person mental states or phenomena and external, third-person material or bodily phenomena, it is inexplicable why the latter would ever show up for us as, or in any way intelligibly presence or signify, the former:

If it were really my “thought” that had to be placed in the other person, I would never put it there. No appearance would ever have the power to convince me that there is a cogito over there, or be able to motivate the transference, since my own cogito owes its whole power of conviction to the fact that I am myself. If the other person is to exist for me, he must do so to begin with in an order beneath the order of thought.\(^{120}\)

Again, the question Merleau-Ponty poses, and which is conspicuously unaddressed in most treatments of the issue at hand, is this: if consciousness is strictly private – if it is defined precisely by the fact that it lacks the publicity of external, material things – how is it possible for other consciousnesses to appear to me, or how is possible for me to perceive certain bodies as


\(^{120}\) Merleau-Ponty, “The Philosopher and His Shadow”, Signs, p. 170.
conscious? If bodies are public entities and minds are private theatres of appearances, then how can the (public) properties or appearances of a body indicate mindedness? Merleau-Ponty’s answer, of course, is that it is clearly impossible \emph{in principle} for any corporeal phenomenon or entity to manifest that which is already posited as strictly \emph{incorporeal}; to elide this fact is, again, to forget, or to fail to adhere consistently to, the very framework that makes such a relationship between mind and body problematic in the first place, namely the framework within which one assumes or posits a strict, categorical division between the two. In short, Merleau-Ponty’s point is that if I cannot directly perceive the consciousness of an-other in and through the other’s body, I will never be able to perceive it at all, and if I can never perceive the consciousness of an-other, I will \emph{a fortiori} never be prompted to reflectively (i.e., analogically) posit or infer anything about it. In other words, Merleau-Ponty’s point is that any inference (analogical or otherwise) that others exist depends upon a direct, pre-inferential or non-analogical acquaintance with the consciousnesses of others, but direct acquaintance with other consciousnesses not only means that dualism must be false because dualism precisely rules out the possibility of being directly acquainted with any consciousness except one’s own, it also means (as I will elaborate further below) that no argument from analogy may function as a “proof” that other consciousnesses exist without begging the question, that is, without tacitly deploying as a premise precisely the conclusion it is supposed to demonstrate.

So, Merleau-Ponty argues that if your “exteriority” (that is to say, your body and its physical movements) and your “interiority” (that is to say, your consciousness or your unique, solitary space of appearances and representations) signify utterly disjunct, incommensurable orders of reality, I can never (by definition) get past your exteriority in order to reach your interiority: no features that belong to your exteriority (nothing that characterizes your body and
how it operates in the world) could ever justify or even motivate the judgment that your exteriority “clothes” or indicates any interiority at all. It will not do to say that I might extrapolate other minds from my own, since if it were the case that I may have no direct acquaintance with any mind other than my own – if it were the case that the properties that essentially define mindedness are purely internal – then there may be no external properties or objects that would logically warrant or even psychologically motivate such an extrapolation in the first place. If mind and body were truly ontologically divorced from one another, no bodily appearances or movements would ever warrant or induce the induction that a mind resides “behind” or “within” them. Thus, if my knowledge or access to others can truly only be founded upon an analogical inference that I draw from my own unique, privileged, inward experience of myself, then nothing will ever warrant or induce such an induction on my part, for ex hypothesi there is a gulf between my interior and supposed others’ exteriors: an absolute, categorical separation between my inner experience and certainty of myself on the one hand, and the experiences I may have of external things or of the bodies and movements of such presumed others on the other hand. Given a dualistic starting point, I must admit a fundamental and insuperable disanalogy between my own interior consciousness of myself and the appearances of an exterior, material body that would not only logically invalidate but also perceptually short-circuit any analogical transference from the former to the latter. In other words, given the posited incommensurability of internal, subjective consciousness and external, “objective” bodily movements and appearances, not only would such an “analogy” between them never be rationally justified, but no perception or appearance of an external body would ever motivate it to be drawn in the first place.
Thus, in the context of discussing Husserl’s treatment of the problem of other minds, Merleau-Ponty underscores the point elaborated above, which is a point he makes in nearly every work in which he addresses intersubjectivity: it is logically (indeed tautologically) impossible for consciousness to appear in the external world – and that it is therefore impossible for me to perceive let alone infer the existence of consciousnesses outside my own – if consciousness is defined exclusively in terms of its purely interior, immediate, reflexive relationship with itself, or if it is defined as existing in such a manner that is essentially removed from publicly observable things and appearances:

The Cartesian cogito poses the problem of self and others in terms that seems to render a solution impossible. In effect, if the mind or self were to define itself by its contact with itself, how could the representation of other people be possible? The self only has signification insofar as it is consciousness of self. Everything can be doubted by him except for the fact he thinks; everything can be doubted except for the fact that he sees; etc. All experience presupposes contact with oneself. All knowledge is possible only by this primary knowledge. Other people will be a self which appears to me from without; this is contradictory.\(^\text{121}\)

This, again, is why Cartesianism makes any experience or knowledge of otherness impossible in principle. If the mind or self is strictly defined in terms of what is accessible only from or to the first-person perspective – that is, if consciousness is equated with reflective consciousness or with supposedly unmediated and incorrigible self-presentation – then by definition no “second-person” perspective would ever be possible, for no “third-person” phenomena (that is, no bodily appearances or movements) could ever disclose what the mind or self experiences in communion with itself (which is here taken to define experience, mindedness, or selfhood as such). If dualism is true, then the ‘first-person’ and the ‘third-person’ are simply irreconcilably divorced: if consciousness is pure interiority, then it is by definition invisible from the outside; if interiority and exteriority are defined as mutually exclusive orders of reality, then my interiority and the

interiority of an Other can never in principle be visible to one another, and therefore the “inter” in “inter-subjectivity” would be inconceivable, or the very concept of intersubjectivity would simply be an oxymoron. In short, if the mind is not embodied, I would never be able even to perceive let alone legitimately infer the mindedness of a body. The point, then, is not to begin from a dualistic position in the first place. The only thing that can “mediate” a relationship between the interior and the exterior – hence a relationship between self and other – is a “middle term” that is, as such, neither purely interior nor wholly exterior but rather ambiguously both at the same time, which is to say something else altogether (which conventional philosophical terminology cannot adequately describe) from which the poles of interiority and exteriority, subject and object are abstracted and later reified as fundamentally separable and mutually exclusive: and such a middle term is precisely the *lived/living* body.

Since dualism entails yet also, and for that very reason, renders insoluble the problem of other minds, in order to “solve” this problem it is necessary to dismantle the dualism that engenders it in the first place; and in order to dismantle dualism, it is necessary to return to lived experience, for lived experience is, again, precisely that from which the classical opposition between subject (mind) and body (object) is abstracted and reified in the first place and is, consequently, that which also resists and unsettles that opposition. The subject(mind)/object (body) binary is carved by an act of reflection, and yet all acts of reflection are tacitly dependent upon our *pre*-reflective openness to, and involvement within, a world, our entanglement with things and others that such a binary precisely represses; and like all instances of repression, Merleau-Ponty shows that the subject/object binary self-deconstructs insofar as it constitutively depends upon, hence implicitly affirms, the very thing it contradicts or pretends to deny: in other words, the supposed binary opposition between subject (mind) and object (body) in fact
paradoxically depends upon the enmeshment of the two in and through the phenomenon of the lived body, a phenomenon that, as such, defies categorization as either the one or the other and thus disrupts or undoes that very binary (“either/or”) opposition (as Derrida would say, the condition of the possibility of subject/object, mind/body dualism is also its “condition of impossibility”). It follows, then, that in order to undo such a binary along with all of the erroneous ontological and epistemic commitments that it generates, or rather in order to reintegrate ourselves into the world from which reflective or conceptual thought often estranges us, it is necessary that we attempt to better harmonize thinking or conceptuality with precisely the field of pre-reflective (lived) experience upon which it always already depends. More specifically, since solipsism is the unavoidable logical consequence of a dualistic standpoint, in order escape from solipsism it is necessary to refuse to accept from the start such a standpoint and to undertake the difficult task of developing new concepts, or new means of expression, to replace those that may derive from or implicitly reinstate it: new concepts or means of expression that are, in fact, consonant rather than in contradiction with lived experience, concepts or means of expression that precisely illuminate rather than repress or distort the skein of carnal relations and imbrications with which all forms of knowledge and all constructions of selfhood and otherness are inextricably woven. For Merleau-Ponty, this is the primary the task of phenomenology, and since such a task is necessary in order to develop a cogent understanding of our relations with others (or a cogent understanding of “otherness” itself), we may we say it is always already – indeed primarily – the task of ethics as well.

So, Merleau-Ponty shows that there can in fact never be a cogent analogical solution to the problem of other minds, for the very framework that makes such a solution necessary (that is, the very framework that generates the problem in the first place) is also the very framework that
makes it logically impossible. If there really is such a radical, insuperable asymmetry between my knowledge of my own mind and my supposed knowledge of the minds of others, or if it really is the case that I begin entirely enclosed within my own interior, homuncular space of representations, then my consciousness would, by definition, be impenetrably isolated, impervious to any intimation of otherness, unbreachable by anything truly exterior to it; my consciousness would precisely be defined by a privacy that can never be invaded, a solitude that can never be disturbed, a position that can never be decentered. If we begin from the assumption that the ego begins atomistically individuated and isolated, it will never be anything but that: it will never be able to step – or to be swept – outside itself, and solipsistic isolation would thus be its primal and ineluctable condition. If I am wholly enveloped within a monadic, internal space of representations, or if in general subjectivity is originally and perpetually withdrawn from the sphere of public existence and appearance, then not only would no experience ever be able to motivate me to infer the existence of others, but no experience would ever be able to impart to me the notion of otherness that I presuppose and deploy in performing such an inference, or in even entertaining doubts concerning the existence of others, in the first place. As I will elaborate below, analogical reasoning cannot, without begging the question, account for how we originally “know” or acquire a conception of other minds, and therefore in order to account for how we originally know or acquire a conception of other minds it is necessary to repudiate the dualism that restricts our knowledge or conception of other minds to analogical reasoning.

If consciousness is truly embodied, it is in and through the conduct of the living body that we encounter it, and our “knowledge” of other “consciousnesses” is no longer an inscrutable mystery:

If I experience this inhering of my consciousness in its body and in its world, the perception of other people and the plurality of consciousnesses no longer present any difficulty. If, for myself who am reflecting on perception, the perceiving subject appears provided with a primordial setting in relation to
the world, drawing in its train that bodily thing in the absence of which there would be no other things for it, then why should other bodies which I perceive not be similarly inhabited by consciousnesses? If my consciousness has a body, why should other bodies not ‘have’ consciousnesses?122

Now, a quick and decontextualized reading of this passage might suggest that Merleau-Ponty does indeed offer an argument from analogy for other minds: I analogize from the embodiment of my own consciousness to the consciousnesses of other animate bodies. What Merleau-Ponty has in mind here, however, is nothing of the sort. As we have already seen, Merleau-Ponty consistently rejects all such arguments from analogy, and wherever he presents one it is always only in order to set it up for refutation. Throughout his writings on intersubjectivity, Merleau-Ponty seems to advance two major, distinct criticisms of such arguments from analogy for other minds, so although he never explicitly distinguishes them in such a manner, I think it is helpful to do so in the following way123: on the one hand, there is what we might call the “inconsistency objection,” which we have just discussed, and which consists in showing that analogical or inductive “proofs” for other minds depend upon (usually suppressed) dualistic ontological commitments that are in fact logically incompatible with the possibility of the very knowledge of other minds they are supposed to prove: in short, all such arguments from analogy rely upon (usually implicit) premises that are inconsistent with their conclusions, ontological assumptions that in fact derail the ontological or epistemic theses one originally thought such reasoning could justify. On the other hand, there is what we might call the “circularity objection,” which is the one I now wish to elaborate.

122 Phenomenology of Perception, p. 351.

123 In a number of places Merleau-Ponty also points out that arguments from analogy for other minds are not only fallacious on their own terms (for they beg the question and tacitly rely upon metaphysical assumptions that are in fact inconsistent with any knowledge or notion of otherness) but are also empirically falsified by what we know about child psychological development. An infant does not “draw an analogy” or perform an inference in order to imitate the smile of an adult or to recognize the happiness in it. We might consider this to be a third objection to such analogical accounts of our knowledge of others in addition to the two just mentioned, and it is one that I discuss briefly below.
Merleau-Ponty argues not only that the metaphysical (i.e., dualistic) assumptions that motivate analogical “proofs” of other minds make any perception or conception of otherness impossible in principle but also that, setting such metaphysical assumptions aside, such supposed “proofs” of other minds are unavoidably question-begging (or viciously circular), for in order to infer analogically the consciousness of another I must tacitly presuppose that which ex hypothesi I am only able to know or conceptualize after I have drawn the inference: I must assume or draw upon that which such analogical reasoning is precisely supposed to demonstrate or explain in the first place (namely, the other’s consciousness or my very concept of otherness as such); such an act of analogical judgment can only be occasioned by a prior perception of behavior or intentional action, by some sort of experience that suggests the presence of an Other. That is to say, why would I ever be prompted to infer analogically that some being is conscious if it has not in some way already presented to me some quality that signifies consciousness? Yet is it not precisely the perception or judgment of such a quality that is precisely at issue here? Is it not this sort of perceptual predication of alterity or reflective attribution of mental properties that such analogical reasoning is supposed to warrant in the first place or that is itself supposed to be the consequence or conclusion of such analogical reasoning? It is precisely through analogical reasoning that a body’s consciousness or mental attributes are supposed to be posited, or it is precisely through analogical reasoning that one is supposed to acquire any concept or sense of alterity, yet, as Merleau-Ponty indicates, it is clear that another’s consciousness or mental attributes or that some sense of alterity must already, in a sense, be “posited” in order for any

124 As I will elaborate in the next chapter, Merleau-Ponty advances a similar argument against what I call “projectionism”, i.e., the common charge that attributions of specific mental states or of minds in general to various non-human animals are mere “projections” of human characteristics and experiences, which is the most salient form of skepticism concerning animal consciousness today. Moreover, we will also see that similar criticisms apply to Allen and Bekoff’s view that ascriptions of intentionality to animals are justified as “inferences to the best explanation.”
such analogical inference to take place at all. We must keep in mind that the claim under discussion here is that analogical reasoning is the only possible basis of our knowledge or conception of other minds; the claim at issue here is that arguments from analogy – and that only arguments from analogy – may “prove” the existence of other minds, or in other words that it is only through a process of analogical inference that we acquire a concept of otherness; yet it is clearly the case that analogically reasoning that others exist depends upon some sort of prior perception of otherness, so either such analogical reasoning depends upon some sort of prior non-analogical perception of otherness, in which case such analogical reasoning is not the “basis” of our knowledge or notion of otherness at all, or such prior perceptions of otherness are analogical inferences, in which case such analogical reasoning always assumes as a premise precisely the conclusion it is supposed to demonstrate or explain (i.e., begs the question) and indeed plunges us into the abyss of an infinite regress, thus rendering our concept of otherness unexplained or without foundation.

Merleau-Ponty’s second trenchant criticism of supposed analogical “proofs” of other minds, then, is that in order to infer analogically the consciousness of another body I must first perceive this body as conscious (that is, as behaviorally, intentionally engaged with a world), but this prior perception of another body’s consciousness clearly renders the analogy in question circular or redundant. Thus, Merleau-Ponty clarifies the point he articulates in the passage quoted above as follows:

There is nothing here resembling ‘reasoning by analogy’…The other consciousness can be deduced only if the emotional expressions of others are compared and identified with mine, and precise correlations recognized between my physical behavior and my ‘psychic events’. Now the perception of others is anterior to, and the condition of, such observations, the observations do not constitute the perception.125

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125 Ibid., p. 352. Emphasis mine.
Though subtle, the point Merleau-Ponty makes in this passage is the one I just began to explain. I am only ever prompted to infer the mindedness of a body by a prior perception of its mindedness; how, then, is this prior perception of mindedness possible? What accounts for it? If we say that it is the result of a yet prior analogical inference, then we are begging the question or reasoning in a circle (or slipping into an infinite regress of analogies): i.e., How do I know other minds exist? According to the account under scrutiny here, I know that they do only as a result of analogically inferring their existence. But what prompts me to make such an inference? I am clearly prompted to make such an inference by some sort of perception of qualities that suggest the existence of another mind. And what is the basis of this perception of mental qualities in another entity? Given that we have already agreed that analogical reasoning is the only possible grounds for our “knowledge” or conception of otherness, the only permissible answer to this question is yet prior analogical inferences, and so on. The circularity involved in regarding analogical reasoning as the fundamental basis of our knowledge of other minds should now be clear: on the one hand we are appealing to analogical reasoning in order to demonstrate the existence of others, yet on the other hand we are tacitly assuming the existence of others – tacitly drawing upon some prior acquaintance with otherness – whenever we perform such analogical reasoning. Thus, all analogical “proofs” of other minds assume as a premise precisely the conclusion they are supposed to demonstrate (for again, such arguments from analogy are supposed to be the foundation of our “knowledge” of otherness), namely an acquaintance with (or “knowledge of”) the existence of others. And if we say that this prior acquaintance with otherness that all such arguments from analogy assume as a premise is yet itself derived from prior analogical inferences, then we confront an infinite regress of analogical inferences: an analogical inference that another mind exists is necessarily prompted by some prior perception or
judgment that another entity possesses certain relevant features (that is, certain features that may be taken to suggest the possession of a mind), and this prior perception or judgment of such “relevant” features in another entity is itself claimed to be derived from prior analogical inferences, and these prior inferences will themselves have to be derived from yet prior perceptions of mind-signifying qualities in others, and these will also, yet again, have to be derived from yet prior analogical inferences, and so on \textit{ad infinitum}.

Thus, Merleau-Ponty’s argument is that even though we might make inferences about others in particular instances, the traditional argument from analogy is fatally flawed as an account of our \textit{fundamental knowledge} of others, for it not only cannot explain how it is logically possible for us to infer (or why we might ever be experientially prompted to infer) the existence of others analogically since the analogies in question are premised on observed correlations between two kinds of phenomena already posited as categorically separate and opposed, but moreover, as we have just seen, such an argument cannot explain how we \textit{originally} encounter other consciousnesses without begging the question; that is, it cannot constitute an explanation of how any sense or concept of otherness – including especially the very sense or concept of otherness one implicitly deploys in precisely drawing any inference that others exist – is originally instituted in experience, for such an explanation would be viciously circular: if the argument from analogy is supposed to explain how we achieve a concept of otherness, or if it is supposed to justify the supposition that others exist, then it presupposes as a premise precisely its own conclusion, for we must already possess and draw upon a concept of otherness in order to infer that any particular others exist. Thus, we would be left with the argument that we (fundamentally) know that others exist because we are rightly able to infer that they do via analogical induction, and that we are able to infer that others exist via analogical induction
because we have some prior, fundamental knowledge of otherness. This, of course, is nonsense. The issue at hand is precisely our primary knowledge of, or encounter with, otherness. Though it is possible for me to infer things about others in particular cases, the primary basis of my awareness and knowledge of otherness – that which originally constitutes a sense of otherness in experience – cannot be analogical inference for the simple reason that any analogies I may draw between myself and others always already depend upon, or sublimate, a prior awareness and knowledge of otherness, an awareness or knowledge of otherness that cannot, without lapsing into circularity or an infinite regress, be predicated upon yet prior analogies.

So, it is clear that reasoning analogically about other minds necessarily assumes and is motivated by a general sense or concept of otherness. For Merleau-Ponty, then, the crucial question is this: where does such a sense or concept of otherness come from? Again, we cannot say, without begging the question or reasoning in a circle, that it comes from other, prior analogical inferences, for our ability to perform such inferences is precisely what is in question. In addition to the fact that it is simply empirically false (i.e., contrary to elementary developmental psychology) that we originally relate to and acquire knowledge of the minds of others through inductive reasoning, it is logically impossible that we do so as well. If we appeal to analogical reasoning as the ground of our conception or knowledge of otherness, we cannot then appeal to any conception or knowledge of otherness as the ground of our capacity to reason analogically about others: were we to do so, we would be committed, on the one hand, to the (correct) claim that reasoning analogically about others depends upon a certain prior conception or “knowledge” of otherness, and yet on the other hand we would be committed to the claim that we acquire such a prior conception or knowledge of otherness through analogical reasoning. This is, again, absurd. It is clearly circular to claim that reasoning analogically about others is the
source of our knowledge of otherness and that there is a knowledge of otherness that is the source of our ability to reason analogically about others. We cannot say, then, that analogical inference is the source of our sense or “knowledge” of otherness when analogical inferences about others logically presuppose and derive from a sense or knowledge of otherness in the first place. So, if we wish to understand how it is possible that we make inferences about other minds, we must account for how we acquire a conception of other minds in the first place, and this requires that we appeal to, or rather rediscover, the source of otherness in experience, or the ontological condition that lets life and consciousness come to presence in the world and which is, as such, necessarily below the level of analogical inference.

We see, then, that if the concept of otherness we deploy in making analogical inferences about others cannot itself be derived through analogical inference, it follows that analogical inferences concerning the existence and characteristics of other minds in principle depend upon a notion of otherness that is already operative in our thinking and field of experience, a notion of otherness that precisely cannot derive from prior analogical inferences but that must rather be constituted in and through an ontologically and epistemically primitive relationship with others, a givenness of alterity that makes any inferences about others possible. How exactly others can be originally given in experience, of course, remains to be explicated. Husserl labored to explain it and arguably had difficulty doing so from within a conceptual framework that remained committed to grounding meaning in the meaning-making intentional acts of an autonomous ego or that (arguably) remained burdened with Cartesian oppositions between subject and object, mind and matter, immanence and transcendence.\(^{126}\) Merleau-Ponty, as we have already seen and

\(^{126}\) However, I do think that Husserl’s account of intersubjectivity is far more subtle or sophisticated, or far less obviously flawed, than it is often taken to be, and I will further discuss this point in chapter five. This is not to say that I think it is without flaws. Merleau-Ponty is often rightly very critical of Husserl’s account of subjectivity, yet
as we will further see, jettisons such Cartesian oppositions and explains intersubjectivity, or the
givenness of alterity in lived experience, as made possible by (and indeed as always already
implicated and realized in and through) the essential embodiment of subjectivity – or by the non-
disjunctive yet also non-reductive relationship between consciousness and behavior – and as
therefore rooted in what he calls intercorporeity, in pre-reflective couplings or reciprocal
exchanges of bodily powers, affects, meanings, comportments, and modes of intentionality. If
there were no such pre-analogical ground for our conception of otherness or for our knowledge
of the existence of others – that is, if propositional or inferential knowledge of others were not
founded upon an irreducible knowledge of others by acquaintance – we would remain trapped in
the circularity we have just discussed: we would be left with having to claim that reasoning
analogically about others derives from a prior knowledge of otherness and that such prior
knowledge of otherness is derived from reasoning analogically about others. It is for this reason
that supposed analogical “solutions” to the problem of other minds cannot function as such
solutions at all, for all such arguments from analogy deploy (at least implicitly) in their premises
a concept of otherness that they cannot, as such, non-circularly explain or ground. If some sort of
experiential acquaintance with others is necessary in order to prompt us to infer that others exist,
then we cannot claim that it is a process of inference that grounds or mediates our acquaintance
with others. We cannot appeal to analogical induction in order to explain how we primarily come

he also, I think, appreciates Husserl’s arguments and insights in ways that are not simply more charitable but also
more accurate than many of Husserl’s later critics. In the end, though, Merleau-Ponty will argue that
phenomenology (or philosophy generally) must break decisively from the transcendental tradition. He claims, for
example, that his own “theory of reflection” is not a “going back to conditions of possibility” (The Visible and the
Invisible, p. 177) and even suggests that intersubjectivity in particular defies the traditional opposition between
the transcendental and the empirical, between immanence and transcendence, and thus anticipates what Derrida and
others will later call “quasi-transcendental.” As Merleau-Ponty remarks in his essay “The Philosopher and
Sociology”: “Now if the transcendental is intersubjectivity, how can the borders of the transcendental and the
empirical help becoming indistinct?” (Signs, p.107). That being said, Merleau-Ponty’s own account of
intersubjectivity is very much indebted to Husserl’s. Husserl’s treatment of intersubjectivity strongly presages and
informs Merleau-Ponty’s, and in chapters two and five I will try make this clear.
to be acquainted with others if an acquaintance with others is a precondition for ever performing such an induction. Therefore, there cannot be any non-circular inductive proof that others exist, or any non-question-begging inductive explanation of our original conception of otherness, for such a proof or explanation of otherness would have to assume precisely the very thesis or concept (namely the thesis that others exist or the very concept of otherness as such) that it is supposed to prove or explain in the first place. The only way to avoid such circularity, then, is to realize that analogical inferences about the minds of others necessarily depend upon a pre-analogical or pre-inferential encounter with alterity, and Merleau-Ponty precisely elaborates how such encounters with alterity are possible and always already actualized in lived experience.

Not only is such an account logically necessary, it is also, if we honestly and rigorously attend to experience, the only one that correctly describes and explains the phenomenon of intersubjectivity; it is the only account that captures what is actually going on when we perceive and engage – when we address and are addressed by – others in the world:

When I motion to my friend to come nearer, my intention is not a thought prepared within me and I do not perceive the signal in my body. I beckon across the world, I beckon over there, where my friend is; the distance between us, his consent or refusal are immediately read in my gesture. There is not a perception followed by a movement, for both form a system that varies as a whole. If, for example, realizing that I am not going to be obeyed, I vary my gesture, we have here, not two distinct acts of consciousness. What happens is that I see my partner’s unwillingness, and my gesture of impatience emerges from this situation without any intervening thought.²⁷

When I recognize and extend myself outward toward my friend from across the street – when, say, I see my friend and summon her to come meet me – I no more need to “infer” her presence and intentional attitudes, and I no more first need to consider reflectively my own behavioral response to her presence and intentional attitudes, than I need to calculate distances and angles in order to, say, reach for the pencil on my desk: I immediately, directly perceive my friend and her intentions in her bodily presence and conduct, and my subsequent responses to her are likewise

immediately elicited from the meanings – the practical attitudes and intentions – that are immanent to her conduct. As Merleau-Ponty suggests here (and to use a term that he borrows from psychology and that deeply informs both his early and late philosophy), my friend and I constitute, or rather inhabit and are constituted by, a *Gestalt*, a holistically given, meaning-laden situation of which we and our behaviors are from the start entangled, codetermining moments. Thus, “in intercorporeal communication as in language, significations come through in whole packages…”128 It is only when there is a breakdown in our communication, only when our exchange of intentions and common expectations is disappointed or disrupted, or only when something intervenes to upset or challenge our ordinary, default perceptual hold on the world, that we are reflectively thrown back to ourselves and prompted to formulate and scrutinize judgments concerning one another’s intentions or to infer “internal” thoughts and attitudes from “external” (bodily) evidence; similarly, intersubjective agreement constitutes our fundamental, default assumptions about reality: if, for example, I see something (say, a squirrel) cross our path, I assume that you see it too, and only if you claim not to see it, only if your experience fails to align with my own, do I wonder whether or not what I have seen is real and am therefore prompted to consider my sense of reality reflectively; even yet more similarly, it is only when my body is not functioning as it normally does (it is only when it is afflicted with injury or illness) that I need to consider reflectively how to, say, grasp the pencil on my desk. So, when I encounter or greet others in the world, we already inhabit a space of shared meanings and potentialities, a context in which we already coexist with one another and in which, therefore, we are *immediately* present to one another as others, or in which our subjectivities mutually come to

presence for one another through our overlapping manners of behaviorally inhabiting and negotiating the world we share.

Since subjectivity is inherently embodied, or rather since to be a subject is to be a living body, in everyday experience I no more infer that an entity possesses subjectivity than I infer that it is a living body, which is to say, of course, that I do not “infer” this at all but rather perceive it immediately:

...When I say that I see someone, it means that I am moved by sympathy for his behavior of which I am a witness and which holds my own intentions by furnishing them with a visible realization. It is our very difference, the uniqueness of our experience, which attests to our strange ability to enter into others and re-enact their deeds...From the moment I recognize that my experience, precisely insofar as it is my own, makes me accessible to what is not myself, that I am sensitive to the world and to others, all the beings which objective thought placed at a distance draw singularly nearer to me. Or, conversely, I recognize my affinity with them; I am nothing but an ability to echo them, to understand them, to respond to them.\footnote{Merleau-Ponty, “The Metaphysical in Man,” in \textit{Sense and Non-Sense}, Trans. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 93-94.}

Since subjectivity is inherently invested in, and inseparable from, habituated modes of coping with and responding to the world – that is, since subjectivity is inherently entwined with \textit{behavior}, and since behavior is inherently embedded within and polarized toward a holistic context of practical possibilities, exigencies, and affordances – I directly encounter other subjectivities when I encounter their behaviors; and not only do their behaviors directly disclose their subjectivities because their subjectivities are inseparably entangled with their modes of outward, bodily, behavioral expression, they do so, moreover, because they also directly disclose to me or mirror \textit{my own}, for the perceptual powers, affects, and vulnerabilities of our living bodies – even just insofar as they are living bodies – overlap if not coincide with one another, and for that reason are just as reflexively transferable to one another as are the parts of my own body with respect to the image of them I confront in a mirror: in short, because minds are embodied, every living body is already “a mind,” and no living body – no matter how different
in its form or expressive capacities it may be from my own – is radically, ontologically divorced from my own. Indeed, insofar as we are living bodies, and insofar as every living, behaving body traces in its movements, carries in its very joints the world to which it addresses itself, so too does it speak to me of my own world, or at the very least of another world that may be glimpsed at the periphery of my own, one whose horizons osculate if never quite cross my own: simply put (and as we will further discuss), to share flesh is also to share a world, and to be a living body is to share life or subjectivity with any and all other living bodies.

My living body is, from the first moment I begin to engage the world, already paired with the living bodies of others, and though Merleau-Ponty, following Husserl, speaks of a direct (pre-reflective, non-inferential) transference of corporeal schemas between living bodies, it is perhaps more accurate to say that what happens between living bodies is not so much a transference of meanings between them (as though they each stand apart from one another as autonomous loci of meaning in the first place) but rather a coming to presence of meanings that are always already, endlessly in the making between, through, and amid them; quite literally like a conversation, it is an already participatory genesis or co-production of meaning wherein distinctions between the participants involved are certainly not effaced but wherein, nevertheless, one cannot sharply demarcate where the contributions of one ends and where those of the others begin. Thus, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, “it is never a matter of anything but co-perception. I see that this man over there sees, as I touch my left hand while it is touching my right…”

In our intercorporeal relationships and engagements, what we have are not exchanges of meanings already fully formed by, or on the side of, each living, conscious body apart from one another, but rather the emergence of meanings constituted reflexively and reciprocally (laterally) by or

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from the sides of all of the living bodies involved all at once: living bodies and the perceptions, lives, and worlds they communicate are not monadic snapshots or segregated sites of being but are threads of a common tapestry, parts of a (never completed or settled) whole that is present in, yet never exhausted by, each of them, a world that they constitute and negotiate together and therefore immediately perceive and affirm in one another. Subjectivity suffuses behavior and behavior is embedded within, and unintelligible apart from, a milieu or situation that motivates it, but this means that behavior itself, and therefore subjectivity as such, is already presenced as a Gestalt, or as a meaningful, perceptual whole in which mind and body are co-given before they are later reflectively bifurcated and thus before we take to wonder whether appearances of the latter are veridical indications of the existence or content of the former.

Like all phenomenological insights, Merleau-Ponty’s account of our knowledge of other minds is something we all know perfectly well in and through everyday experience – something that is ceaselessly confirmed and attested for us before our very eyes – yet it is also, semi-paradoxically, something we are inherently prone to overlook, a truth that is always “buried under the sedimentations of later knowledge.” As Merleau-Ponty constantly reminds us, the abstractions we later come to acquire through reasoning and reflection (such as the oppositions between subject and object, consciousness and body, self and Other) naturally conceal and distort the conditions, relations, or phenomena that allow us to acquire them in the first place, or which constitute the always implicitly present generative ground of our concepts, propositions, and inferences: the soil, so to speak, that nourishes reflection and its (very late-in-coming, and at best partial and lacunary) accomplishments.

It is important to underscore that no one can deny that we may make inferences about the minds of others in particular cases; indeed, we do this all the time, and such inferences – whether correct or incorrect, whether carefully considered or hasty – are integral to everyday social cognition. What is at issue here, rather, is the question concerning the fundamental condition of such inferences, the question concerning the originary basis – the ontological precondition - of our conception or “knowledge” of other minds. To be clear, Merleau-Ponty’s argument is not that we are never able to reason analogically about the minds of others, but rather that analogical reasoning cannot be the *basis* of our access to (or “knowledge” of) them, for the ability to reason analogically about other minds in particular instances always already, tacitly depends upon a general, more basic sense or “knowledge” of otherness that must, as such, be pre-analogical or pre-inferential; again, such a sense or knowledge of otherness cannot be derived analogically or otherwise inferentially for the very reason that it is the ground of all analogies or inferences concerning others. Thus, as Dillon explains, “I may use analogical reasoning to think myself into another’s viewpoint in a thematic exploration of the empathetic identification, but, as Merleau-Ponty argues, analogical inference begs the fundamental question of how the other is primally instituted as alter ego.”\(^{132}\) If others were accessible or knowable only inferentially, they would not be accessible or knowable at all, for there would be no non-question begging basis for such inferences if there were no non-inferential (or pre-inferential) contact and involvement with others that would ground and inform them. Again, we cannot say that we are justified in inferring that others exist on the basis of prior veridical inferences that they do, for such reasoning is viciously circular; and likewise, we cannot claim that analogical inference is the source of our concept of otherness when we must already possess and deploy such a concept of otherness in

\(^{132}\) Merleau-Ponty’s *Ontology*, p. 116.
precisely performing such inferences in the first place, for that, too, is viciously circular: it is absurd to claim that the concept of otherness we assume and deploy in analogically inferring that others exist is acquired as a result of such inferences themselves. It follows that reflective, inferential, or cognitive knowledge of others must be “mediated” by, or founded upon, an immediate, pre-reflective, direct acquaintance with others. It follows that there must be a presencing of otherness in lived experience that antecedes and makes possible any inductive inferences or predicative judgments concerning others. All analogical inferences and reflective, predicative judgments concerning others – like all inferences and reflective, predicative judgments in general – must be founded upon an “operative intentionality…which produces the natural and antepredicative unity of the world and of our life…” 133 Any analogies I may reflectively draw between my own inner life and the inner lives of others necessarily derive from an originary and continual commingling of my own existence and “inner” life with the existence and inner lives of others, from what Merleau-Ponty describes as an “extraordinary overlapping,”134 a “strange system of exchanges”135 or a “consummate reciprocity”136 between myself and others – that is, between my living body and other living bodies – below the level of reflective inference and conceptualization.

Since, as we have seen, it is fallacious to claim that analogical reasoning is the basis of our knowledge of others – since we cannot (without begging the question) appeal to such reasoning in order to explain how we ever encounter or acquire the notion of otherness that enables us to reason in such a manner in the first place – it follows that we must admit that we encounter others independently of analogical reasoning, that we encounter others as a

133 Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, p. xviii.
135 Ibid., p. 164.
136 Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, p. 354.
precondition for ever being able to reason about them analogically. This is why, for Merleau-Ponty, no iteration of the classic argument from analogy – indeed no inductive argumentation whatsoever – may constitute our primary justification for claiming to know that others exist. Again, Merleau-Ponty’s argument is that any inductive inferences concerning the minds of others (or even concerning the very existence of other minds) necessarily depend upon a non-inductive, pre-inferential exposure to otherness, and that such an exposure to otherness would, again, be impossible if minds were disembodied, completely solitary and private interiorities, theatres of appearances never accessible directly from any standpoint outside themselves. But if we are exposed to others directly, below the level of inductive inference and predicative judgment, and if, therefore, minds are not totally isolated and private interiorities, then not only is solipsism neutralized from the start but so too are inductive efforts to neutralize it, or rather so too is the supposition that inductive reasoning primarily justifies our beliefs concerning the minds of others along with the dualistic metaphysics that implicitly motivates and necessitates such inductive “justifications” in the first place. Thus, the traditional problem of other minds is rendered moot in virtue of the antecedent, pre-inferential “knowledge” of otherness that all analogical inferences concerning others require in order to get off the ground. In short, either we truly encounter and know others prior to, or independently of, analogical reasoning, or we do not and cannot encounter and know them at all. And if we can truly encounter and know others prior to, or independently of, analogical reasoning, it follows that the dualistic presuppositions that make such reasoning the necessary and only conceivable condition of such knowledge must be false.

I have taken a lot of time to elaborate Merleau-Ponty’s critiques of traditional efforts to resolve “the problem of other minds” not only because it seems to be a strangely neglected
aspect of his work, but also because it is in fact indispensable to his own positive account of our relations with others and because it has truly profound consequences. Merleau-Ponty’s

137 It seems difficult to find extensive scholarly discussions of Merleau-Ponty’s treatment of the traditional “problem of other minds.” M.C. Dillon seems to provide the best, most detailed discussion of this in his remarkable (and still, I think, unrivaled) work Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology. Lawrence Hass also provides a wonderfully clear account of Merleau-Ponty’s response to the problem of Cartesian solipsism – and situates Merleau-Ponty’s approach to the problem in relation to traditional arguments from analogy as well as Sartre’s own attempt at a phenomenological alternative to such analogical arguments – in his Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008; see chapter 4). My exposition of Merleau-Ponty here is indebted to both of these works. Yet, I nonetheless have not been able to find any expositions of Merleau-Ponty’s criticisms of conventional analogical “solutions” to the problem of solipsism as detailed as the one I have attempted to provide here, and so I hope that my discussion of this will help fill a particular gap in Merleau-Ponty scholarship.

As for why there is such a gap in the first place, it is difficult to say for sure, but my intuition is that many Merleau-Ponty scholars seem to resist the notion that Merleau-Ponty was primarily interested in the traditional epistemological “problem of other minds” and prefer to insist that he – like others in the phenomenological or, more broadly, “Continental” philosophical tradition – was more concerned with the ontological “problem of alterity”; that is, rather than concerning himself with justifying our knowledge of the existence of others, Merleau-Ponty should be read as more-or-less having considered the latter to be a pseudo-problem and was more invested in explicating the phenomenon of intersubjectivity: how it is possible for otherness to be presented in lived experience, or how it is possible for the self to have a relationship with something that must be truly, irredically other than itself. I also suspect that this interpretation of Merleau-Ponty’s treatment of intersubjectivity is motivated by the general notion that the classical “problem of other minds” belongs to “analytic” Anglo-American epistemology and philosophy of mind in opposition to “Continental,” existential-phenomenological ontology, and while many have worked to put Merleau-Ponty in conversation with the former tradition, Merleau-Ponty scholars in general seem anxious to distance Merleau-Ponty from the categories and concerns of “analytic” philosophy and to place and read him firmly in the “Continental” tradition.

Whatever the case may be, I believe that such an interpretation of Merleau-Ponty’s treatment of intersubjectivity is wrong for two interrelated reasons (one that is textual and one that is conceptual): first, to put the point bluntly, to regard Merleau-Ponty as unconcerned with the traditional epistemological problem of other minds requires a willful suppression of important parts of his own texts and arguments. The passages I have already cited are sufficient to demonstrate this point. Merleau-Ponty repeatedly and explicitly addresses the question concerning how it is possible for me to know that others exist, and he devotes extensive consideration not only to the ways in which Cartesianism makes such knowledge impossible but also to the flaws inherent in traditional efforts to establish such knowledge. Moreover, Merleau-Ponty insists it is a problem that not only must be taken seriously but also one that is, like most philosophical problems (no matter how “scandalous”), “motivated” or “well-founded” (see e.g., The Structure of Behavior, p. 216), i.e., one that naturally arises from the structure of our conscious existence itself: since reflection tends to overlook or distort its own pre-reflective conditions of existence, it is naturally led to reify the abstractions it acquires through its own reflective acts (which is to say, it tends not to regard the abstractions it acquires as abstractions at all; it regards them as first-order truths rather than as the derivative concepts or models that they are), and such abstractions (like the opposition between subject and object) are precisely what generate philosophy’s most persistent and seemingly intractable problems, including especially the “mind-body” problem and “the problem of other minds” (two classical philosophical problems that are clearly implicated in one another). In particular, Merleau-Ponty even claims, as I discuss below, that there is a “solipsism rooted in living experience” (Phenomenology of Perception, p. 358) and excoriates philosophies that “know nothing of the problem of other minds” (ibid., p. xii). Merleau-Ponty is quite clear that he follows Husserl in taking seriously the “paradox” of the alter ego (ibid., p. xii), by which he means the problem of how it is possible to perceive and know others provided that consciousness or otherness is supposed to be invisible from the outside. Indeed, for Merleau-Ponty, taking alterity seriously requires taking the problem of other minds seriously.

Second, the very notion that there is a sharp distinction to be drawn between the so-called “epistemological problem of other minds” and the “ontological problem of alterity” is simply untenable; it is not a distinction that Merleau-Ponty accepts, nor is it one that we should accept. For Merleau-Ponty, such a distinction is, so to speak, a
question is the question concerning how exactly it is possible that we are able to reason analogically about other minds at all, and this question is one that is curiously never addressed by those who appeal to such reasoning in order to establish our knowledge of others. Setting aside for the moment the fact that an entirely isolated or self-enclosed self is impossible, or that any minimal awareness of oneself entails an awareness of others, Merleau-Ponty’s question is that if we begin from the assumption that the self is totally isolated or enclosed within its own private theatre of experience, what could ever move it to suppose that other selves exist in the world, or what kinds of appearances or phenomena could ever pierce the veil of its own so as to intimate appearances or phenomena that are not its own? How exactly could an experience of something exterior to myself evoke in me my strictly interior presence to myself and thereby motivate me to posit (by analogical comparison with my own case) the presence of another self, the existence of an “interior” that is not my own? It is usually simply taken for granted that

“distinction without a difference,” or at the very least it is one that marks a difference not between two rigorously separable problems but rather between two aspects of one and the same problem. Of course, as I mentioned far earlier in this chapter, this is not to deny that there is often a meaningful distinction to be drawn between epistemological questions and issues and ontological ones, or between epistemological and ontological registers of analysis. It often does make sense, of course, to distinguish between the “order of knowing” and the “order of being,” and discussions of philosophical issues can often quickly become muddled by failing to distinguish between them. As I often have to remind my students, there is an important difference between reality and what we do or can know about reality, and it is clearly a fallacy to infer what is or is not real from what we do or do not, or can or cannot, know.

However, as I also remarked earlier in this chapter, epistemology and ontology cannot be absolutely divorced from one another, and indeed Merleau-Ponty understands the fact that phenomenological argumentation necessarily blurs the distinction between them, or rather reveals the fact that they are always already implicated in one another. Every epistemological claim, theory, or framework logically depends upon a number of ontological presuppositions, and every ontology has consequences concerning the nature and scope of human knowledge. Any concept or theory of knowledge entails assumptions concerning the nature of ourselves as knowers and concerning the nature of our supposed actual or possible objects of knowledge. With respect to the problem of other minds, it should already be exceedingly clear that skepticism about other minds depends upon problematic ontological commitments concerning the nature of the mind and its relationship to the material world, and that dismantling such ontological commitments is therefore necessary for dismantling the skepticism they support (indeed logically entail). In order to establish how it is possible for the self to perceive otherness or to know that others exist, it is necessary to formulate a proper account of the nature of selfhood and otherness; reciprocally, such a proper account of selfhood and otherness immediately implies the manner in which we are able to perceive or “know” others. Thus, as I discussed earlier in this chapter, epistemological and ontological problems simply cannot be radically separated from one another, and the “problem of other minds” is a particular, exemplary instance of the interrelationship between them. The question concerning how we may know that others exist has everything to do with how we conceptualize the nature of consciousness and its relationship to physical reality, and vice versa.
sometimes things in the world stir one to posit the existence of an Other, that sometimes bodily movements prompt one to analogically extend oneself (or one’s own mental qualities) to other bodies; but how is this kind of analogical transference really possible? How can such “telepathy”\(^\text{138}\) really come about? How can such analogies come about? What is their condition of possibility? This question is profound not only because it was essentially never posed prior to phenomenology but also because, as Merleau-Ponty shows, the answer to it reveals that analogical reasoning cannot possibly constitute the source of our conception or knowledge of otherness and therefore brings to our attention a non-analogical or non-inferential “knowledge” of others that neutralizes both skepticism concerning the existence of others as well as inductive or analogical responses to such skepticism. Even more importantly, this non-inferential knowledge of others (which Merleau-Ponty explicates as rooted in intercorporeity) has implications beyond merely resolving a Seventeenth Century epistemological puzzle that no one really worries about or takes seriously in everyday life, for it entails a radical reconceptualization of the basic ontological categories and constructs that govern how we traditionally understand ourselves and the world, which is to say a radical reconceptualization of just what it means to be a self or to inhabit a world in the first place: it means that we have to reconceptualize not only the boundaries that determine the self but correlatively, for that very reason, the boundaries that determine “otherness” as well; indeed, as we will see when we turn to examine Merleau-Ponty’s late ontology, it even means reconceptualizing just what a boundary itself is.

Merleau-Ponty contends, then, that we may begin to formulate a “solution” to the problem of other minds only once we abandon the idea that consciousness is something hidden.

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\(^{138}\) See e.g., Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, p.189-190, 244.
behind the movements and gestures of the body and learn to see these movements and gestures themselves as immediate, direct expressions – not intermediary signs or indirect evidence – of conscious existence:

...The problem comes close to being solved only on the condition that certain classical prejudices are renounced. We must abandon the fundamental prejudice according to which the psyche is that which is accessible only to myself and cannot be seen from outside. My “psyche” is not a series of “states of consciousness” that are rigorously closed in on themselves and inaccessibly to anyone but me. My consciousness is turned primarily toward 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.139

Merleau-Ponty argues that we would not be able to perceive, let alone infer, the consciousness of a body if consciousness were not always already, intrinsically embodied, if consciousness were not always already “in the flesh.” However, to say that consciousness is “in” the flesh is not, of course, to say that it is “inside” or “within” it like a pilot in a ship, which would simply restate the very dualism we must reject. Consciousness, rather, is “in” the flesh in the sense in which, say, an expression is “in” a face, or in the sense in which a melody is “in” a certain arrangement of notes, or in the sense in which meaning is “in” the words on a page or “in” the image of a painting. This is why Merleau-Ponty often compares the manner in which consciousness or alterity is presenced by the living, behaving body to the manner in which linguistic meaning is presenced by words and sentences on a page or to the manner in which artistic meaning is presenced by paint on a canvas:

Where is the other in this body that I see? He is (like the meaning of the sentence) immanent in his body (one cannot detach him from it to pose him apart) and yet, more than the sum of the signs or the significations conveyed by them. He is that of the which they are always the partial and non-exhaustive image – and who nonetheless is attested wholly in each of them. Always in the process of an unfinished incarnation – Beyond the objective body as the sense of the painting is beyond the canvas.140

I no more need to infer that your living body “contains” consciousness than you need to infer that the previous sentence “contains” a thought; you no more need to infer subjectivity from my behavior than you need to infer meaning and intentionality from any instance of language: you see or read immediately through the words on a page to their meaning, and the same is true with respect to behavior. For Merleau-Ponty, as meaning is to material, linguistic and artistic expression, so is consciousness to behavior: they are essentially inseparable and co-given, yet not reductively equivalent. The interiority of an Other must be radically absent to me, for I can never, in principle, “inhabit” it myself lest it cease to the Other’s interiority, yet it is nonetheless a present absence, an absence that is immediately, directly co-given with and through the Other’s bodily presence. One’s interiority is an absence that is always entwined with one’s exteriority or behavior.

The most important conclusion to be derived from the foregoing discussion (and the one that will be integral to the arguments of chapters three and four), is that bodily gestures and comportments are inherently, immediately modes and presentations of intentionality, and are therefore inherently “mental” phenomena. Moreover, since all minds are necessarily embodied, to be a “mind” is to be a living body, and to be a living body is to be a mind. An embodied mind just is a living, behaving body, and it follows, then, that all living, behaving bodies are “minds,” that indeed there are indefinitely many kinds of minds in the world because there are as many kinds of minds as there are kinds of living bodies. Of course, this does not mean that mind and body are one and the same; rather, it does mean that mind and body are inseparable, entwined, co-present aspects of one and the same phenomenon (which, again, we call the lived/living body), and likewise it means that “solitude and communication cannot be the two horns of a
dilemma, but two ‘moments’ of one phenomenon…,“\textsuperscript{141} that to be in contact with oneself is already to be in contact with others (and vice versa), that selfhood (“solitude”) and alterity (“communication,” or the extension of the self to others) are reciprocally constitutive aspects of being-in-the-world, two interdependent moments of the phenomenon we call intersubjectivity. Interiority and exteriority, then, are co-constitutive rather than separable and opposed aspects of conscious existence, and it is in virtue of that interdependence that my presence to myself and that an other’s presence to him/herself are not irreconcilably divorced from one another but are, on the contrary, always already open to one another and, at the most basic level of reality, intertwined. Since “inside and outside are inseparable”\textsuperscript{142} – since conscious existence is essentially incarnate – self-presence not only does not exclude or negate the presence of others but, on the contrary, already includes and depends upon it. The presence of others is already, in fact and in principle, implicated in my own presence to myself. Again, the embodiment of consciousness is precisely what lets consciousness, and therefore also alterity, come to presence in the world.

Consciousness, then, necessarily permeates the living body or is, rather, the very enactment of a living body as such; it is the intentionality that is directly, immediately expressed by the living body and its comportments. Consciousness is inseparable from, and therefore directly perceptible in and through, the dynamic, projective engagements through which a living body skillfully copes with its milieu and signifies itself as such. Perception is never withdrawn entirely into an internal space of appearances or representations, for indeed it refers to our inaugural and continually renewed openness to a world that allows us to distinguish between “internal” appearances in opposition to “external” reality in the first place: it is that site and

\textsuperscript{141} Ibid., p. 359.
\textsuperscript{142} Ibid., p. 407.
movement of givenness that antecedes and unsettles any reflective diremption of “subject” and “object,” yet it is nevertheless not a “transcendental” structure insofar as transcendentality traditionally designates ideality (that is, existence outside of nature or an essentially fleshless manner of being). Perception is neither merely “one of the facts thrown up in the world”\footnote{Ibid., p. 207.} nor is it entirely the internal presence to itself or intuitus mentis of a cogito, but is the dialectic rapport between a living body and its world. We only ever perceive with and through our lived/living bodies, which means perception is always already a bodily performance, always already an intentional, behavioral act. The lived/living body is always already a perceiving, behaving body, always already a sense-making style of being.

Sentience is, at the most basic level, corporeal reflexivity (or auto-affection), and this reflexivity that constitutes the living, sentient body precisely entails, or is always already, contact with, and an intentional directedness toward, a world and other bodies. Interiority, then, is essentially a radical, incessant openness to, orientation toward, and hence envelopment within, exteriority. Since it is essentially embodied, consciousness is not, as Sartre would have it, pure “nothingness”; it is not a “nihilation” of “Being(-in-itself)” or of “nature” but is rather a “fission of Being from the inside…at whose termination, and not before, I come back to myself.”\footnote{Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” in The Primacy of Perception, p. 186. This “fission of Being from the inside” is exactly what Merleau-Ponty elsewhere refers to as “dehiscence,” which again (like the term écart, with which it is synonymous in Merleau-Ponty’s ontology) means the generative differentiation through which any distinct thing or phenomenon is constituted as such, or rather a non-oppositional divergence between things that is necessarily accompanied by their overlapping and that is the crux of any fundamental ontological relationship. Dehiscence is especially exemplified by the reflexivity of the living body, but for Merleau-Ponty it is endemic to any being, identity, or phenomenon, and very may well be equated with Being as such. Though “dehiscence” and écart are synonymous in Merleau-Ponty’s ontology, the former (as I mentioned earlier) is derived from botany, whereas the latter is derived from Gestalt theory, in which it refers to the spacing between foreground and background that constitutes any perception.} To be conscious is to be flesh in touch with itself, and to be flesh in touch with itself is simply to be a perceiving, affective, acting body; it is essentially to be embedded within, or extended or
displaced into, meaningful and value-laden relations with a carnal world and with other carnalities.

We see, then, that Merleau-Ponty advances a radical repudiation of the very starting point of Cartesian doubt: Descartes begins from the unargued thesis that he has indubitable, immediate access to his own mind, yet this is simply false: as Merleau-Ponty argues, I only have access to my own mind in and through my relations with the minds (or rather living bodies) of others; I only achieve subjectivity amidst other subjectivities. For Merleau-Ponty, there must be an “inextricable involvement”\(^{145}\) with others that precedes and enables any beliefs or doubts I may formulate about them and which is also, for that reason, the source of the very concepts of mental qualities and characteristics I may ever introspectively ascribe to myself and thus ever analogically ascribe to others. As I will elaborate below and again in the chapters to follow, I have no “inner” life at all – no “I”, no interiority or reflective sense of self – if I have not already been exposed to, addressed by, and immersed with other “inner” lives, for the self can only exist as such if it is already differentiated from, thus implicated in community with, others.

Thus, Merleau-Ponty does not entirely deny but nevertheless considerably undermines the traditionally supposed asymmetry between my consciousness of myself and my consciousness of others, for if there is a difference between them, it is not because the former consists of my coincidence with, or transparency to, myself, whereas the latter consists of my relationship with that with which I can never coincide or which must be absolutely opaque to me. In other words, the difference between the self’s reflexive relationship with itself and the self’s relationship with others cannot be understood in terms of a difference between, on the one hand, pure, unmediated immanence (or total, internal coincidence with oneself) and, on the other hand,

\(^{145}\) Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and The Invisible*, p. 84.
absolute transcendence (or total non-coincidence with, or oppositional exclusion from, what is outside oneself). Merleau-Ponty repudiates any dualistic opposition between immanence and transcendence, selfhood and alterity (indeed, as we will later see, he even repudiates the very opposition between the traditional alternatives of identity and dualistic non-identity, coincidence and oppositional non-coincidence). This is not to say that there is no such thing as genuine, irreducible transcendence or alterity (as we will also later see, Merleau-Ponty is quite clear that every relationship is necessarily constituted by infinite, irremediable distance), but it is to deny that there is ever anything like “pure” immanence or “pure” transcendence, for they are always already entwined with – always already reciprocally conditioned and contaminated by – each other. To put it somewhat less abstractly, the self’s reflexive relationship with itself is constituted by an equally reflexive relationship with others. Of course, there is an essential, irreducible difference between the self’s relationship with itself and its relationship with others: if others are genuinely other, then in principle the self cannot perceive or know them exhaustively or “without remainder”: others must infinitely exceed the self’s horizons of experience and knowledge. This is simply the point that I can never live through or inhabit another’s lived experiences: the interiority of an Other would logically cease to be that other’s interiority were I to inhabit it, for then it would be my own. The point I wish to underscore here, however, is that the supposed radical asymmetry between my relationship with my own mind and my relationship with the minds of others which traditionally motivates skepticism concerning other minds, or which often conjures the specter of solipsism, is false: though the self’s relationship with itself is qualitatively different from its relationships with others, both are equally reflexive, for (as we have already seen and as we will further see) they are primordially coupled or co-constitutive: I never was, and never could have been, in pure, isolated communion with myself in the first
place, for in order for me to have any relationship with myself at all it is necessary that I have already been exposed to and affirmed by others, that I have already journeyed beyond myself into a world shared with others. The self exists as such only insofar as it has always already returned to itself from its passage into otherness, which precisely means that its return to itself is never settled, that its reflexive (and sometimes reflective) movement back to itself is always at the same time its departure from itself, that its constitutive movement inward is at the same time its extension outward, that it is never wholly “at one with itself” for it is always outside or ahead of itself, that “as Hegel said, to retire into oneself is also to leave oneself.”

In short, self-reflexivity can never be self-coincidence, so if there is any “asymmetry” between my relationship with my own mind and my relationship with the minds of others, it cannot consist in the fact that I “coincide” with my own mind yet never “coincide” with the minds of others, or that my own mind is transparent to me while the minds of others are entirely opaque to me, or that my own internal “mind’s eye”/“I” can never elude me while the mind of an Other (if indeed I am permitted to suppose it exists) is but a Skinnerian black box, an unplumbable, brackish abyss. The supposed transparency of one’s own consciousness is yet another vestige of Cartesianism, and so too is the correlative notion of the utter inscrutability of another’s consciousness. I can never coincide with another’s consciousness, but it is likewise the case that can I never coincide with my own. The subjectivity of an Other can never be transparent to me, but neither can my own subjectivity ever be transparent to me. The reflexivity of the living body is analogous to that of the “self” or “mind,” and of course the latter is grounded in, and is an extension of, the former. To touch is also, necessarily at the same time, to be touched; in order to touch something, it is necessary that I myself be tangible and reciprocally

\[146\] Ibid., p.49.
“touched” by the thing that I touch, yet the agency of touching and the concomitant passivity of being-touched – the hand or body that touches and the hand or body that is touched – never coincide with one another; they are phenomenologically and ontologically co-constitutive – they are “two leaves”\(^\text{147}\) of one and the same living body, two moments of one and the same body’s

\(^{147}\) Ibid., 137. Merleau-Ponty often likes to use the metaphor of “leaves”/“leaves” in order to describe the relationship between two different yet com-ponent and co-constitutive phenomena or orders of being. As Robert Vallier remarks in a footnote in his English translation of Merleau-Ponty’s courses on \textit{Nature}, the term that is translated as “leaf” is \textit{feuiller}, which can refer to the literal leaf of a tree yet also to a “or folio-leaf” or simply the “leaves” (i.e., pages) of a book. Vallier provides a rich account of the various senses one might associate with these terms in Merleau-Ponty, but in most contexts I think the latter sense is primary. That is, when Merleau-Ponty remarks that two “things” (or orders of being) are “two leaves/leaves,” the context usually makes it clear that we should understand this to mean that they are related to each other like two sides of single page, because in most contexts he is clearly describing two distinct things that are nevertheless com-ponent or inseparable, or things that are two different yet co-given aspects of one and the same “thing” (as are the two sides of a page in a book). The instance I have quoted here is a clear example of this, because in its context Merleau-Ponty is discussing the relationship between the “objective body” (the body as an object) and the “phenomenal body” (the body I experience as a subject of sensation and perception), suggesting that they are two irreducibly different yet nonetheless inseparable, com-ponent aspects of one and the same phenomenon: the lived body; the non-oppositional or non-disjunctive divergence or interval between the body as object and body as subject constitutes the phenomenon of the lived body (thus, as I remarked earlier, Merleau-Ponty does not place “the lived body” on the side of “the phenomenal body” as, say, Sartre and (arguably) Husserl do, but understands it rather as a being constituted by “two leaves.” Below, I refer to Merleau-Ponty’s usage of the image of “two lips,” which communicates the same point. For Vallier’s discussion of Merleau-Ponty’s usage of the terms “leaves”/“leaves,” see \textit{Nature}, p. 305 (footnote 7).

Lastly, though I think this expression is a reasonable metaphor for what Merleau-Ponty is trying to describe, it is important to acknowledge that Merleau-Ponty himself is reticent about it and registers its limitations. Thus, almost immediately after he compares the objective and phenomenal aspects of the lived body to “two leaves,” he writes:

One should not even say, as we did a moment ago, that the body is made up of two leaves, of which the one, that of the “sensible,” is bound up with the rest of the world. There are not two leaves or two layers...To speak of leaves or layers is still to flatten and to juxtapose, under the reflective gaze, what coexists in the living and upright body. If one wants metaphors, it would be better to say that the body sensed and the body sentient are as the obverse and the reverse, or again, as two segments of one sole circular course that goes above from left to right and below from right to left, but which is but one sole movement in its two phases. - \textit{The Visible and the Invisible}, p.137-138.

We clearly see Merleau-Ponty struggling here to articulate the relationship he wishes to articulate, and I appreciate the honesty with which he conveys that struggle. Of course, he suggests here that perhaps rather than conceive of the objective and phenomenal aspects of the body as “two leaves” or “layers” we might better conceive of them as two inseparable aspects or moments of a movement in which they turn about one another in the manner of a double-helix, yet if anything this nicely illustrates our inevitable confrontation with the limitations of language when we attempt to describe the basic structures of lived experience and Being, structures that, as Merleau-Ponty repeatedly insists, confound the traditional categories we use (especially in philosophy) to talk about the world and that will never be fully available to reflective thought. The task of phenomenology, of course, is to attempt to create new concepts or means of expression that may better honor the fundamental structures and features of our relationship with the world (and of Being as disclosed through our relationship with the world), a task that will always be unfinished. It is for this reason, I think, that Merleau-Ponty so often turns to art and that for him, in the end, perhaps art just is what phenomenology (and philosophy broadly) ought to be.
“momentum of existence”\textsuperscript{148} – yet they are nevertheless irreducibly different or non-identical; they are two moments of that dehiscence through which a body becomes sentient precisely by sensing, hence becoming other to, itself. Thus, the self’s coincidence with itself – just like the sentient body’s coincidence with itself, or just like the coincidence of touching and being-touched – is, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, only ever “imminent and never realized in fact.”\textsuperscript{149} Such coincidence or identity “always miscarries at the last moment”\textsuperscript{150} or “eclipses at the moment of realization,”\textsuperscript{151} and for this reason “we must accustom ourselves to understand that “thought” (cogitatio) is not an invisible contact of self with self, that it lives outside of this intimacy with oneself…”\textsuperscript{152} As I will now elaborate, the fact that the self “lives outside of intimacy with itself” is precisely what allows it to live in intimacy with others; indeed, it is already the self’s intimacy with others.

I can never, in principle, coincide with another’s consciousness or interiority, yet it is also the case that I can never truly coincide with my own, for (as we have seen) consciousness is necessarily ecstatic, or constituted precisely by its contact with what is other than or outside itself: in short, self-reflexivity is self-othering; auto-affection is always also hetero-affection. The movement through which life or subjectivity is constituted as such is always a “reflection by ecstasy.”\textsuperscript{153} My mode of access to my own mind and my mode of access to the minds of others may be different, but it does not follow that the former is direct whereas the latter is indirect: rather, they are both modes – albeit different modes – of direct access. Thus, “we have pointed out elsewhere that consciousness seen from outside cannot be a pure for itself. We are beginning

\textsuperscript{148} Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, p.84.
\textsuperscript{149} The Visible and the Invisible, p. 147.
\textsuperscript{150} Ibid., p. 9.
\textsuperscript{151} Ibid., p.147.
\textsuperscript{152} Ibid., p.234.
\textsuperscript{153} Ibid., p.225.
to see that the same applies to consciousness seen from the inside.”¹⁵⁴ Though others, precisely in order to be others, must not be accessible to me in the same manner in which I am accessible to myself, it does not follow that my access to myself is “direct” or immediate whereas my access to others is only “indirect” or inferential: there is a significant phenomenological difference between my access to my own subjectivity and my access to other subjectivities, yet both are equally modes of direct access. My access to my own mind and my access to the minds of others may be qualitatively different, yet both may be, and both nonetheless are, modes of direct access. In other words, first-personal givenness is not the only mode of direct perceptual givenness: only dualism supports such a restriction of direct access or givenness to the “first-person” perspective. Another’s subjectivity may not be given to me in the same manner in which my own is directly given to me, but that does not mean that another’s subjectivity is not directly given to me. The Other’s subjectivity is given to me in a manner quite different from the manner in which my own is given to me, but, as we have already seen, both are nonetheless modes of direct givenness.

Moreover, as we have also already seen, my direct givenness to myself can never be coincidence with myself, or can never be transparent givenness to myself. Contrary to Cartesian conceptions of it, the first-personal mode of givenness – the self’s givenness to itself – is never, in principle, transparent. I am never transparent to myself, and not only does that mean, as Merleau-Ponty argues, that I am accessible to others and that others are accessible to me, it also means that there are aspects of myself – aspects of my own interiority – that are only accessible to me through others, that there are things only others can ever show or tell me about myself. As we know quite well from everyday experience, I can never quite see myself in the manner in

which others see me, yet I am largely defined by the perspectives of others. Perhaps I have a
tendency to apologize too much or to acquiesce too readily to the opinions and criticisms of
others, yet I may be utterly incognizant of my diffidence. Perhaps I have a tendency toward
arrogance or obnoxiousness in my interactions with others of which I am unaware. Perhaps there
is a phony quality to the manner in which I express certain emotions (perhaps I express, say,
happiness or sadness a bit “too much” given the context). Perhaps I express an intense aversion
to something yet, unbeknownst to me, I do so “a little too intensely,” that is, in manner that
suggests I “protest too much,” and thus am perhaps not quite as repelled by it as I claim to be.
Perhaps I am not completely (if at all) aware of how deeply unhappy I am, yet my unhappiness is
projected through my behaviors in all kinds of ways that are apparent to others yet unbeknownst
to myself, and it takes someone to notice this and to ask me whether I am “fine” in order for me
to realize that indeed I am not. These are just a few common, empirical examples of
consciousness’ opacity to itself, and though I have no doubt that Freud is right about the
existence of the unconscious, one does not necessarily need to turn to psychoanalysis in order to
understand this fact, for an essential structure of any form of consciousness is that it be engaged
with a world (and with others) that always, as such, distances it from itself: it is an essential
structure of consciousness that consciousness be distanced from itself.

So, I may act and express myself in the world in ways in which I am consciously
unaware, yet these nevertheless reflect deep elements of my personality, and it takes others to
show them to me, just as it takes others to show or to teach me anything about my conscious
existence in the world at all. As I will further discuss, I am defined all the way down by my
relations with others, and that means that who or what I am is so much more than whatever is
disclosed to me about myself from the first-person point of view, that what or who I am is
already extended into others, already supported by webs of carnal, intersubjective interdependencies. There is such a thing as “interiority,” yet it is never quite as “interior” as philosophy traditionally conceives of it. When one withdraws from the world in supposedly solitary meditation, it is easy to become mesmerized by the reflective gaze one bends back on oneself and to define knowledge by the supposed privileged immediacy of one’s reflective givenness to oneself, yet one thereby forgets that in lived experience this immediacy that appears to characterizes one’s relationship to oneself is not quite as “immediate” as it reflectively appears, for indeed it has always already been “mediated” by one’s truly immediate fleshy contact with others and with a world. This is one reason why Ricoeur remarks that “…phenomenology begins by a humiliation or wounding of the knowledge belonging to immediate consciousness.” ¹⁵⁵ The aim of phenomenology is to elucidate the essential structures of lived, immediate experience, yet paradoxically this often means revealing lived, immediate experience to be not quite so “immediate” indeed, for it means revealing my supposedly most immediate experiences – that is, my internal experiences of myself – to be “mediated” by relations with things and others that throw me outside myself, carnal relations with a world and with other carnalities that always defer or despoil the perfect immediacy that would characterize transparent presence to, or true communion with, myself. As Derrida will later argue, even the self-presence one experiences in one’s internal monologue with oneself is never a “pure,” true communion with oneself, for there is necessarily an irreducible interval or diachrony between “speaking” and hearing oneself speak. Self-presence is always also self-absence, and Merleau-Ponty consistently makes this very point throughout all of his writings. Merleau-Ponty repeatedly emphasizes “the key idea…that perception qua wild perception is of itself ignorance.

of itself, imperception…,”¹⁵⁶ that consciousness – even logos – simply does not have its seat in a subject in full possession of itself, that the auto-affection of the sentient body – and that consequently the reflexivity of consciousness, thought, or “the voice” – is also always the hetero-affection or self-othering of that body in and through its involvements with a world.

Merleau-Ponty concludes that “there is, then, no privileged self-consciousness, and other people are no more closed systems that I am myself.”¹⁵⁷ I do not think it can be underscored enough that this claim articulates not only the condition of the possibility of intersubjectivity but also the condition of the always already actualized fact of intersubjectivity. I can never be transparent to myself precisely because I am embodied and because it is only through my bodily contact with a world that I am ever in contact with myself, yet my embodiment is immediately, directly, always already contact with embodied others. Not only does my embodiment make me directly accessible to others, but the embodiments of others likewise make them directly accessible to me, and moreover to be an embodied subject is already to be constituted by one’s access or exposure to other embodied subjects. “The perceiving mind is an incarnated mind,”¹⁵⁸ and though this is why I am never able to perceive either myself or other minds “without remainder,” it is also why I am able to perceive myself and other minds at all.

So, it is precisely because subjectivity is embodied that “the subject loses its purity and its transparency,”¹⁵⁹ and moreover “the other can be evident to me because I am not transparent for myself, and because my subjectivity draws its body in its wake.”¹⁶⁰ These claims are, as we have seen, intimately connected. My lack of transparent presence to myself is the price I pay for

¹⁵⁶ The Visible and the Invisible, p. 213. Italics are Merleau-Ponty’s.
¹⁵⁷ Phenomenology of Perception, p. 337.
¹⁵⁹ Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, p. 350.
¹⁶⁰ Ibid., p.352.
being “a self” at all, the price I pay for the possibility of anything being perceptually present to me. Not only is my non-coincidence with myself constitutive of my presence to myself (hence constitutive of “me”), it is also what enables anything to be present to me at all, including others. If I were to coincide with myself, or if I were to be given transparently to myself, my perceptual life or “selfhood” would instantly be extinguished; I would lapse into an intrauterine, syncetic absorption in Being; I would slip into that proverbial “night of identity in which all cows are black,”¹⁶¹ that prelapsarian repose in communion with the world prior to the birth of self-consciousness; I would have no “self” – no subjectivity or identity – at all. Self-reflexivity (or auto-affection even at the most germinal level) is essentially non-self-coincidence, hence the repeated deferral of any transparent, panoptic internal view of oneself. If absolute transparency or privacy were to constitute interiority as such, then no interiority would truly have access to any other interiority, nor would interiority as such even be possible in the first place. A “hermetically sealed self is no longer a finite self”¹⁶² and is, therefore, no “self” at all.

As I will further discuss in chapters four and five, “the mind’s eye” can never take a “God’s eye” perspective toward anything, including of course especially itself, yet we have already seen above that the conditions that make possible my perceptual access to the world – the fundamental structures of perception itself and in particular my lived body – must, as such, always elude ordinary perception, or may only be present, paradoxically, as radically absent. The self can never be fully present to itself or must, to a great extent, be radically absent to itself because, in order to be present to itself at all, it must pass through the world that is other than itself, or must pass through others that are others to itself. Again, this also simply means that the self must be an embodied self. My lived/living body through which I have access to a world and

¹⁶² Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, p. 373.
to others (as well as access to myself via a world and others) is also what forbids me from ever being present to myself completely, and moreover my lived/living body itself, as we have seen, can never be completely present to me either. Even “vision is not a certain mode of thought or presence to self; it is the means given me for being absent from myself…”¹⁶³ Perhaps the most important, then, is that the very starting of Cartesian doubt (and thus the very starting point of Cartesian solipsism) – that is, the cogito, or the self’s reflective first-personal relationship with itself – is not a fundamental, unmediated given but is always already a later efflux of one’s passage outside oneself or of the carnal presence of the world to oneself and is, for that reason alone, deprived of an absolutely transparent or private interiority. As Merleau-Ponty summarizes this point:

…Self-possession and coincidence with the self do not serve to define thought, which is, on the contrary, an outcome of expression and always an illusion, in so far as the clarity of what is acquired rests upon the fundamentally obscure operation which has enabled us to immortalize within ourselves a moment of fleeting life.¹⁶⁴

We can, like Descartes, shut up our ears and close our eyes and withdraw from our bodies in meditation, but though we may withdraw ourselves from our bodies and from the world we never cease to be embodied and in the world, and our sensuous, embodied being-in-the-world never ceases to be the primordial and inescapable condition of all of our flights into meditation and of the comforting illusion of solitude. We are very proud of our ability to say “I”, very proud of our power to bend the ray of consciousness back on itself and to excavate behind our thoughts a thinker, behind our deeds a doer, behind our experiences a subject, but this thinker, this doer, or this subject that (I think) I am is not in fact there a priori behind the scenes of experience – outside of space and time, insulated from the winds and tides, the vicissitudes and contingencies

¹⁶⁴ Phenomenology of Perception, p. 389.
of worldly existence – waiting to be discovered, nor is it something that bootstraps itself into being the moment I think it. We might posit the *cogito* as ontologically and epistemically anterior to sensuous, carnal, intersubjective life, but it is really a contingent, later-order *accomplishment* of that life, a derivative and only ever fugitive expression of a life that has to labor continually to express itself as such, yet once expressed it naturally forgets the crucible from which it came to expression, the agon of worldly, carnal, affective relations – the flesh – that it always already is. The “I” appears as an autonomous, solitary, purely internal and self-relational, disembodied spectator behind a screen of appearances – it appears before itself, by itself – only after “it” has *gathered* itself together, that is, only after it has returned from the world, comported itself, tensed its vocal cords, flexed its neck, drawn its breath, mobilized every imperceptible nerve and muscle, and summoned the power of speech (which it only learned how to access from others in the first place) in order to utter that simple little word, a word that, once uttered (whether outwardly or inwardly), acquires the appearance of absolute privacy, the sense of pure immediacy, or the aura of transcendental primacy.

So, if anything is truly “immediate,” it is not the subject’s relation to itself in introspection but rather its contact with others and with a world through its behaving, affective body. The subject’s constitutive reflexive relation to itself immediately implicates itself in what is outside or other than itself, for (as we have seen) it is only insofar as it is sensible that the subject can sense itself; it is only through the circuit of the world that a subject can relate to itself and thus *be* a subject. A body senses itself only in and through sensing its world, and therefore in sensing itself a body is already other than itself, already outside itself, already in the world. My incarnation – my autochthonous, affective and intentional attachments to sensible, material reality – thus allow me to be present to myself, but they also, in precisely the same manner,
allow me to be present to others and allow others to be present to me: if I am sensible to myself (i.e., conscious) only because I am myself sensible (i.e., embodied), it is no longer mysterious how I may be conscious of others, for others are likewise conscious of themselves only because they too are sensible, or only because they too “have” an outside or a body, or rather only because their consciousnesses are also already blended into a surface of contact with the world, already “sunk into corporeity.” ¹⁶⁵ For two or more subjects to be incarnate subjects is for them to be extended into the same carnal world, and for them to be extended into the same carnal world is for them already to be extend into or to “encroach upon”¹⁶⁶ one another. Intersubjectivity, then, is simply the meeting of two or more such surfaces of contact and, in the first instance, is often literally the touching of two or more bodies. To be sentient is minimally to be self-reflexive, and self-reflexivity is affectivity: it is the capacity to be sensitive to, hence affected by, things external to oneself. And it is precisely this reflexivity that defines the living, sentient body. Moreover, this reflexivity through which all lives or subjectivities irrupt into being enables, and indeed already is, intersubjectivity. Intersubjectivity is the commingling of two or more sentient (self-reflexive) forms of flesh that are sensitive to one another as such in and through the very same sensitivity to a world that constitutes them as the sentient, self-reflexive forms of flesh that they are. In its fundamental or nascent condition, intersubjectivity is simply the spark of one body’s reflection upon itself kindling and intensifying, and reciprocally being kindled and intensified by, the spark of another’s; it is the rippling of carnal senses and sensitivities across sentient carnalities, the propagation of affects across affective bodies; it is the reflexive, direct sensing of the reflexivity of another living body through the similar reflexivity

of one’s own. If am able to sense another life, it is because my opening onto a world is the very same opening through which other lives pass into it as I pass into theirs; it is because the affective threshold through which one passes into the world is also that through which the world and others pass into oneself. This may sound at best poetic and at worst woefully abstract, but it is attested by very ordinary and concrete phenomena: it is, for example, why taking hold of another’s hand is significantly different from taking hold of, say, a doorknob; it is why caressing (or being caressed by) an ‘Other’ is significantly different from brushing up against a cushion or stroking a piece of fabric; it is why petting, say, a living cat is significantly different from palpating or dissecting the cadaver of one; it is why masturbation is significantly different from sex with a partner; it is why it is nearly impossible to tickle oneself; it is why when, say, a spider unexpectedly crawls across one’s arm or foot one immediately flinches (regardless of one’s attitudes toward spiders), and such a response is categorically different from how one would immediately respond to an object or piece of fabric that might suddenly touch one’s body: all such affects – all such stimulations and tremulations – disclose what we might call the “Ur-phenomenon” of intersubjectivity, that exposure of the self to what is other than itself (including to other selves) without which it would not exist at all and on the condition of which it may never wholly coincide with, or be transparent to, itself.

As we have already established, whenever we encounter another life or subjectivity, we do not first infer its presence but rather perceive – indeed, feel – it directly through the same corporeal reflexivity through which we perceive or feel anything at all, we “first have a wince, like we have when we find a caterpillar where we weren’t expecting it”\(^{167}\) because the reflexivity of one (self-)reflexive body reflexively senses the reflexivity of another reflexive body, because

two sites of reflexivity are, at least to some extent, bound to reflect (or mirror) one another, “because one ek-stasis is compossible with other ek-stases,”\textsuperscript{168} because two (self-)reflexive bodies cannot but, in and through their (self-)reflexivity, reverberate upon or resound within one another as such, because the reflexivity through which a body is open to itself and to its world – the reflexivity in virtue of which a body is a living, conscious body – is precisely that opening or “invagination”\textsuperscript{169} through which all living, conscious bodies ceaselessly slip into and out of one another, because flesh that folds back upon itself inescapably enfold, and is in turn enfolded by, others that do so likewise, since such flesh is never “a sack in which I am enclosed”\textsuperscript{170} but – analogous to the literal skin of the body – is a site or surface of perpetual openness to, and contact with, other flesh. “…Because my eyes which see, my hands which touch, can also be seen and touched…because our flesh lines and even envelops all the visible and tangible things with which it is nevertheless surrounded, the world and I are within one another…”,\textsuperscript{171} yet if “the world and I are within one another,” then others (who are likewise within the world) and I are already within one another as well. If I truly am in and of the world through the corporeality that I share with it, then the world and everything that comes along with it is already part of my corporeality, including especially the corporealities of others. If I truly belong to the perceptible world, then “whenever I try to understand myself the whole fabric of the perceptible world comes too, and with it come the others who are caught in it.”\textsuperscript{172} If my subjectivity is extended into the world through its corporeality, then it is already extended into the corporealities of other subjectivities that are themselves likewise extended into, or likewise extensions of, my world.

\textsuperscript{169} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{The Visible and the Invisible}, p. 152.
\textsuperscript{170} Ibid., p.134.
\textsuperscript{171} Ibid., p.123.
\textsuperscript{172} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{Signs}, “Introduction,” p. 15.
Thus, we are already seeing not only that subjectivity is always already intersubjectivity, but also that (inter)subjectivity is always already intercorporeality.

We see, then, that non-self-coincidence is an openness to oneself that is equally and at the same time an openness to the world and to others, an openness to oneself and to others that is impossible without the lived body and that is constituted by the lived body in composition with other bodies. The self is always a self “by divergence (d’écart),”¹⁷³ and its divergence from itself is also its incorporation into a world and into other corporealities. This is the second part of Merleau-Ponty’s claim that my lack of transparent givenness to myself is the condition of my access to others: it is the condition of my access to others not only because it is indeed the condition of my access to anything, but also because it is entailed by the incarnation of my subjectivity (and thus the incarnation of other subjectivities) without which, as we have seen, subjectivity would never be able to come to presence, or would never be directly perceptible, in the world at all. My adhesion to the world – that is, my incarnation – is what simultaneously mediates my relationship to myself and my relationships with others; it is what simultaneously differentiates me from myself and from others and thus reflexively couples me with others, reflexively couples the view I have of myself (my interiority) with the views that others take on me (my exteriority), reflexively couples the views that others have of themselves with the views that I take on them, reflexively couples the views that we each have of ourselves and of one another. As I will mention again in chapter five, the dehiscence of perceiver and perceived that constitutes the lived body – that is, the institution or self-differentiation (or auto-affection) of any sentient, self-sensing body – is at the same time the dehiscence of self and Other. This is precisely why Merleau-Ponty claims that “the experience of my own body and the experience of

¹⁷³ Merleau-Ponty, The Visible and the Invisible, p. 249.
the other are themselves the two sides one same Being.”¹⁷⁴ I may be exposed to myself and to a world because I “have” an outside, and I am exposed to others as such by virtue of the fact they too have an outside: that is, I am open to the others by virtue of our shared exteriority.

Intersubjectivity is possible because interiority is always already doubled by, or coupled with, exteriority. I may be an Other to an Other and an Other may be an Other to me because we each have an outside, because in order to be conscious of anything at all consciousness cannot be ontologically divorced from that of which it is conscious, which means that consciousness must be embodied: the ontological condition of an awareness and knowledge of others is in fact the very same ontological condition of consciousness (and self-consciousness) itself: embodiment. I am aware of others through the very corporeal reflexivity by virtue of which I am alive or conscious at all. Thus, my opening upon myself is an opening upon the world, and the Other’s opening upon him/herself is likewise an opening upon the same world, but my opening upon the world and the Other’s opening upon the world are equally an opening upon one another, for they are two aspects – “two leaves”¹⁷⁵ or “two lips”¹⁷⁶ – of an opening of or within the world itself.

Since “in the flesh there is no longer the alternative of the in-itself and the for-itself,”¹⁷⁷ the interiority of an Other is a certain kind of absence that is necessarily coupled with, hence directly perceptible in and through, the other’s bodily presence or exteriority. This is how others may be directly, non-inferentially accessible in such a way that preserves rather than negates their otherness: their interiorities are accessible directly through their conduct while nevertheless

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 225.
¹⁷⁵ Ibid., p.137.
¹⁷⁶ Ibid., p.136. In the English translation this is rendered as “two laps,” but this is a mistranslation of “les deux levres” (“two lips”), so I am rendering it here as Merleau-Ponty intended (and which is also the way that makes the most sense). I also wish to acknowledge that in its context, Merleau-Ponty is only describing the relationship between the “objective” and “subjective”/“phenomenal” aspects of the sentient body, but I think his description of the relationship between them applies just as well to the relationship between sentient bodies, between self and Other.
not coinciding with it. Thus, “I know unquestionably that that man over there sees...because it is visible in his eyes’ grasp of the scene,”\(^{178}\) and in virtue of the fact that all forms and manifestations of mindedness are inherently incarnate, and moreover in virtue of the fact that “my perceptual opening to the world...is more dispossession than possession,”\(^{179}\) I am likewise able to “know” and even share in the pleasures and pains, joys and sorrows, desires and thoughts of others, and indeed it is only because I have already been acquainted with these things in others that I may have ever begun to understand what they are in my own case or what they are as such; it is for this reason that the standpoint of Cartesian skepticism, as well as the standpoint from which I analogically extend mental states to others, is derivative rather than ontologically or epistemically primary. Thus, Merleau-Ponty proclaims that “the perception of other people and the intersubjective world is problematical only for adults.”\(^{180}\) Despite the “egocentricity” that is often attributed to them (by Piaget\(^{181}\) and others) at certain stages of their development, children

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\(^{179}\) Ibid., p. 170.

\(^{180}\) *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 355.

\(^{181}\) Merleau-Ponty develops a number of sustained criticisms of Piaget throughout his writings on child psychology. I cannot fully elaborate his engagement with Piaget here, but the criticism of Piaget that is most germane to the present discussion (and to Merleau-Ponty’s account of intersubjectivity in general) is the one that targets Piaget’s concept of infantile “egocentricity.” Though Merleau-Ponty does agree that maturation from young childhood to “adult” consciousness involves a process of “de-centering” (see “The Child’s Relations with Others,” in *The Primacy of Perception*, p 110), he takes issue with the ascription of “ego-centricity” to infancy and early stages of childhood, for at that level there is no awareness of oneself as a distinct self among others; rather, there is a “syncretism” that is precisely an “indistinction between me and the other.” Thus, “at first, the me...is entirely unaware of itself” (ibid., 120). Though Merleau-Ponty acknowledges that Piaget’s concept of egocentrism is a “subtle concept which often exceeds criticisms made of it” (see *Child Psychology and Pedagogy: The Sorbonne Lectures* 1949-1952, p. 141) because it does quite ascribe to infants a robust self-consciousness, he nonetheless suggest that the concept of “egocentricity” involves an illicit imposition of a structure of adult consciousness upon child conciousness, the fallacious transference of a concept only acquired in adulthood to infancy. Thus, Merleau-Ponty asks (clearly rhetorically), “Can we now conclude that the analysis of the child’s concepts by an adult is a satisfactory method?” (ibid., p. 141). This reinforces the point that Cartesian solipsism (which misconstrues the individuation achieved in adulthood as radical isolation from others) involves, we might say, a repression of childhood. The ascription of adult ego-centricity to infancy demonstrates a similar forgetfulness of childhood (a forgetfulness naturally motivated by the fact that in early childhood one precisely lack a robust sense of individuality) and, in some cases, leads us to reify ourselves as fundamentally isolated when in fact our very sense of individuality, and consequently our sense of isolation, only arises from a primordial syncretic involvement with others.
(especially infants) never doubt that other minds exist in the world and constantly, implicitly affirm that they do; nor do young children ever engage in the complicated processes of reasoning that philosophers have traditionally supposed we do whenever we affirm that another entity is conscious or “minded”:

At a very early age children are sensitive to facial expressions, e.g., the smile. How could that be possible if, in order to arrive at an understanding of the global meaning of the smile and to learn that the smile is a fair indication of a benevolent feeling, the child had to perform the complicated task I have just mentioned? How could it be possible if, beginning with the visual perception of another’s smile, he had to compare that visual perception of the smile with the movement that he himself makes when he is happy or when he feels benevolent – projecting to the other a benevolence of which he would have had intimate experience but which could not be grasped directly in the other? This complicated process would seem to be incompatible with the relative precociousness of the perception of others.\(^\text{182}\)

Though philosophical questions can never just be decided by empirical evidence, philosophers often ignore empirical evidence at their peril, and the classical problem of other minds is an illustrative example of this. Setting aside all of the arguments developed up to this point, it is also the case that the notion that we are primarily aware of others, or that we fundamentally “know” or come to believe that others exist, as the result of some process of inference is simply inconsistent with child psychology. Children are immediately aware of the fact that others exist, and indeed appropriately recognize and respond to specific mental states and attitudes in others, without performing any kind of analogical reasoning and without formulating predicative judgments. For example, infants clearly understand what a smile means without inferring it or without access to the concepts necessary to formulate a predicative judgment about it. Infants pre-reflectively, directly sense the meanings of various facial expressions long before they ever acquire a reflective sense-of-self and thus long before they are able to analogically posit mental attitudes in others. Of course, as Merleau-Ponty argues here, this would not be possible if inductive reasoning were the fundamental and necessary source of our awareness and knowledge.

of others. This would not be possible if the minds of others were only indirectly, rather than immediately and directly, accessible through their conduct. Merleau-Ponty’s point here, then, is not just a point about human psychological development; rather, it is a philosophical point that is disclosed through certain facts about human psychological development, namely that subjectivity cannot be withdrawn into an entirely enclosed interiority, for then it would never be accessible directly from the outside, and as Merleau-Ponty has already argued, if subjectivity were never directly accessible from the outside, it would never be accessible at all. And as we see here, infants would never be able to respond appropriately to the emotional or existential meanings of various facial expressions and bodily gestures if such meanings were not directly presented by, or immanent to, those expressions or gestures themselves. If the minds others could only ever be posited indirectly (as the result of, say, an analogical inference), then the fact that young children can correctly intuit the mental states or attitudes of others would be utterly inexplicable. Thus, everything I have argued up to this point is powerfully reinforced by the patent fact that children are able to perceive directly – not infer – other minds. It is only after one develops a robust sense-of-self through a long process of individuation (which is also already socialization) that one might become so mesmerized by oneself and by the putative privacy of one’s own experiences that one takes to doubt the existence of others. Children immediately affirm or take for granted that other minds (even that other non-human minds) exist, and as Nietzsche profoundly asks, “why should one not speak like children?”183 We might say that the traditional problem of other minds (like perhaps a number of other traditional philosophical problems, especially certain ones in ethics and political philosophy) arises from a repression of childhood.

Though it may seem like a crude oversimplification to say so, we might say that a baby’s response to his/her mother’s smile is a sufficient refutation of Cartesianism.\textsuperscript{184}

We have seen that Merleau-Ponty demonstrates that intersubjectivity is primarily \textit{intercorporeity}. This means that intersubjectivity happens through the direct exchange or pre-reflective coupling of motor projects and corporeal schemata, through the synergistic envelopment of bodily intentions and expressions. I immediately recognize the behaviors of others as modes of engagement with the world or as possible projects that are available to my own body, and immediately perceive them to be expressive of attitudes and affects that likewise surge through my own flesh. I often immediately take up the motor-intentional projects of others and immediately mirror the attitudes or affects of others, and vice versa. “This conduct which I am able only to see,” Merleau-Ponty writes, “I live somehow at a distance. I make it mine…Reciprocally I know that the gestures I make myself can be the objects of another’s intention.”\textsuperscript{185} This is to say that the gestures of another living body are immediately \textit{meaningful} to me as \textit{gestures}, that is, as orientations toward a world, as modes of directedness to meaning, as projects polarized toward things and tasks that I might apprehend or adopt as well and that are, as such, “instantaneously transferable.”\textsuperscript{186} Thus, Merleau-Ponty writes,

…I experience my own body as the power of adopting certain forms of behavior and a certain world, and I am given to myself merely as a certain hold upon the world; now, it is precisely my body which perceives the body of another, and discovers in that other body a miraculous prolongation of my own intentions, a familiar way of dealing with the world.\textsuperscript{187}

\textsuperscript{184} That is, it is a sufficient refutation of Cartesianism provided we understand or extrapolate how subjectivity must be constituted in order for such a feat to be accomplished, and that means having to do ontology. So, I am not suggesting that Cartesian metaphysics can \textit{simply} be refuted empirically. I am suggesting that sometimes empirical phenomena depend upon, hence disclose, deeper ontological conditions or truths, which is a claim that I do not think is controversial.

\textsuperscript{185} “The Child’s Relations with Others”, in \textit{The Primacy of Perception}, p. 118

\textsuperscript{186} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{Phenomenology of Perception}, p. 141.

\textsuperscript{187} Ibid., p. 353-354.
To perceive a living, behaving body is to perceive a “prolongation” of my own bodily comportments, capacities, and affects; it is first to perceive not an “alter-ego” whose privileged internal and putatively private awareness of itself I can never breach or inhabit but an *alter-body* whose powers, intentions, and vulnerabilities inherently, reflexively overlap and implicate my own. The “intentional threads”\(^{188}\) of my living body are already interwoven with those of other living, coping bodies, and, as we have seen, I would have no consciousness of myself or of my body at all if it were not for this fabric of carnal relations that my body weaves in concert with other bodies, this shared fabric through which my own incarnate subjectivity and the incarnate subjectivities of others are already threaded, this shared fabric that therefore weaves *me* into a “subject” or “self” just as much as I, through my bodily involvements, weave *it*.

So, to perceive a living body is not to perceive an “automaton” or a “mere” object or husk of matter, and neither is it to *infer* the existence of an ego “inside” of such a thing; it is to be dispossessed and swept up by the conduct of an Other; it is to perceive directly another life, another sense-making organism, another creative, artful agency, another “mind.” When I perceive a behaving body, I do not first perceive an “interior-less” exteriority and later posit analogically its interiority. Such a supposed divide between interiority and exteriority is a false abstraction, and like every false abstraction, it is one that always comes too late: the poles of interiority and exteriority are, in fact, already entangled in the phenomenon of the living, behaving body, and it is only a derivative act of reflection that tears them asunder. As we have seen, behavior is always already an irreducible presentation of interiority or alterity. For example, we all recognize a difference between, say, a living tiger and an animatronic model of a tiger, but this difference is a basic and significant difference indeed. The skeptic naturally

\(^{188}\)Ibid., p. xiii, 72, 106, 130.
worries that any animate body I perceive in the world might in fact really just be a particularly ingenious automaton, an entity whose movements are indistinguishable from those of “real” living, conscious bodies yet which is nonetheless devoid of life or consciousness, an entity that tricks me into taking it to be sentient when in fact it is just a machine or a “zombie.” I think we have already laid to rest the dualistic assumptions upon which this kind of skepticism always rests, but as Lawrence Hass insightfully points out\(^{189}\) (in a way that recalls, I think, the basic point of the famous “Turing test”), if we ever built a robot whose movements truly were completely indistinguishable from living behavior, then its movements would just be living behavior. Hass’ argument targets the claim that someday a robot’s behaviors might so perfectly imitate “real” behavior that it would be able to “fool us” into believing that it is sentient, a claim that is commonly proposed, of course, in order to support skepticism about other minds. “If it is possible to be fooled in this way, or if we accept the possibility that such a machine might someday be created,” so the skeptic reasons, “then why not think that every apparently sentient body is not likewise a mere machine, albeit a highly complicated one that can mimic sentience?”

The problem here is that in order to say that a machine merely “mimics” sentience but does not really possess it, one must appeal to something that distinguishes the mere machine from the truly sentient body, but to do this is to forfeit the skepticism one initially intended to establish. That is to say, the dilemma here is that either a sentient, behaving body is truly indistinguishable from the movements of a machine, in which case the movements of such a “machine” just are the movements of a sentient, behaving body, or one has to abandon the notion that they are completely indistinguishable, in which case one tacitly appeals to some knowledge of the difference between the two, and either alternative defeats the skepticism one intended to

establish. Either the behavior of a robot really is living, sentient behavior, or one must tacitly appeal to something that distinguishes its movements from those of “real” living, sentient behavior, and one forfeits skepticism in either case.

In the end, Merleau-Ponty shows us that the “problem of other minds” collapses into the “problem of other living, behaving bodies,” but such a problem is surely absurd; that is, to put the problem this way is to dissolve it, since there is obviously no justifiable doubt about the existence of other living, behaving bodies. In short, to perceive a “mind” is to perceive a living body, and to perceive a living body is to perceive a mind. It should be clear from everything we have seen thus far that Merleau-Ponty does not reduce subjectivity to the living body or equate mental phenomena with behavior. Merleau-Ponty is not a “behaviorist,” and he went to great lengths to distance his own views from those that fit that label (as I mentioned earlier, his first book, *The Structure of Behavior*, is largely devoted to refuting behaviorism and other reductionistic theories in psychology). However, in case this point is not yet sufficiently clear, I now wish to address more directly the fact that Merleau-Ponty does not advance, and explicitly rejects, a “behaviorist” account of subjectivity.

Now, there are different versions of “behaviorism.” The methodological behaviorism formulated and practiced most famously by J.B. Watson and B.F. Skinner is not exactly the same as the theory of “logical behaviorism” in philosophy of mind (developed mainly by the logical positivists who came to be known collectively as the “Vienna Circle,” and articulated in perhaps its most well-known form by Gilbert Ryle). The behaviorism of Watson and Skinner was an approach to studying and formulating explanations of human behavior in empirical psychology that broke from former, more speculative or “introspective” approaches (especially psychoanalysis), whereas “logical behaviorism” is in fact a theory concerning the nature of
consciousness as such (or at least a theory concerning the semantics of talking about consciousness\(^\text{190}\)). Thus, Watson’s and Skinner’s behaviorism is, we might say, less “ontologically robust” than logical behaviorism (since they do not really intend to provide a “theory of mind”), yet their approach to understanding behavior – regardless of the extent to which one describes it as merely a preferred “methodology” – is not without its own (problematic and indeed erroneous) ontological commitments. Watson and Skinner intended to make psychology “more scientific” by forcing it to restrict its attention only to empirical evidence. For them, the mind is inherently unobservable from the outside (and naturally we already know how Merleau-Ponty responds to such a notion); it is, as Skinner often put it, a “black box.” No one can really know what goes on inside someone else’s mind. However, one can know how a person behaves, and one might even be able to test predictions about how a person might behave in the future. So, if psychology is to be “scientific,” it must remain tethered to observable evidence and not make speculations about things that cannot, in principle, be observed in the outside the world. This means that psychology must only make predictions and test hypotheses about human behavior. One cannot know what goes on inside the “black box” of the human mind, yet one can observe behaviors (i.e., outputs) and link them to equally observable “stimuli” and the physiological mechanisms that mediate them (i.e., inputs). This is

\(^{190}\) This form of behaviorism largely arose from the “ordinary language philosophy” associated with logical positivism, according to which philosophical problems can and ought to be dissolved by appealing to the ways in which we ordinarily talk about the world. According to this approach, then, we can answer a question such as “what is consciousness?” by considering the ways in which we talk about it. So, when I say someone is “in pain,” what do I usually mean? According to logical behaviorism, I mean that someone is behaving in a way that indicates a pain state. And what do I mean by “pain?” According to logical behaviorism, I mean the ways in which someone would be disposed to behave under certain conditions. Thus, for the logical behaviorists, whenever we talk about mental states, we are always just talking about either behaviors or behavioral dispositions, and so if we focus on what we actually mean when we talk about consciousness, we can dissolve many of the persistent metaphysical problems that typically beleaguer attempts to understand it. Of course, this view is problematic for many reasons, not the least of which is that it does not really capture everything that we actually mean when we talk about consciousness in the first place.
why behaviorism in psychology tends to reduce human behavior to various forms of 
“conditioning,” as it explains behavior in terms of mechanisms that consistently yield certain 
behavioral “outputs” on the basis of certain environmental “inputs.” Of course, we have already 
seen why such a reductive understanding of behavior, and why the assumed divorce between 
mind and body that such a reductive understanding of behavior tacitly presupposes, is 
unacceptable, and thus Watson and Skinner stand as illustrative examples of how science is 
always based upon metaphysical and epistemological commitments (often quite poor or ill-
considered ones).

On the other hand, The Vienna Circle’s and Ryle’s “logical behaviorism” was an attempt 
to develop an anti-Cartesian account of consciousness, yet it was (as are all reductionistic 
thories of consciousness) simply a logical offspring of the metaphysical framework Descartes 
cemented, and thus was not at all an alternative to that framework. Logical behaviorism truly 
does equate the mind with behavior. In logical behaviorism, “mental states” just are “behavioral 
states.” This is not to say that mental states are only actual, occurrent behaviors; they can also be 
dispositions to behave in certain ways. Thus, anger, for example, consists not only in the ways in 
which I might actually display anger but also in the ways in which I might be disposed to display 
it given certain factors or conditions. I might exhibit anger in any number of ways, yet even if I 
am not currently exhibiting it, I might be disposed to do so if, say, I were cut off by another 
driver while changing lanes on the highway, and this disposition too is “anger.” In this way, 
logical behaviorism is able to accommodate the existence of mental states that are, in a way, 
“internal” inasmuch as they are latent, yet such states are surely not “spiritual” or non-physical. 
That is, the disposition to express anger in a certain way is analogous to, say, “brittleness,” or the 
potential of an object to break under certain conditions: a disposition to shout, curse, or stamp
my feet may be, in a sense, “internal” until something triggers me to act in such a way, yet it is no more non-physical than, say, the brittleness of a window. This is why Ryle argues that the Cartesian notion the mind as a “ghost in the machine” (which is a phrase he coined) is fallacious because it misdescribes as disembodied or “spiritual” a phenomenon that is thoroughly physical; again, it makes no more sense to regard anger as “immaterial” as it does to regard the brittleness of a window as “immaterial.”

Logical behaviorism is a deeply flawed and now outmoded view for many reasons, and I am not going to survey all of the criticisms of it that have been advanced. Here, it will suffice to mention that the most important problem with the theory – the one that commonly motivates most people to reject it – is that it utterly fails to accommodate (or even simply denies) the essential qualitative or “what-it-is-like” character of experience. That is to say, logical behaviorism truly denies what we call “interiority.” According to logical behaviorism, to be “angry,” “sad,” or “happy” just is to perform certain behaviors (or just is to be disposed to perform certain behaviors) that commonly indicate anger, sadness, or happiness. This means that logical behaviorism cannot accommodate any distinction between genuine feeling and pretense, between really feeling, say, happiness and merely feigning it. Moreover, on its own terms, behaviorism simply cannot claim that there is anything more to a mental state than the ways in which one does or might behaviorally exhibit it; on this view, a disposition to behave in some way is as “internal” as a mental state can get. Behaviorism, then, denies or ignores what are commonly referred to as “qualia,” i.e., the “painfulness” of pain, the “redness” of red, the “happiness” of feeling or being happy, and so on, and therefore cannot indeed account for the difference between feeling pain rather than pleasure, seeing red rather than green, feeling happy rather than sad. Again, there is nothing to being in a mental state beyond behaviors or behavioral
dispositions. Thus, logical behaviorism attempts to remedy the Cartesian divide between interiority and the body by eliminating interiority entirely from its account of subjectivity and picture of reality, yet in doing so it in fact concedes rather than truly remedies that divide and entails consequences that are just as untenable as the Cartesian concept of subjectivity it opposes.

It should be obvious why Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy is emphatically opposed to any version of behaviorism. All versions of behaviorism – whether that of Watson and Skinner or that of Ryle and the logical positivists – assume from the start a divide between interiority and exteriority. That is, they in fact concede conceptually the very Cartesian mind/body dichotomy they pretend to oppose. Behaviorism and Cartesianism both presuppose a divorce between interiority and exteriority; indeed, behaviorism is really just the reactionary counterpart to Cartesianism: the latter opposes interiority (“mind,” res cogitans) to exteriority (“body,” res extensa) whereas the former either reduces interiority to exteriority or treats interiority as an inscrutable “black box” behind or “within” exteriority. It should be clear by now that Merleau-Ponty does not trade dualism for a reductive, positivistic monism. To understand lived experience and the relationship between subjectivity and embodiment properly, we should probably develop a whole new vocabulary and abandon the categories of “interiority” and “exteriority” altogether (which is arguably what Merleau-Ponty attempts to do in his later works). Nevertheless, we have seen that Merleau-Ponty does not reject the distinction between interiority and exteriority but argues that they are intertwined in and through the lived/living body. Merleau-Ponty never reduces interiority to behavior; he never denies the “what-it-is-like” or lived-through dimension of experience; he does not deny that only I can live through my pain

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191 Though perhaps it has become a cliché, the following joke is often used in order to illustrate this problem: two behaviorists are in bed after having had sex. In their post-coital state, one of them turns to the other and asks, “I know it was good for you, but was it good for me?”
or that I can never truly live through your pain. We have already seen that Merleau-Ponty affirms an irreducible difference between my own experience of, say, grief or anger and the manner in which such an experience might be conveyed publicly (either by myself or by others).

However, we have also already seen that Merleau-Ponty does deny that this lived-through, qualitative dimension of conscious experience renders the consciousnesses of others radically inaccessible. Nothing “mental” is ever disembodied, so even in the most “private” aspects of my life I never cease to be “in touch” with other incarnate beings:

…Our glances are not “acts of consciousness,” each of which claims an invariable priority, but openings of our flesh which are immediately filled by the universal flesh of the world. All depends, in short, upon the fact that it is the lot of living bodies to close upon the world and become seeing, touching bodies which…are a fortiori perceptible to themselves. The whole enigma lies in the perceptible world, in that tele-vision which makes us simultaneous with others and the world in the most private aspects of our life.¹⁹²

I will further elaborate what Merleau-Ponty means by “the flesh of the world” in chapter five, but we have seen that, for Merleau-Ponty, if subjectivity is possible at all it must be distinct from yet also ontologically continuous with the world. This means that subjectivity must be incarnate. So, “the flesh of the world” (in one of its valences) designates the ontological continuity between (incarnate) subjectivity and the (carnal, sensible) world, and so too, then, does it designate the ontological continuity between subjectivity and other (likewise incarnate) subjectivities. Thus, “the presence of the world is precisely the presence of its flesh to my flesh…I am “of the world” and…I am not it…,”¹⁹³ and because my flesh is enmeshed with the world’s flesh, because my vision, for example, must not be ontologically divorced from the visibility of the world disclosed to it and must, therefore, itself be “visible” in some way, because “between what I see and I who see… we catch sight of a complicity,”¹⁹⁴ or because in general “each landscape of my life” is a

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 76.
“durable segment of the durable flesh of the world,” my subjectivity or vision is “qua visible, pregnant with many other visions besides my own.”\(^{195}\) So, if interiority were wholly interior or self-enclosed, then there would, in fact, be no such thing as “interiority” in first place, and it would especially be impossible to account for how one interiority could ever relate to or access another. We learn, then, that in a sense “interiority” is a misnomer. It is true that interiority does not reduce to exteriority, but it does not follow that interiority and exteriority are opposed or mutually exclusive. Interiority and exteriority are the warp and woof of one and the same phenomenon, two aspects of an enfleshed expression of the world’s flesh, two aspects of a particular expression of the “flesh of the world” that we are.

To underscore a point I mentioned earlier, if we truly reject the traditional opposition between subject/mind and object/body, then we surely cannot say that the former reduces to, or is exhaustively manifested by, the latter, for in general to reduce one term of a binary to another, or to reject one term of a binary in favor of the other, is nevertheless to accept conceptually from the start, and thus not at all to dismantle, that very binary: one assumes an opposition between mind and body and in order to “solve” the problems engendered by that opposition one attempts to eliminate it by eliminating one of its terms, but such an attempted “solution” never interrogates or repudiates, and therefore leaves intact, the dualistic schema from which it proceeds in the first place; indeed, any proposed “solution” to dualism that begins with the conceptual opposition between mind and body ultimately reinstates, and thus in no way actually “solves,” that very dualism: again, such reductionism or monism is simply the reactionary counterpart to dualism. Trading dualism for behaviorism (or for any reductionistic account of

\(^{195}\) Ibid., p. 123.
subjectivity) is simply “compensating for one abstraction with a counter-abstraction.”

Merleau-Ponty understands that the only way to dismantle or radically critique a binary is to refuse to accept from the start the conceptual opposition between its terms: if those terms may no longer be taken to be separable or mutually exclusive, neither may one of them be taken to collapse into, or to be absorbed by, the other. The answer to dualism, then, is never to erase one of its two antithetical terms in favor of the other one but is rather not to begin from, and thus to find a way to think below or beyond, that very conceptual antithesis in the first place; any other kind of “solution” to dualism leaves intact or reinstates the very dualism it is intended to solve, and is thus no solution at all. So, rejecting the opposition between consciousness and the body obviously means that the two are not categorically divorced from each other, yet at the same time it cannot and does not mean that consciousness simply collapses into, or entirely coincides with, bodily functions, processes, expressions, or behaviors.

Alterity is possible only if interiority is inseparable from yet not reducible to exteriority, and this is precisely Merleau-Ponty’s view. For alterity to be possible, the other must be accessible to me directly yet never completely or exhaustively, and only the embodiment of subjectivity makes this possible or intelligible: only because others are directly presenced in and through their bodies may they be accessible to me in a such a way that does not extinguish their otherness or in a way the preserves the requisite excess of their subjectivity. So, for Merleau-Ponty, the mind is never equivalent to behavior, yet it is nevertheless the case that the limit between them is never sharp or decidable. There is an “internal connection between my body’s movement and the psyche” that “confuses the frontiers of soul and body.” As is the case with all expressive phenomena, the mental characteristics or meanings expressed through behavior are

196 Ibid., p. 68.
197 Merleau-Ponty, Child Psychology and Pedagogy, p. 446.
intrinsically infused into, and partially constituted by, behavior itself, yet they are not strictly identical to behavior. Thus, “behavior creates meanings which are transcendent in relation to the anatomical apparatus, and yet immanent to the behavior as such…”¹⁹⁸

Importantly, this is also what makes not only correct but also incorrect judgments of others possible. Skeptics often think that the possibility of formulating erroneous beliefs about others implies an absolute divide between self and others, yet such a divide would make both correct and false beliefs about others impossible. Indeed, if false beliefs about others are possible, so too must correct beliefs about others be possible, and solipsism makes both true and false beliefs about others (or any beliefs about others) impossible. Far from warranting solipsism, the possibility of making mistaken judgments of others presupposes our enmeshment with others. As Merleau-Ponty argues, the behavior and consciousness of an Other – that is, the exteriority and interiority of a living body – are intertwined yet not reductively equivalent to one another. So, if dualism is false, then “there is no precise border between attitude and action.”¹⁹⁹ If dualism is false, then “…we no longer see where behavior begins and where mind ends.”²⁰⁰ This inseparability yet non-coincidence of interiority and behavior is precisely how it is paradoxically possible have contact with Others in a way that does not dissolve or negate their otherness; it is how we may access the inner life of an Other in a way that preserves the requisite inaccessibility (or excess) of that life.

This non-disjunctive distance between consciousness and behavior – which is also precisely the distance between self and Other – is the very distance that at once makes communication and miscommunication between subjects possible. The lived body does not

¹⁹⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 189
²⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 178.
belong entirely to either side of the classical subject/object divide, and this ambiguity of the lived body grounds intersubjectivity and thus the second-order intersubjective phenomena of correct and incorrect judgments of others. So, while behavior always inherently means the presence of an “inner life” or intentional existence, we can always be wrong about what is behaviorally meant – about what is lived or intended on the “other side” of a behaving body – in specific instances and circumstances. A point to which I will return in chapter three is that this is what makes intersubjective life not only inexhaustibly rich but also filled with risk, always beleaguered by the possibility of error, disillusionment, and disappointment:

When I say that I know and like someone, I aim, beyond his qualities, at an inexhaustible ground which may one day shatter the image that I have formed of him. This is the price for their being things and ‘other people’ for us, not as the result of some illusion, but as the result of a violent act that is perception itself.\(^{201}\)

My perception of an Other is “violent” in the sense that it tends to level the Other’s otherness, to regard as static or rigorously determinable (that is, as unambiguous) the Other’s subjectivity which is, as such, always in a process of becoming and always in excess of whatever aspects of it may appear to me, always irreducibly, inexpugnably “ambiguous.” However, we should never harbor any such illusions that others are ever reducible to the ways in which they appear to me. That is, we should never harbor any illusions that would expunge from intersubjective life precisely the ever-present, essential possibility of disillusionment. It is precisely because the Other’s subjectivity is embodied that I can coexist with him/her at all, yet it is because the Other’s subjectivity never completely coincides with his/her body or behaviors that he/she is, indeed Other, that I can always be wrong about his/her “inner” life. We can know others, but we can never know them completely or without remainder, and this is why knowing others is always filled with risk. I am sure that my partner loves me, and I am sure that she does through all of

\(^{201}\) Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 361.
shared lived experiences we have had with each other. Is it possible that really does not love me? Is it possible that she is just a sadistic sociopath who derives pleasure from performing such a long con on someone? Of course that is possible. So, when I say she loves me, my claim is surely not utterly ungrounded; it is surely supported by evidence, even by evidence that most would agree support the claim beyond any reasonable doubt. Yet, such a claim can never be established beyond all possibility of doubt, and so if I believe that my partner loves me, I am also always taking a risk; I am staking a commitment in the world, one that can always be upset. However, without such a risk or commitment, no relationship with her – no love between us – would be possible at all, and what is true concerning my relationship with my partner is true concerning all relationships between embodied beings. My beliefs about my partner may be true or they may be false, and even if they are true now they may always become false later, yet whether they are true or false, and whether or not I know them to be such, is fundamentally rooted not in abstract reasoning or induction but in the imbrications of our sentient bodies, in experiences we always share together in the flesh. Getting to know an Other, befriending an Other, or loving an Other is always a risk I take, always a never completely secure commitment I make, and thus it is one that may someday leave me disenchanted, disconcerted, betrayed, or heartbroken. Yet it is always a risk worth taking, always a commitment worth making, because if it were not, then no risks or commitments ever would be; life as such would not only never be worth living, it would never be lived at all.

For Merleau-Ponty, then, “if there is an other, by definition I cannot install myself in him, coincide with him, live his very life: I live only my own. If there is an other, he is never in my
eyes a For Itself, in the precise and given sense that I am, for myself.”²⁰² This is why, contrary to any reductive behaviorism, Merleau-Ponty is so committed to the qualitative, first-personal, or “interior” dimension of lived experience that he affirms that there is a “truth of solipsism.”²⁰³ Of course, by this Merleau-Ponty obviously does not mean that solipsism is strictly true. The “truth of solipsism” here simply refers to the fact that the Other cannot be present to me as he/she is present to him/herself, and conversely that I cannot be present to others in quite the same way that I am present to myself. In short, “the truth of solipsism” is precisely this separation or dehiscence between subjectivity and behavior and also, therefore, between self and Other. There is an irreducible qualitative and inward dimension of experience. All experience does involve some aspect of individuation and privacy, and indeed such individuation is just as essential to experience as communalization or intersubjective affirmation.²⁰⁴ If I had no sense of myself as a distinct self at all, I would not be sentient at all. Even the most “rudimentary” forms of auto-affection are ways in which a form of life or a “self” are differentiated from a world and from others. The problem is that classical (i.e., Cartesian) solipsism misconstrues this individuation endemic to lived experience as radical isolation. As M.C. Dillon explains in his exposition of Merleau-Ponty’s account of intersubjectivity:

Solipsism is not merely a philosophical mistake; it is rather an aspect of human life that has been misunderstood by philosophers and psychologists theorizing within ontological standpoints incapable of doing justice to the full range of human experience from alienation to solidarity, from forlorn isolation to reciprocated love. While it is true that traditional forms of solipsism arise from a willful neglect of the lived body, it is also true that these extremist accounts are responsive to a well-grounded segment of human experience: my body may be shaped in the same fashion as yours, but it is my body, not yours, and I experience it in a way that I cannot experience yours. An adequate account of intersubjectivity must

²⁰² *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 78. For similar remarks (in addition to those already cited in this chapter), see ibid., p. 11, 80, 82, 254.
²⁰³ *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 360.
²⁰⁴ This is a point to which I will return in chapter five. A point I will further discuss (yet one which we have already broached) is that individuation is, in fact, an effect of communalization, or rather individuation and communalization are two aspects of one and the same process. To be a self is to be differentiated from others, yet to be differentiated from others is to be involved or entangled with them.
be able to accommodate both privacy and communion within a unitary and coherent view of human experience.\footnote{\textit{Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology}, p. 114.}

Merleau-Ponty clearly argues that Cartesian dualism and solipsism are false, but for him they are nevertheless examples of “well-founded” or “motivated” errors,\footnote{See e.g., \textit{The Structure of Behavior}, p. 216.} errors that arise naturally (and perhaps inevitably) from lived experience even though, at the same time, they contradict it. In order for two or more beings to relate to one another, they must be irreducibly distinct, for otherwise there would only be an amorphous, syncretic indistinction of perspectives, which is to say there would be no real perspectives or selves at all. Thus, the very space that separates or differentiates us is at the same time the very space that brings us together.\footnote{This is the main way Merleau-Ponty defines “the flesh of the world.” All relationships between things require a \textit{conjunctive} distance between them, or a distance between them that does not purely isolate them from one another (which would be the dissolution of the relationship). At a deeper ontological register, “the flesh” (in Merleau-Ponty’s later writings) designates precisely this conjunctive distance that is constitutive of \textit{all} relationships.} The “truth of solipsism” is precisely this very distance between beings that, far from isolating them from one another as traditional solipsism would misconceive it, in fact that brings them together and is necessary for them to have any contact with one another at all, since without such a distance between them they would not even be distinct beings in the first place. And as we have seen, this distance between beings is also what makes miscommunication or misunderstanding between them possible. The “truth of solipsism” is also this possibility of being wrong about others that is endemic to intersubjectivity, this ineradicable ambiguity that attends (or rather \textit{is}) the intertwining of consciousness and behavior, interiority and flesh.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this discussion of Merleau-Ponty’s treatment of the problem of other minds, this problem is one that he (following Husserl) \textit{takes seriously}. In the preface to the \textit{Phenomenology of Perception}, Merleau-Ponty repudiates any “transcendental idealism” that “rids the world of its opacity and transcendence” and that therefore “knows
nothing of the problem of other minds”; from such a perspective, there is “no difficulty in understanding how I can conceive the Other, because the I and consequently the Other are not conceived as part of the woven stuff of phenomena” and thus there is “nothing hidden behind these faces or these gestures…no domain to which I have no access.” Such a view might “solve” the problem of other minds, but it does so for the wrong reasons, or perhaps it is more accurate to say that such a view does not solve the problem because it cannot even recognize that there are grounds for one in the first place. Now, I think it is clear that what Merleau-Ponty says here about “transcendental idealism” he would also say about behaviorism (or about any kind of reductionism that expunges interiority from the world). Thus, despite his devastating critiques of dualism and solipsism, the problem of other minds is not one that Merleau-Ponty simply dismisses. Merleau-Ponty does not think that our experiences of others are unproblematic, and he does not he simply posit by fiat and without further explication our coexistence with others.

“There is a solipsism rooted in living experience,” and this refers to the fundamental, inescapable first-personal givenness of experience, the ipseity or “mineness” that is essential to consciousness. Though consciousness must be entwined with behavior, this “solipsism rooted in living experience” is precisely the distance that must obtain between consciousness and behavior, hence also between self and Other; it designates those aspects of conscious existence or selfhood that cannot be exhaustively publicized. Subjectivity is directly disclosed through the conduct of the living body, but it is never disclosed without remainder, and the “solipsistic” element of experience is precisely that remainder; it includes precisely those aspects of one’s own subjectivity that will always be withheld from others and, conversely, those aspects of other subjectivities that will always be withheld from oneself; those aspects of subjectivity that can

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208 Phenomenology of Perception, p. xiii.
209 Merleau-Ponty, ibid., p. 358.
only ever be present as absent. The “truth of solipsism” is not the truth of classical solipsism but the falsehood of behaviorism; it is the truth that interiority is never reducible to exteriority even though it is also constituted by its extension into it, that consciousness is never reducible to behavior even though it is always already entwined with it. Here, the “truth of solipsism” is in fact the contrary of solipsism in the classical sense, for it designates not only a basic condition of experience as such but especially a basic condition of the experience of others.

In closing, it is necessary to reject both dualism and reductive behaviorism in order to overcome skepticism concerning other minds while at the same time accommodating the distance that necessarily obtains between self and Other. That is, a third alternative beyond dualism and behaviorism (or reductionism in general) is necessary in order to explain, on the one hand, the possibility and fact of our access to others as well as, on the other hand, the fact that others will never be completely accessible to us and that we may therefore always be mistaken about their experiences or intentions in particular instances. Subjectivity is never reducible to behavior, yet there is no decidable limit between them. I experience myself as a singular, individual self, and I have a kind of access to myself that no one else may have. My experiences – precisely as mine – cannot be experienced by another precisely as I experience them: no one can feel my pain exactly as I feel it, and no one may legitimately dispute the fact that I feel it. Given that this is the case, and given that it is also nevertheless the case that we believe that others exist and that we participate in the intentions and thoughts, pains and pleasures, joys and sorrows of others – or given that it is also indeed the case that the presence of others is necessarily constitutive of our very self-concepts and sense of the world – the question that presents itself is how both of these things can be the case at the same time. Of course, this is possible only if dualism is false, or only if my internal reflection upon myself does not reveal to
me a self that would be entirely isolated or sealed off from the external world, or only if my experience of myself implicates and reveals to me an “outside” or a publicity – a surface of contact with things and others, or a participation in transcendence – just as immediately or just as certainly as it reveals to me a unique and supposedly impregnable “inside” or “sphere of immanence/ownness.”

So, as Merleau-Ponty argues, “…my experience must in some way present me with other people, since otherwise I should have no occasion to speak of solitude, and could not begin to pronounce other people inaccessible.” What fundamentally renders solipsism or ‘other-minds skepticism’ along with well-meaning efforts to resolve such solipsism or skepticism through inductive reasoning incoherent is that all propositional doubts – indeed all propositional attitudes in general – concerning others presuppose, as the primary condition of their intelligibility and formulation, pre-propositional, perceptual or bodily involvements with others, lived experiences of and with others that are “beneath the level of the verified true and false.” That is to say, such solipsism or skepticism depends upon a tacit, lived affirmation of – or what Merleau-Ponty will later call a “perceptual faith” in – the fundamental reality of that which it pretends to doubt or deny, and so we may say, to borrow again from Derrida, that the condition of the possibility of solipsism or skepticism is at the same time the “condition of its impossibility.”

210 Phenomenology of Perception, p. 359. This is point to which I will return in chapter five.
212 See The Visible and the Invisible, p. 3, 14-15, 23, 50. Merleau-Ponty’s concept of a “perceptual faith” is essentially an appropriation of Husserl’s concept of a “natural attitude” or “Urdoxa” that underlies and makes possible all propositional attitudes and predicative judgments or inferences about the world; that is, it refers to a pre-reflective, pre-scientific affirmation of the existence of things, others, and a world that, precisely because it makes all propositional knowledge possible, cannot itself be an article of propositional knowledge, and is therefore (like “faith” in the more traditional religious valence of the term) is “beyond” either proof or refutation; it is not an ordinary belief because it makes all ordinary beliefs possible in the first place. Our “perceptual faith,” rather, is “our relationship to the world, as it is intuitively enunciated within us” that, as such, “cannot be further clarified by analysis” and that “philosophy can only place… before our eyes and present… for our ratification” (Phenomenology of Perception, p. xviii). In the Phenomenology of Perception, Merleau-Ponty refers to the equivalent notion of a “primordial faith” (ibid., p. 409) and explicitly translates Husserl’s notion of an Urdoxa or Urglaube as a “primary opinion” (ibid., p. 343).
Solipsists or skeptics (and later, we shall see, human chauvinists) cannot help but implicitly affirm in their spheres of lived experience the very others whose rightful place there they explicitly refuse to grant or acknowledge, or cannot help but continually affirm in their pre-reflective engagements with the world the operative presence of those others that they otherwise, upon reflection, disavow. The pretense to doubt or deny the existence of others will never amount to anything more than just a pretense, a protestation that “doth protest too much”; it will never be anything more than an exclusion that does not truly exclude, a position that already constitutively incorporates within itself, or that already depends upon a “prelogical bond”\textsuperscript{213} with, precisely that which it purports to exclude from itself or its purview. Indeed, anything that I ever thus impossibly, self-defeatingly “exclude” from myself or from my world is always excluded as Other(s), is always truly, irreducibly Other yet also, paradoxically in virtue of its otherness, already there to give shape to myself and to my world, already there at (or more precisely as) the horizons of my space of existence, indeed (or yet more precisely) already there in the folds of my enfleshed field of experience, already enlaced with the inseverable “intentional threads”\textsuperscript{214} that tether my body to my milieu and me to Being. Moreover, since consciousness is necessarily embodied, since “the perceiving mind is an incarnated mind,”\textsuperscript{215} since to be a mind is to be living body (and vice versa), we will soon see, as we must, that my lived, tacit affirmation of others entails an affirmation of all living bodies as others, which is to say an affirmation of the presence of human and non-human others alike.

\textsuperscript{213} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{The Visible and the Invisible}, p. 38.
\textsuperscript{214} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{Phenomenology of Perception}, p. xiii, 72, 106, 130.
Chapter Two

“An Absence that Counts in the World”
Paradoxes of Perception, Alterity, and Expression in Merleau-Ponty

“Perception is…paradoxical. The perceived thing itself is paradoxical…”

– Merleau-Ponty

We often find that the most profound and fecund philosophical truths are those that are the most obvious and mundane yet also, and precisely for that very reason, those that are most easily overlooked. One of these is the simple truth – one we all know perfectly well through ordinary experience – that we directly perceive absences as well as presences, and that indeed presence always includes, and is conditioned by, absence. The fact that we do not merely perceive “presences” but also, at the same time, absences, and moreover the fact that some of these absences can only ever be “present” as absent, or the fact that there are certain absences that can never be brought to full, ordinary presence precisely because they are constitutive conditions of presence, are facts that are obvious yet also quite startling once we notice them and begin to take them seriously, facts that indeed disrupt many of the conventional ways in which we conceptualize experience and the nature of reality and that therefore, if we think through them rigorously, have profound philosophical consequences, not the least of which concern our access to others.

Every experience of presence is doubled by an equally direct and immediate experience of absence. For example, if I view a building from the balcony of my apartment, the side or angle from which I view it is the one that is presently “present” to me, yet also and just as directly or immediately “present” to me are all of the other sides of the building that I am not presently

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viewing: the profile that is now in front of me already, inherently alludes to all of the other profiles that it conceals, the other profiles it must conceal in order to face me in the first place. These other absent profiles of the building are just as directly “present” to me as the one that is presently facing me; they are present to me precisely as absent. Presence and absence are both modes of direct perceptual givenness, and indeed they are always co-given. Lived experience is precisely a play or ordered flow of presence and absence: I encounter a particular object (say, a table) from a certain angle or vantage point; from this angle, a particular profile of the table is disclosed to me, yet its other profiles are also disclosed to me, except they are disclosed to me precisely as absent. And I might proceed to move around the table so as to bring to presence its now non-present profiles, so as to make presently present those aspects of the table that were presently absent. As I move around the table so as to bring its absent profiles to presence, the profile that was formerly facing me – the profile that was presently or frontally present to me – withdraws into absence. As I move around it, the presently present profiles of the table continually cede their presence to those that are now emerging from absence into presence.

Experience is this continual flow of presence into absence and of absence into presence, and Husserl develops his own (cumbersome yet nevertheless often helpful) terminology for articulating this. I think it will be helpful for what follows to recall this terminology. We perceive what is presently (or frontally) present to us, but in experience we also perceive just as directly or immediately any number of absences. However, in order to distinguish between my perception of the side of the building that is now facing me and my simultaneous perception of its absent sides, Husserl says that while I “perceive” the side that is now facing me, I “apperceive” the sides that are now absent to me. Thus, for Husserl “apperception” simply means the direct perception of any absence. Similarly, Husserl terminologically distinguishes between the modes
of givenness indexed by “perception” and “apperception,” between the mode of givenness in which something is presently or frontally present and the mode of givenness in which something is presently absent. For Husserl, those things that are presently or frontally present to me – those things I perceive – are presented to me, whereas those things that are presently absent to me – those things that I apperceive – are “appresented” to me. In Husserl, “appresence” is synonymous with “absence,” and “appresentation” is simply the presentation of an absence. Thus, “appresentation” means “making present to consciousness a “there too”, which nevertheless is not itself there…a kind of making “co-present…””.\(^{217}\) So, I “perceive” what is (presently) present, and I “apperceive” what is (presently) absent; similarly, what is (presently) present is “presented” to me as such, and what is (presently) absent is “appresented” to me as such. A building presents to me the side that now faces me yet at the same time “appresents” all of its other sides that are not facing me, all of the other sides that must be absent in order for this one to be (presently, frontally) present.

It is important to underscore the point that every direct perception of presence entails an equally direct apperception of absence: it is not the case that I perceive a particular profile of a building and only afterward “apperceive” its absent profiles, and still less is it the case that I perceive, say, the north-facing side of a building and then infer that it has south-facing, east-facing, and west-facing sides. Any profile of a thing that is presently present to me is, indeed, presently present only through or on the basis of all of its presently absent profiles, and that is why its presently absent profiles are given simultaneously with whatever profile it presently, frontally presents to me. Something can only present itself in experience by concealing other

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things; likewise, a particular profile of a thing may present itself to me only because, at the same
time, it hides its other profiles. Experience is necessarily structured by this compresence and
interplay of presence and absence because, first of all, experience is always an experience of
wholes (Gestalts). Although this may appear to be a rather obvious truth, it was one that was lost
on many psychologists and philosophers (in particular, classical empiricists and logical
positivists) who defined perception in terms of atomistic “sense-data”: discrete sensations or
sensible qualities that the mind would receive from the external world through the body’s sense
organs, internally process, and then somehow construct and project outward as “whole” objects.
The idea here is that an apple, for example, can be analyzed into various simple (irreducible,
hence atomistic) sensible qualities (it’s color, it’s shape, perhaps its smell and texture, and so
on), and that these impress themselves upon the senses and get reconstructed in the mind and
projected into the world as what we call “an apple.” Such sense-data are the simple “building
blocks,” so to speak, of the content of experience. However, and to put the point bluntly, this
theory of perception is so patently absurd that it is astonishing – even scandalous – that it was
able to hold sway for as long as it did. It was, of course, repudiated by the Gestalt psychologists
who argued (correctly) that the fundamental unit of perception is not the “sense-datum” but the
whole from which such “sense-data” are only later abstracted. The primary object of perception
is a perceptual whole that is always “greater than the sum of its parts.”

Husserl and Merleau-Ponty both follow Gestalt psychology in taking perceptual wholes –
not “sense-data” – to be the irreducible “units” of perception, for indeed, as Merleau-Ponty
argues at the beginning of the *Phenomenology of Perception*, there are no such things as
atomistic “sense-data” or sense-impressions. Such a sense-datum or “pure sensation” is
understood as “the experience of an undifferentiated, instantaneous, dotlike impact,” yet, as
Merleau-Ponty argues, “this notion corresponds to nothing in our experience.” If we actually attend to what we experience, we notice that it is only ever possible to perceive something against or amid a *background* or context (or what Husserl calls a “horizon”). To perceive is always necessarily to perceive “a figure on a background.” There is always a background that lets anything come to presence: to see anything at all is to see something situated relative to other things and against a background or in the midst of a context or world without which it would not be able to show itself – indeed, would not even be “a thing” or a “phenomenon” – at all. For anything to be perceptible it surely must be differentiated from other things (and from the world), but this means that from the start even the “simplest,” most “rudimentary unit” of experience can never be an atom – some sort of isolated sensation or quality – but must already be *relational* and *structured*, an appearance that is organized in advance and already meaning-laden in virtue of the context amid which it emerges. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, “the perceptual ‘something’ is always in the middle of something else, it always forms part of a ‘field’…The pure impression is, therefore, not only undiscoverable, but also imperceptible and so inconceivable as an instant of perception…this pure sensation would amount to no sensation, and thus to not feeling at all.”

It is, therefore, ironic that classical empiricism took for granted the existence of something that is never, in principle, empirically given but is rather the product of an act of abstraction. Experience is from the beginning constituted by a foreground/background configuration of appearances and meanings that cannot, as such, be decomposed into any simpler elements. If this anterior foreground/background configuration of my perception of a thing or phenomenon were to shift in some way, so too would the thing or phenomenon itself that I perceive. Since even the

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218 *Phenomenology of Perception*, p.3.
219 Ibid., p.4.
220 Ibid., p.4-5.
most “elementary” perception already involves the perception of something against and amid a background, it is already organized and intentional and therefore “already charged with a meaning.”

Wholes are always – perceptually, logically, and ontologically – prior to any simpler elements in terms of which we might later analyze them. We see, then, that sense-atomism is one of the clearest examples of a fallacy of reification, that is, one of the clearest examples of deriving some abstraction or idealization from lived experience, forgetting the process of abstraction or idealization from which one derived it, and subsequently regarding it as fundamentally real or even, as in this case, as constitutive of lived experience. In this case, one begins with a perceptual whole (say, an apple), one then mentally selects and isolates certain qualities from it (say, its redness), and then one constructs this isolated quality as a primitive component (or “building block”) of the perceptual whole with which one began. This is clearly fallacious. This is a clear case of mistaking an abstraction that one derives from experience with a concrete, basic structure or feature of experience itself. Thus, “the alleged self-evidence of sensation is not based on any testimony of consciousness, but on widely held prejudice.”

Moreover, simply because it is possible conceptually to analyze some whole into simpler parts, it never logically follows that the parts are “prior to” or fundamentally and exhaustively constitutive of the whole. Such reasoning, however, tends to be the basis of most forms of

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221 Ibid., p.4.
222 Notably, William James advances exactly the same critique of sense-atomism as Husserl and Merleau-Ponty (and the Gestalt psychologists). Thus, James writes:

“The ‘simple impression’ of Hume, the ‘simple idea’ of Locke, are both abstractions, never realized in experience. Experience, from the very first, presents us with concreted objects, vaguely continuous with the rest of the world which envelops them in space and time, and potentially divisible into inward elements and parts…the elements with which traditional associationism performs its constructions – ‘simple sensations,’ namely – are all products of discrimination carried to a high pitch…” - The Principles of Psychology, Volume One (New York, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 1950), p. 487.
223 Merleau-Ponty, ibid., p 5.
reductionism. In any case, setting aside the fact that this kind of inference is invalid, the conclusion inferred is also positively established as false for the reasons just elaborated, namely that experience must always already be holistically, relationally organized because any “object” of experience must be differentiated from other objects and from a background or horizon against which (or rather from a world in the midst of which) it presents itself. For Merleau-Ponty, it is therefore always the case that “in perception we witness the miracle of a totality that surpasses what one thinks to be its conditions or its parts.”224 In short, wholes always come first.

What does this have to do with the play of presence and absence in experience? We have already seen that in order for anything to appear it must appear amid a context, that is, differentiated from a world and from other things, and this also already means that absence necessarily accompanies and conditions presence because nothing can appear in such a manner without concealing something else. Nothing can become foregrounded without other things receding into a background. Nothing can stand out to me without hiding other things in my field of experience, and likewise, as we have already observed, no profile of a thing can be presented to me without hiding other profiles:

The [visible things] are always behind what I see of them, as horizons, and what we call visibility is this very transcendence. No thing, no side of a thing, shows itself except by hiding the others…to see is as a matter of principle to see farther than one sees, to reach a latent existence. The invisible is the outline and the depth of the visible. The visible does not admit of pure positivity any more than the invisible does.225

As Merleau-Ponty suggests here, essential to perceptual experience is a dimension of depth, and this is simply another way of describing the differentiation that is endemic to lived experience. In order for things or phenomena to be perceptible (that is, in order for things or phenomena to be “things” or “phenomena”), they must be differentiated from one another and from the world or

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224 The Visible and the Invisible, p. 8.
field of experience amid which they show themselves, which is also to say they must be
distanced from one another and from the world (and from the perceiver). If there were no such
differences or distances between things, there would be no “things” to perceive in the first place.
Thus, “…the sensible order is being at a distance…”226 A point to which I will return below is
that if things could present themselves to me fully transparently (as they would from a “God’s
eye” perspective), they would have no hidden sides or absent profiles and would thus not be
“things” at all; likewise, if they were never either in front of, behind, to the left of, to the right of,
in the middle of, above, below, etc., other things, then they would have no distinct, hence no
perceptible, existence at all.

Moreover, as Merleau-Ponty will later observe, the differentiation or spacing between
foreground and background (which Merleau-Ponty calls écart) cannot itself ever truly be
“present” to perception for the very reason that it is the fundamental condition of perception:
what is truly fundamental is neither the figure nor the background but rather the irreducible, non-
figurable space or interval between figure and background, that dehiscence through which things
emerge into presence as such. In other words, there is a certain depth or “thickness”227 that is the
elemental condition of experience (and that Merleau-Ponty will later claim even discloses the
nature of Being); as such, it cannot strictly be “experienced,” yet it is not radically outside

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227 Merleau-Ponty often uses this expression to refer to the depth – the relational separation or differentiation – that
constitutes experience, meaning, and even Being, and which he otherwise (especially in his later writings) calls
“flesh.” See, for example, The Visible and the Invisible, p. 135, 173, 268, and also “Eye and Mind” (in The Primacy
of Perception), p.182, where he famously appeals to the “thickness” of water in a swimming pool as an example to
illustrate the general dimension of depth (or “flesh”) that mediates our perceptual access to things. I will further
elaborate Merleau-Ponty’s concept of flesh (and the related concept of écart) in chapter five, but here we are already
seeing the extent to which, for Merleau-Ponty, a rigorous attention to lived experience discloses not merely
structures of subjectivity but also structures of Being. This depth that constitutes lived experience discloses the fact
all relationships, at the most basic ontological level, exhibit both distance and continuity, or rather exhibit continuity
in virtue of distance. The differentiation that constitutes lived experience – the differentiation between figure and
ground – discloses Being as differentiation.
experience as a “transcendental condition of possibility” would be: it envelops and pervades experience; though it is an enabling condition of experience, it is also radically immanent to experience and is therefore, as Merleau-Ponty suggests, comparable to an element such as air or water (albeit one that is more properly “elemental” than these, since it can never quite be experienced in any ordinary way). For example, in order for me see an object there must be some distance between myself and the object (as well as distances between the object and other objects or between the object the world around it); yet, this distance that enables my vision cannot ultimately be an object of my vision for the very reason that it enables my vision. I might succeed in thematizing or transforming into an object of vision the distance that obtains between myself and, say, the laptop I am now seeing, but in order for this distance itself to be an “object” of my vision there will have to be some yet deeper, more fundamental distance between myself and it, and so on; ultimately, experience must bottom out at kind of spatiality or difference that cannot itself be thematized as an ordinary object of experience. What we see is that ‘seeing’ is possible only on the basis of a kind of distance between ‘seer’ and ‘seen’ that can never itself be seen, that the visibility of the visible must always itself be absent or invisible.

Indeed, this originary differentiation between foreground and background is one of those kinds of radical absences – one of those absences that is more absent than any ordinary absence (such as the other side of a building) – that Merleau-Ponty and others identify as the truly fundamental constitutive conditions of experience (and as endemic even to Being as such). In any case, for these reasons we see that, in a sense, perception is always necessarily depth perception, although it is fundamentally, and paradoxically, the perception of a depth that cannot really be perceived precisely because it is what lets anything be perceived in the first place. This is why Merleau-Ponty suggests that “depth” ought to be regarded not as a “third” dimension or
as merely one dimension among others but as the truly “first” dimension, or as the Ur-dimensionality, so to speak, that conditions and embraces all of the ordinary dimensions with which we are familiar. Depth, in other words, is properly not a dimension “in the ordinary sense of a certain relationship according to which we make measurements,” but is rather the clearing or differentiation that subtends, opens up, and constitutes all relationships, including especially any relationship between perceiver and perceived, yet it is nevertheless something to which we may obliquely attend in virtue of all of the other “depths” – all of the absences or invisibles, all of the distances, dimensions, shadows, hidden spaces, folds, and lacunae – that necessarily and obviously envelop and configure even the most mundane perceptions.

To be clear, the figure/ground structure of perception does not just refer to the fact that I perceive objects against a background or horizon; it also refers to the fact that perceptual objects themselves inherently have a figure/ground (or horizon) structure. Naturally, all perceptual objects are part of a Gestalt, or are imperceptible and unintelligible independently of some context in which they appear. However, it is also important to appreciate the fact that objects are Gestalts – perceptual wholes - in themselves (if we may talk about them as such, for doing so is admittedly, for the reason just mentioned, already an abstraction). This is why Husserl ascribes “horizons” to objects and not just to the world in which objects appear. The simple point here – a point that further illustrates the fundamental, structural play of presence and absence in experience – is one I have already mentioned, namely that an object always presents a certain profile to me yet also, at the same time, “appresents” all of its other absent profiles or possible manners of appearance to me. That is, the profile of an object that now figures as the content or “object” of my perception appears against the “horizon” of all of the other ways in which this

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229 Ibid., p. 180.
object might appear to me (and to others) from other perspectives. Above, I explained the primary insight of Gestalt psychology (and of phenomenology) that things always appear against a background, and that it is this whole foreground/background configuration of experience that is, in fact, the fundamental “unit” of experience. Here, I am explaining the similar point – a point that further reinforces the aforementioned foundational insight of Gestalt of psychology, and one that Husserl repeatedly emphasizes – that objects themselves are always, immediately experienced as wholes. Objects present themselves only from one profile at a time yet also, nevertheless, as wholes. This is one of those “figured enigmas”230 that Merleau-Ponty refers to at the beginning of The Visible and the Invisible, a basic feature of experience that perhaps appears paradoxical when put into words: I only ever perceive something from a certain profile, yet at the same time I also perceive it as a whole. This is, again, Husserl’s basic insight that every perception is paired with any indefinite number of apperceptions, that every presentation of an object in lived experience immediately appresents an indefinite number of other possible ways in which that same object may appear, that in general presence is always inflated with “appresence.”

The simple point here is that even though I may only view something from one profile at a time, I nevertheless view it as a whole object and do not merely experience an isolated snapshot or slice of it; that is, beyond the particular profile that a thing presents to me, I also just as directly and immediately (ap)perceive all of the other profiles it hides from me, all of the other profiles it is not presently presenting to me but which it might present were I to take up a new perspective toward it. To return to an example I mentioned earlier, when I perceive the front of a building I also immediately apperceive the back of it (and all of its other sides); if a building

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230 The Visible and the Invisible, p. 4.
presents itself to me from its northern side, it simultaneously appresents its southern, eastern, and western sides to me. In lived experience, if I only see the front of a building I never worry or wonder that it might just be a prop from a movie set. As I watch buildings pass me by while driving on a highway, I never stop to think that the scene before me is really just a Potemkin village. In everyday experience, I take the objects I perceive to be whole or “real” objects, and a crucial point here is that I do not infer that they are whole or real. I do not infer that the building I now view from the front also has a back: the back of the building is immediately given with its front. I do not perform some sort of induction when I take the objects in my field of experience to be “whole” or “real”: I directly, immediately take them to be such (for example, I do not think to myself that all of the times I have ever seen a building from a distance it has never turned out to be merely a movie prop upon closer inspection and consequently conclude that this building I am now seeing from a distance is most likely not merely a movie prop).

Thus, all perceptual object are manifolds of presence and absence. A thing can only ever present itself from one aspect at a time, yet as a whole it is an ensemble of all of the ways in which it can appear, and so to perceive any one of its aspects is also at the same time to apperceive an indefinite number of its other aspects; again, each present profile of a thing appresents its absent profiles, those now hidden sides or aspects of itself that might be disclosed to me if I were to adopt a different standpoint toward it. This is exactly what Merleau-Ponty means when he claims that “perception is imperception….that to see is always to see more than one sees.”231 Perception is always “imperception” because perception always includes the perception of absence. “To see is always to see more than one sees” because “to see” is to see beyond whatever is presently present, because what is presently present is also already infested

231 The Visible and the Invisible, p. 247; see also 213.
with absence. Again, I see a thing from a certain angle, yet I do not just see an isolated “slice” of it but rather I see it as a whole, that is, I also “see” those aspects of it that I do not see, and this is essential to seeing or perceiving as such\(^{232}\).

A stone is seen in any at all of its perceptual appearances, in which, strictly, only very little “of it” is presented in “actual,” “proper,” perception. If, on account of the one-sidedness and other multifarious imperfections, we were not to allow this seeing to count as a “seeing,” as a “perceiving,” then talk about seeing would lose its essential sense forthwith.\(^{233}\)

The apperception of wholeness in and through the partial, “one-sided” presentation of a thing – hence the general compresence of presence and absence in experience – is a necessary and not merely a contingent feature of experience. It is necessary that we both only perceive objects from one profile at a time and also perceive them as wholes (hence also “apperceive” their absent profiles), for otherwise experience would be utterly incoherent, a true “blooming, buzzing

\(^{232}\) Husserl surely tends to focus on vision when discussing these points, as it is the sense that perhaps most clearly illustrates them, and Merleau-Ponty often appeals to vision as well in order to make similar points. Now, though I do think that “ocular-centric” accounts of perception ought to be challenged and rejected, it is important to note that both Husserl and Merleau-Ponty recognize and discuss other modes of perceptual givenness, and these too need to be taken into account when we consider what it means for an object to present itself as a “whole.” For neither Husserl nor Merleau-Ponty do the possible ways in which something may appear only include the ways in which it may visually appear. For Husserl, the various ways in which something might appear in, say, my memory or imagination, as well as the kinds of cultural meanings that might be associated with it, also belong to what it is and to how it appears as a whole, and (as I will further discuss in chapter five) for Husserl every appearance of a thing refers not only to other ways in which it might appear to me but also to ways in which it might appear to others. Merleau-Ponty explicitly agrees with and elaborates all of these points as well, however he is perhaps better than Husserl at honoring the other non-visual sensible ways in which things appear. Though Merleau-Ponty does often use visual examples and metaphors to explain lived experience, he also frequently discusses other sensory modes of givenness as endemic to the givenness of any object or phenomenon (and even argues for a fundamental “synesthesia” or overlapping of all modes of sense-perception). In his later writing in particular, Merleau-Ponty discusses touch as much as he discusses vision, and I think a compelling case can be made that if Merleau-Ponty privileges any sense over any others, it is touch rather than vision that he privileges (at least in his later writings). Questions of textual interpretation aside, however, I surely do not wish to advocate an ocular-centric account of lived experience. I am using examples here drawn from vision because not only do Husserl and Merleau-Ponty often use such examples but also simply because they easily illustrate the salient points I wish to discuss. Nevertheless, we should always keep in mind that when we articulate how things appear as “wholes,” we have to understand their “wholeness” also to include how they might appear (or rather how they always already appear) otherwise not only visually but also tactiley, auditorily, olfactorily, gustatorily, imaginatively, artistically, culturally, historically, and so on.

confusion” or mere “wandering troop of sensations.” Husserl refers to this perception of wholeness in and through the flow of appearances in lived experience as “synthesis”:

For example, if I take the perceiving of this die as the theme for my description, I see in pure reflection that “this” die is given continuously as an objective unity in a multiformal and changeable multiplicity of manners of appearing, which belong determinately to it. These, in their temporal flow, are not an incoherent sequence of subjective processes. Rather they flow away in the unity of a synthesis, such that in them “one and the same” is intended as appearing.

Husserl calls this perception of wholeness “synthesis” because it involves the perception of unity or identity in and through the perception of multiple, temporally successive partial profiles of an object. When I view something from one angle and then vary its appearance in some way (by, say, turning it around with my hand or by stepping around it), I never think that the object I previously viewed has vanished and that a new one has suddenly irrupted into presence to take its place: I perceive one and the same thing in and through successive changes in its appearance, which means, again, that its presence is always already inflated with absence. If this were not so, experience would be like a kinetoscope whose frames bear no relationship to one another, a sequence of coruscating images or appearances with no connection to one another whatsoever.

Thus, each appearance of a thing inherently alludes to the infinite number of other ways in which it might appear. Things are given as wholes, but since they are never given all at once – that is, since they are given as wholes but are never wholly given (as they would be from a God’s eye perspective) – and since there is in principle no limit to the possible ways in which they can be given (especially since their possible modes of givenness include not only the ways in which they may be given to me but also all of the ways in which they may be given to others), this also

236 Cartesian Meditations, §17, p.39.
precisely means that they are given as “open and inexhaustible,”\textsuperscript{237} that lived experience is “the fulgurating attestation here and now to an inexhaustible richness…”\textsuperscript{238}

So, it is clear that perceptual presence is always partial, allusive, and lacunary, always infested with absence, always hemmed in by a halo of opacity. It is clear that “apperception” is necessarily constitutive of perception, that “presentation” is necessarily entwined with “appresentation,” yet now it is important to underscore that this is not just a fact concerning the structure of perception or subjectivity: it is also a fact concerning the nature of presence as such, a fact concerning the nature of phenomenality or “thinghood” as such, a fact even concerning Being as such. As I just discussed, a thing’s presence is pervaded with absence; the presentation of a thing is always already the (ap)resentation of a manifold of absences: for every profile of itself that a thing presents to me, there are indefinite others that it withholds from me; the disclosure of one profile entails the concealment of others. For anything to come into presence, other things must pass away into absence. A thing or phenomenon can become present only if others cede their presence to it. Now, one might think that all of this concerns merely a feature – even perhaps a limitation – of embodied subjectivity; one might think that all of this is simply a matter of the fact that I can only ever view an object from a particular vantage point, or that I cannot view an object from everywhere all at once. One might think that it is only because I am “encumbered” with eyes and a physical body that I may only ever perceptually access something from one profile or angle at a time. In general, one might think that the perspectival situatedness of one’s access to the world is simply a fact about perception and knowledge, perhaps even a

\textsuperscript{237} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{The Visible and the Invisible}., p.83.

“flaw” in the constitution of subjectivity to be, if not overcome entirely, mitigated as much as possible.\textsuperscript{239}

However, such a view is completely wrong. The perspectival constitution of our access to reality correlatively discloses the perspectival (or rather phenomenal) constitution of perceptible, knowable reality itself. Everything we have observed up to this point discloses not merely the nature of lived experience but also the nature of “the real,” and thus what might initially have seemed to be only psychology or epistemology has already also been ontology. It is true that I cannot view an object from everywhere all at once, but this fact is not simply essential to vision or subjectivity but also to being a visible or perceptible thing in the first place:

A perception which would be coextensive with sensible things is inconceivable; and it is not physically but logically that it is impossible. For there to be perception, that is, apprehension of an existence, it is absolutely necessary that the object not be completely given to the look which rests on it, that aspects intended but not possessed in the present perception be kept in reserve. A seeing which would not take place from a certain point of view and which would give us, for example, all sides a cube at once is a pure contradiction in terms; for, in order to be visible all together, the sides of a wooden cube would have to be transparent, that is, would cease to be the sides of a wooden cube. And if each of the six sides of a transparent cube were visible as a square, it is not a cube which we would be seeing.\textsuperscript{240}

The fact that one cannot view a thing from all possible sides or angles or all at once is not merely a feature of subjectivity, and still less is it some sort of flaw of subjectivity; rather, it is a feature of what it is to be a thing or to exist at all. Objects of experience must be transcendent not in the sense that they are absolutely independent of subjectivity but in the sense that they can never, in principle, be present to subjectivity all at once: they can only be present from certain profiles at a time and they can never be exhausted by any single profile. Any single disclosed profile of a thing immediately refers to (appresents) innumerable others that are concealed as the very

\textsuperscript{239} This is, of course, the traditional, Enlightenment view of knowledge and “objectivity”: “objective” reality is defined in opposition to subjectivity. Therefore, perspective or subjectivity is an obstacle to be overcome in the pursuit of knowledge or “objective” truth. The more “objectively” we wish to understand something, the more we must shed our subjectivity. I will further critique this view in the next two chapters.

\textsuperscript{240} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{Structure of Behavior}, p. 212-213.
condition its disclosure. However, as Merleau-Ponty argues in the above passage, this perspectival presentation of things is not merely an essential structure of subjectivity, and even less is it an epistemic limitation we either can or should seek to overcome, but is an ontological structure of perceived, perceptible things themselves. That is to say, if a thing did not present itself to me from a certain profile, if a thing were presented to me from all possible perspectives all at once – from everywhere and thus from nowhere – it would not be a thing. It is not simply the case that in order for something to be present to me other things must also be absent. That is true. But it is also the case that a thing’s transcendence or depth – the fact that a condition of a thing’s givenness is that it never be given without remainder, or the fact that certain aspects of a thing will always remain opaque or withheld from view – is essential to what it itself is, essential to its very “thing-ness.” That absence always accompanies or subtends presence is not simply a feature of perception but a feature of the things or phenomena themselves that are perceptually present. If something were given to me without any opacity whatsoever, without any absent profiles or lacunae, it would be given without any depth or breadth whatsoever, or given from no particular position and within no particular context whatsoever: nothing would or could be behind it, in front of it, around it, above or below it, or to the side of it. For something to be given to me all at once, or from every possible perspective all at once, is in fact for it to be given to me from nowhere all, from no perspective at all. But a thing without depth, without concealed profiles, without withheld modes of appearance, without aspects or layers always in excess of what can be disclosed to any single perceiver at a time, without location, or without a horizon or context amid which it appears, is not only not a possible object of experience, it is not a possible “object” at all. In short, I cannot view things all at once because I am an incarnate subject, yet
my incarnate subjectivity is not a “fault in the clear diamond of philosophy,” and it
correlatively discloses the necessarily incarnate nature of anything – of any being and even of the
Being of beings – that is disclosed to it.

So, though we tend to think of absences as present absences (and though indeed most of
the absences with which we are familiar in ordinary experience are present absences), we are
now seeing that, beyond any specific absences that may be present, absence is itself a condition
of presence, and that therefore there must be certain absences that are not just ordinary present
absences among others. We are seeing that there must be certain kinds of absences that, precisely
as conditions of presence, can never be brought to presence (in, say, the manner of the hidden
profiles of an object), that there must be certain absences that are even more absent than any
ordinary present absence. We have already discussed one such kind of absence above, namely
the divergence (écart) – the space and interval – between foreground and background that lets
anything emerge into presence and meaning. For Merleau-Ponty, there are certain kinds of
absences or “invisibles” in the world that, though they are immanent and not at all contrary to
presence or to the visible (or are in-visible) and are thus not “transcendental” in the traditional
meaning of the term, they are more radically absent or invisible than any ordinary absent or

242 It is clear to me that what Merleau-Ponty articulates here as “the invisible” – i.e., as those structures or relations
that make visible or sensible things possible as such yet which are also immanent to them and thus not absolutely
outside the natural, empirical, or sensible world as transcendental conditions of possibility would be – are what
Deleuze refers to as “virtual” structures, a term that I think nicely captures the irreducible difference that must obtain
between any sort of “condition of possibility” and the thing or phenomenon whose possibility it conditions yet
without letting such a difference resolve into a dualism or “two-world” ontology. Indeed, Deleuze refers to his
philosophy of difference, in a way that is conventionally oxymoronic, as “transcendental empiricism” precisely
because he endeavors to articulate essential structures of (empirical, natural) reality without conceptualizing such
structures as “transcendental” in the traditional sense, or without taking leave of empirical, natural reality. That is,
the point of “transcendental empiricism” is to articulate the basic structures and relational processes of Being as
below or outside the traditional “transcendental/empirical” binary, as not reducible to empirical, natural phenomena
yet nevertheless not “supernatural.” Such a philosophy, then, is beyond the traditional alternatives of either reductive
materialism or dualism/idealism (“supernaturalism”), and I think it is rather obvious that this is exactly the project
Merleau-Ponty develops in his later writings, yet to justify this comparison here in any adequate way would take me
non-visible profile of a thing because they are precisely those structures that make anything present, visible, or sensible at all:

Principle: not to consider the invisible as an other visible “possible,” or a “possible” visible for an other: that would be to destroy the inner framework that joins us to it... The invisible is there without being an object, it is pure transcendence, without an ontic mask. And the “visibles” themselves, in the last analysis, they too are only centered on a nucleus of absence.\textsuperscript{243}

Thus, absence is not simply given in experience along with every presence but is itself a fundamental condition of givenness, and insofar as it is a condition of givenness it cannot itself “be given”; and yet, it is still thinkable and, in a certain strange or paradoxical way, “presentable.” The point here is that there are radical absences endemic even to the most ordinary objects of experience, radically invisible structures that constitute visible, perceptible reality. It is not just the case that presence is always accompanied by absence; it is not just the case that every present presence entails a present absence; rather, it is also the case that absence is constitutive of presence as such, that absence is not simply always given along with presence but is moreover that on the basis of which anything is given or present in the world at all. So, when Merleau-Ponty claims, for example, that “consciousness has a punctum caecum”\textsuperscript{244} and that, no matter how much I may reflect on lived experience, “I never catch my living glance,”\textsuperscript{245} and when he claims that “things are only half-opened before us, unveiled and hidden,”\textsuperscript{246} he is not only making a claim about consciousness; he is also making a claim about the “things themselves” – about even the world itself – disclosed to consciousness; he is making a claim about the very nature of presence, namely, that endemic to presence is so much more than whatever is or can be “present.” Following Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty understands Being as that

\textsuperscript{243} Merleau-Ponty, The Visible and the Invisible, p.229.
\textsuperscript{244} Ibid., p. 247.
\textsuperscript{245} Phenomenology of Perception, p. 91.
\textsuperscript{246} The Philosopher and His Shadow, in Signs, p. 167.
relational process through which things emerge into presence and intelligibility, yet also like Heidegger, he acknowledges that such a process, as such, can never truly be brought to presence, that all revelation entails concealment and that what is most concealed from us of all is in fact the movement of concealment and differentiation (or rather the self-concealing movement of differentiation) through which anything is revealed in the world. There is an apoptosis, so to speak, endemic to Being, a recession into absence that lets beings come to presence, an absencing that enables and that is already presencing, a darkness anterior even to the distinction between light and shadow. Thus, Merleau-Ponty affirms (clearly echoing Heidegger) that “…if Being is hidden, this is itself a characteristic of Being…”.

So, what is the relevance of this phenomenology of absence to the basic matter under discussion here, that is, to the issue concerning our perceptual and epistemic access to others? It is clear that subjectivity (or alterity) is a kind of absence that comes to presence in the world, one that we must be able to (ap)perceive directly. I can never inhabit another’s consciousness, yet it is necessary, as we have seen, that another’s consciousness be given to me directly, not originally as the result of an inductive inference. Thus, the fact that a direct (not “indirect” or inferential) (ap)perception or (ap)presentation of absence is integral to lived experience in general helps disclose the possibility and character of one’s perception and knowledge of others. The traditional problem of other minds arises from the false dilemma that affirms that either consciousness is entirely self-enclosed or withdrawn from the world (in which case it would never be able to appear in the world at all) or that it is exhaustively, transparently on display in the world (in which case it would have no interiority at all, and thus would not in fact be “consciousness”). To put the dilemma another way: either I must have complete, perfect access

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247 *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 122.
to another’s subjectivity, or I may have no access to it at all; either I must be able to fully inhabit another’s consciousness (in which case it would not be the consciousness of an Other), or the Other’s consciousness must be absolutely inscrutable (in which case I would not be able to perceive or know anything about it directly). As Merleau-Ponty, argues, however, this false dilemma arises from bad ontology (and bad phenomenology). Of course, we have seen that it arises from dualism, but Merleau-Ponty also explains that we can understand it (along with the dualism it presupposes) as a failure to acknowledge and accommodate the fact that absences are just as woven into the fabric of the real, or just as constitutive of the phenomenal, “natural” world, as anything else:

The other person’s life itself is not given to me with his behavior. In order to have access to it, I would have to be the other person himself. Correlatively, no matter what my pretensions to grasp being itself in what I perceive, I am in the other person’s eyes closed into my “representations”…But things seem this way because we are making use of a mutilated idea of Nature and the sensible world…Sensible being is not only things but also everything sketched out there, which figures there, even as divergence and a certain absence.248

If subjectivity or alterity is to be present in the world at all, it must be present as a certain kind of absence. Thus, as Merleau-Ponty suggests here, it is only a “mutilated idea of Nature and the sensible world,” that is, only an ontology that does not take stock of absences in its inventory of reality, or only a kind of positivism that restricts “presence” to those things or phenomena that are present merely in the ordinary empirical ways, that makes any presentation of otherness in the world impossible in principle. However, we have seen that “there are certainly more things in the world and in us than what is perceptible in the narrow sense of the term.”249 We have seen that absence – not merely “presence” – is itself a fundamental mode of phenomenal givenness.

Moreover, not only have we seen that absences are immediately, directly present in the world, we have also seen that there are certain kinds of radical absences that are, paradoxically  

249 Ibid., p. 171.
or peculiarly, present precisely as conditions of presence. We have seen not only that certain things are immediately present as absent but also that certain things may only ever be present as absent. For example, as I just discussed, what Merleau-Ponty calls “the invisible” is not only, and surely not at the fundamental level of reality, “another visible”\textsuperscript{250} or a “positive that is elsewhere,”\textsuperscript{251} that is, something now hidden from view that could be seen from another perspective (like the concealed profiles of an object); rather, the basic “invisibles” that permeate the world are structures or relations that “consciousness does not see for reasons of principle” because they are precisely “what [make] it see,” because they constitute consciousness’ “tie to Being…its corporeity,” because they are the “existentials by which the world becomes visible…the flesh wherein the object is born.”\textsuperscript{252} Merleau-Ponty recognizes a number of different kinds of absences that can never become present as ordinary present absences, and these are the most fundamental kinds of absences in the world, the kinds of absences that suffuse and constitute lived experience and even Being as such. For example, Merleau-Ponty acknowledges that one of these is death,\textsuperscript{253} since an awareness of one’s own mortality (and of the mortalities of others) is surely a basic structure of human experience even though death itself can never in principle be experienced; another is a “past that has never been present,”\textsuperscript{254} since there can be no “present” without a past, yet logically this indicates that, even though we tend think of the past as a sequence of former presents, there must be such a thing as a past that is not merely one “past present” among others, for a past that is precisely the condition of any possible or actual present

\textsuperscript{250} The Visible and the Invisible, p. 251.
\textsuperscript{251} Ibid., p. 254. Italics are Merleau-Ponty’s.
\textsuperscript{252} Ibid., p. 248.
\textsuperscript{253} See Phenomenology of Perception, p. 364. Here, Merleau-Ponty even provocatively draws a direct comparison between the alterity of death and the alterity of the Other. It is also important to note that Merleau-Ponty acknowledges here the alterity not only of death but also of birth, affirming that “my birth and death cannot be objects of thought for me.”
\textsuperscript{254} Ibid., p. 242.
cannot in principle be reducible to any “present” and thus can never truly be “present.” And as
we have also seen, Merleau-Ponty explicitly regards the lived/living body itself as radically,
irremediably absent. Since it is the condition of one’s perception of things, the lived body can
never in principle be “a thing” that one “perceives” (at least not in the same mode in which one
perceives ordinary things); it cannot be “only one perceived among others.” Thus, the
lived/living body is characterized by a kind of absence that is irreducible to any presence, an
absence that can never be brought to presence in the manner of an ordinary thing or
phenomenon.

Now, it is clearly the case that subjectivity or alterity is another one of these absences that
comes to presence in the world; indeed, since I can never “live through” or inhabit the
subjectivity of an Other, the Other’s subjectivity (or otherness) must precisely be one of these
radical kinds of absences that nonetheless, paradoxically, is able to come to presence:

This is what animalia and men are: absolutely present beings who have a wake of the negative. A
perceiving body that I see is also a certain absence that is hollowed out and tactfully dealt with behind
that body and its behavior. But absence itself is rooted in presence; it is through the body that the other
person is soul in my eyes. “Negativities” also count in the sensible world, which is decidedly the
universal one.256

If, as we have seen, there are not only regular absences but also radical absences that are
nonetheless directly “present” to us in experience, if absence – even radical absence – can be,
and already is, a mode of perceptual givenness, then intersubjectivity – the possibility and fact of
perceiving alterities or other subjectivities in the world – is no longer intractably mysterious or
logically impossible. The presentation of alterity remains, naturally, somewhat paradoxical and
far more peculiar than many other kinds of present absences, yet it is a present absence all the
same. There are many “things” in the world that are present as absent, and indeed there are many

“things” in the world that can only ever be present as absent, yet these are nonetheless ways of being “present,” and it is essentially the way in which others are present. As Levinas puts it, “this absence of the other is precisely its presence as other.”\textsuperscript{257} As Merleau-Ponty puts it in the above passage, the presence of the other must be a certain kind of absence or “negativity,” yet regardless of how radically absent it is, it nevertheless cannot be opposed to or the negation of ordinary positive, material presence, for if it were, it would not come to presence in the world at all. If we claim that the absence or negativity that characterizes subjectivity is truly divorced from the natural, sensible world, then we commit ourselves precisely to the sort of dualism that we know to be false for many reasons, not the least of which is that it renders any perception or knowledge of otherness logically and not only phenomenologically impossible.

As we will see even more clearly in chapter five, Merleau-Ponty is quite clear that there is no “second-world.” For Merleau-Ponty, the sensible world is “decidedly the universal one,”\textsuperscript{258} and so we must conceptualize subjectivity or alterity in such a way that honors its irreducibility to ordinary sensible presence yet does not deny it a place in the sensible world altogether, or yet in a way that does not (re)introduce dualism or theological transcendence. This is why Merleau-Ponty asserts (implicitly criticizing especially Sartre) that “…the soul, the for itself is a hollow and not a void, not absolute nonbeing with respect to a Being that would be plenitude and hard core.”\textsuperscript{259} As we saw earlier, this is also why Merleau-Ponty compares the relationship between mind and body to the relationship between the “concave” and the “convex.”\textsuperscript{260} Like the concave curvature of a line, like spandrels in a building, or like negative space in a painting, alterity must be an absence that is “hollowed out” by or coupled with – not the antithesis of – positive,

\textsuperscript{258} Merleau-Ponty, “The Philosopher and His Shadow,” in Signs, p. 172.
\textsuperscript{259} The Visible and the Invisible, p.233. Italics are Merleau-Ponty’s.
\textsuperscript{260} See ibid., p. 232.
material presence. That is, subjectivity must be a kind of absence that, even if it must be irreducible to any kind of ordinary presence or more absent than any kind ordinary of absence, is not the contradiction of sensible presence; if it were, it would indeed be incorporeal and imperceptible. Alterity, then, must be a “negativity that is not nothing,” an “absence [that] counts in the world,” and thus, as Merleau-Ponty affirms, “everything really does come down to a matter of thinking the negative rigorously.”

In order to understand how it is possible to experience other subjectivities (and also, as we will see in chapter five, in order to think the nature of Being as such), it really is necessary to “think the negative rigorously.” This is especially the case because, as I have mentioned, subjectivity is not just one ordinary kind of absence or negativity among others. Now, for Husserl and Merleau-Ponty the presentation of an Other’s living body is just as immediately the appresentation of the Other’s otherness or interiority as the presentation of the front of a building is also immediately the appresentation of its hidden sides. In general, absence and presence are intertwined, and interiority is precisely a kind of absence that is intrinsically, necessarily given with and through the presence or behavior of a living body:

The Bodies which are externally standing over against me are experienced by me in primal presence just like other things, whereas the interiority of the psychic is experienced in appresence…To the seen Body there belongs a psychic life, just as there does to my Body…various appresented indications, in themselves undetermined, work together…psychic being…is co-given to the spectator along with Bodily movements in co-presence.

Interiority is an absence one (ap)perceives in and through the exteriority of an animate body just as directly or immediately as one ap(percives) any absence. As Husserl claims, subjectivity is

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261 Ibid., p. 151.
262 Ibid., p. 228.
263 Ibid., p. 63. As we will see in chapter five, I think this statement could very well be regarded as the slogan for Merleau-Ponty’s entire later philosophy.
264 Husserl, Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, Second Book, §45, p. 172-173.
given in the mode of “appresence,” and as such it is co-given with the presence of a living body. Presentation is always coupled with appresentation, and the presentation of a behaving body is coupled with, or always already is, the appresentation of alterity. For Husserl (as for Merleau-Ponty), the appresentation of an Other’s subjectivity is possible only through the Other’s body, and this itself is possible only through what Husserl calls a “pairing” or transference that takes place between the Other’s body and my own. Thus, “in order to establish a mutual relationship between myself and an other, in order to communicate something to him, a Bodily relation, a Bodily connection by means of physical occurrences, must be instituted.”

As Merleau-Ponty will argue, intersubjectivity is possible only as intercorporeity. The way Husserl articulates this is that when a behaving body enters my field of experience, I recognize it as such through a direct, immediate (non-inferential) perception of certain similarities between it and my own lived, behaving body, or through what Husserl calls an “analogizing” apprehension or apperception of otherness. Though Husserl refers to this transference of sense between my own body and the body of an Other as an “analogizing” apprehension or apperception of otherness, he is clear that there is no analogical reasoning taking place at this level. The Other’s otherness is not primarily posited through an act of reflective judgment or inference. Thus, “it is clear from the very beginning that only a similarity connecting, within my primordial sphere, that body over there with my body can serve as the motivational basis for the “analogizing” apprehension of that body as another animate organism,” yet “apperception is not inference, not a thinking act.”

As we have seen, Merleau-Ponty proves that analogical inference cannot be the source of our understanding of otherness, and likewise for Husserl otherness can only come to presence through a “primal

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265 Ibid., §46, p. 176.
266 Husserl, Cartesian Meditations, §50, p.111.
instituting”267 of meaning below the level of induction or reflective judgment. For Husserl (and for Merleau-Ponty), I no more infer the subjectivity of a living body than I infer that the building I am now seeing from the front also has a back (or other sides that I am not seeing). The interiority (or alterity) of an Other is the “other side” of the Other’s behaving body, and “I can surmise this other side…through the articulation of the other’s body on my sensible, an articulation that does not empty me, that is not a hemorrhage of my “consciousness,” but on the contrary redoubles me with an alter ego.”268 Thus, for both Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, the apprehension of an “alter ego” is founded by a pre-reflective (reflexive) coupling of behaviors or intentionalities, a reciprocal exchange of meaning between bodies prior to reflective conceptualization and inductive inference; it involves a transference of sense in and through a lived commingling of comportments and affects, in and through behaviors or modes of intentional engagement with the world that, as such, inherently, directly signify (or “appresent”) subjectivity, behaviors or intentionalities that inherently overlap with one another before we ever take to compare and contrast them and make inferences about them.269

There is more to Husserl’s account of intersubjectivity than I can elaborate here, but I think it is important to mention that, for Husserl, the lived spatiality of one’s own body – the pre-reflective sense one has of one’s own body in space relative to other bodies – is integral to the reflexive transference of meaning (or “pairing”) between living bodies that institutes one’s sense of alterity (as well as, at the same time, one’s sense of oneself):

267 Ibid., p.111.
269 I wish to register here that this point is going to be absolutely essential to Merleau-Ponty’s response to the so-called “problem of animal minds,” and in particular to his critique of the notion that ascriptions of mental characteristics to non-human entities can ever be understood as fundamentally mere “anthropomorphic projections,” or that such “ascriptions” are primarily made through any sort of analogical inference or through any sort of reflective comparisons one draws between animals and one’s own (human) case. Since animal bodies are living, behaving bodies too, everything said here concerning the perception of subjectivity in a living, behaving human body will apply equally to the perception of subjectivity in a living, behaving non-human body.
Since the other body there enters into a pairing association with my body here and, being given perceptually, becomes the core of an appreciation…that ego…must be appresented as an ego now coexisting in the mode There, “such as I should be if I were there”. My ego, however, the ego given in constant self-perception, is actual now with the content belonging Here. Therefore an ego is appresented, as other than mine.\(^\text{270}\)

When I perceive another living, behaving body – when I perceive a body immediately as like unto my own – I also immediately perceive it precisely as “Other” because I immediately perceive it as occupying a position in space distanced from my own, yet one which I myself might occupy. In other words, I perceive a body inhabiting a “there” that is, as such, immediately correlated with my own body’s location in space that I live as a primary, “absolute here”\(^\text{271}\) or “zero-point of orientation”\(^\text{272}\) that (among other things) grounds and radiates all spatial sense-directions or vectors of organization. Since I understand immediately that I cannot occupy two places at once – that I cannot be both “there” and “here” – I thus immediately perceive another living body as, indeed, the living body of a genuine Other. My “here” is always already paired with other “heres” (or with the “theres” that Others occupy in the world). I in fact can have no sense of my own “here” without also a sense of other places in space that my body might occupy, and when I see other bodies living or behaving in the world, I immediately apprehend other places in the world where I, too, might dwell in or engage with it, and there is never any question of reducing these other living bodies to my own or of mistaking them for my own because, though they are akin to my own in certain ways, I know that they do not occupy my “here” – neither my current “here” in “objective” space nor the absolute “here” of my own lived body that makes “objective” space intelligible – and I know that I cannot occupy two places in the world at the same time. So, though my living body is extended into the world and into other

\(^{270}\) *Cartesian Meditations*, §54, p. 119.

\(^{271}\) Husserl, ibid., §55, p. 121. See also *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, Second Book, §32, p.135.

living bodies, there is no possibility that I would ever mistake another living body for being merely an extension of my own body. There is surely a kind of “mirroring” that takes place when I ap(perorceive) an Other, but when I do so I surely do not perceive a mere double of myself – another “me” – as I would were I to look at myself in a literal mirror, for that is indeed not to perceive another place in the world in which I might dwell, nor is it, of course, to perceive a genuine “Other” at all. In this way, I think that Husserl correctly captures the difference between the sort of reflexivity that constitutes one’s relations with other living bodies and the sort of reflexivity demonstrated by one’s experience of one’s own image in a mirror.

However, as we have already observed, subjectivity is not just any ordinary kind of absence. Even though it is true that I (ap)perorceive an Other’s otherness through the Other’s behaving body just as immediately as I apperceive, say, the absent profiles of an ordinary object of perception, it cannot be true that I apperceive the former in exactly the same way that I apperceive the latter, for the former, of course, is not an “ordinary object” of perception at all. In ordinary cases of perception (such as perceiving a building), what is presently absent may become presently present, but this is not true of alterity: alterity is a present absence that can never, in principle, become present in the manner of an ordinary thing or phenomenon; that is, it is “hidden” in a manner that is significantly, altogether different from the manner in which the absent profiles of an object are “hidden,” and Husserl explicitly argues that this is the case: An appresentation occurs even in external experiences, since the strictly seen front of a physical thing always and necessarily appresents a rear aspect and prescribes for it a more or less determinate content. On the other hand, experiencing someone else cannot be a matter of just this kind of appresentation…Appresentation of this sort involves the possibility of verification by a corresponding

273 Merleau-Ponty explicitly claims that self and Other are “mirrors” of each other, yet this cannot be understood literally to mean that, say, the Other is merely my own reflection, which would be solipsism; rather, this claim needs to be understood in the context of Merleau-Ponty’s own appropriation of Husserl’s concept of “pairing” and Freud’s concept of transference, that is, in the context of his description of intercorporeity as a “projection-introjection” dynamic, or as a bilateral exchange of sense between living bodies, which I mention briefly below and again in the next chapter. See, e.g., The Visible and the Invisible, p. 271, and Nature, p. 75.
fulfilling presentation (the back becomes the front); whereas, in the case of that appresentation which would lead over to the other original sphere, such verification must be excluded a priori. The appresentation of an Other must be irreducibly different from the appresentation of the “other side” of an object, because though I may, in principle, step around an object so as to disclose its “other side,” there is no possible position in the world I can occupy that would similarly disclose an Other’s subjectivity; if an Other’s subjectivity were to be disclosed to me in such a manner, I would have to inhabit it myself and it would not, therefore, be an Other’s subjectivity at all. In short, in order for the Other to be precisely Other, it is necessary that the Other’s otherness be an absence that can never be made “present,” or rather that it be present as radically absent, as an absence irreducible to any presence. As Husserl claims here, if the back of a building is presently absent to me, I may simply move around it to verify that it does indeed have a back, thus transforming what was presently absent into something that is now presently or frontally present. Yet, it is obviously impossible to “verify” alterity in such a manner. How would one do so? One would have to possess another’s living body and consciousness, yet of course in that case it would not be the Other’s living body and consciousness any longer: it would be one’s own. Thus, the (ap)perception of an Other involves an “apprepresentative apperception, which, according to its intrinsic nature, never demands and is never open to fulfillment by presentation.” This is simply what alterity demands, and thus any correct account of alterity must come to terms with it.

How, then, is it possible for the radical absence of an Other’s subjectivity – or how, indeed, is it possible for any kind of radical absence – to come to presence? How is the “presence” of a radical absence not a strict contradiction in terms? We have already seen the

275 Ibid., §54, p. 119.
answer, but now I wish discuss it more explicitly. We do know that such absences come to presence – that even radical absence is a mode of experiential givenness – and this is the fundamental aporia of lived experience and even of Being; again, it is one of those “figured enigmas” or “incompossibilities” that Merleau-Ponty mentions at the beginning of The Visible and the Invisible. It is an “impossibility,” yet it is clearly not an impossibility in the strict logical sense of the term (as the conjunction of “A” and “not-A”) but rather in Derrida’s particular sense of the term: it is an “impossibility,” yet one that is precisely possible, one whose “impossibility” is in fact its condition of possibility. To put the point more clearly, it is a phenomenon whose possibility discloses to us something below or beyond any strict dualistic (exclusionary “either/or”) logic, which is also, for Merleau-Ponty, the logic of lived experience itself, the logic of our “prelogical bond”276 with the world.

We have already seen that there are many kinds of radical absences that pervade and structure experience and that indeed reveal the very nature of Being. There is, first of all, that absence that is the very condition of presence and that is therefore irreducible to any ordinary mode of presence; there is the originary divergence between foreground and background; there is the transcendence – that is, the infinite excessiveness or inexhaustible richness – of a thing in virtue of which it is a “thing” at all; there is death; there is the past that has never been present; there is the lived body. All of these ontological structures or processes are absent in ways that are significantly different from any ordinary present absence. All of these “phenomena” are radically absent absences, absences that are more absent than any ordinary present absence, “phenomena” that are not just any phenomena, and, as we have seen, alterity is one among them. The (ap)presence of alterity is quite paradoxical indeed, yet at the very least it is no more mysterious

276 The Visible and the Invisible, p. 38. This is also the “logic” of what Merleau-Ponty calls “ambiguity” or the “chiasm.”
than any of these other radical absences that also likewise structure and haunt experience. Though the givenness of alterity is indeed the givenness of a peculiar, special kind of absence – though alterity is the givenness of a radical kind of absence – and though its givenness does therefore initially appear to be rather confounding, we realize that it is at least no more confounding than of the other equally radical kinds of absences that inflate perceptible reality to perceptibility and perception. The absence of an Other’s subjectivity is surely significantly different from the absences of an object’s hidden profiles, yet at the same time this radical absence through which an Other is given to me (qua Other) is no more radically absent than any of the other radical absences through which anything is given to me.

No matter how radically, irreducibly or irremediably absent a particular kind of absence may be, every absence must nonetheless be immanent to presence; every absence must be immanent to perceptible, carnal reality. Even though conditions of givenness cannot themselves be “given” (at least not in the manner in which the given is given), they must nonetheless be immanent to the given. To deny this is simply to (re)instate a dualistic, “two-world” or supernaturalist ontology. No matter how radically absent an absence may be, it can never be absolutely divorced from presence without (re)introducing theological transcendence or ideality. No matter how radically absent an absence may be, it can never truly be the negation or erasure of presence, for then we would never be able to think or attend to it at all. Even those absences that are not just ordinary present absences among others are also present in their own peculiar manner (or are not utterly non-present, as they would be if they were total erasures of presence). So, the Being of beings, for example, may be radically absent, yet it is nonetheless immanent to beings and therefore thinkable, expressible, or perceptible even if only very imperfectly or allusively and in a manner far different from any ordinary absences. The lived body is always
radically absent and yet also, in a way, present. Death is radically absent, yet it too is present. The separation between foreground and background that lets anything come to presence in experience cannot itself never be present as either a foreground or a background, and yet we are nevertheless aware of it and able to speak of it. The past that is not a past present among others but is the past that makes possible any present can itself never “be present,” and yet we can gesture to it and articulate it (as I just did). Similarly, what Derrida calls *différance* or “the trace” can never be present since it is precisely that movement of differentiation and of recession into absence that subtends and conditions all given instances or forms of meaning and presence, and yet nonetheless it is not *absolutely* absent because we can, after all, articulate and gesture toward it; if it were absolutely absent, if it were utter erasure, it would be inconceivable or unintelligible. If “*différance*” or “the trace” did not in some way “appear,” it would never have occurred to Derrida to write about them and to use them to critique the predominant presuppositions of Western metaphysics.\(^{277}\) If we can understand why the “metaphysics of presence” is flawed, it

\(^{277}\) Throughout this discussion I have been seamlessly weaving Merleau-Ponty’s own account of alterity and of the constitutive ways in which absences structure experience with Husserl’s, and I have also been suggesting that Merleau-Ponty strongly anticipates later movements in Continental philosophy, in particular Derrida’s deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence and Deleuze’s philosophy of difference. Such connections will be made much more apparent in chapter five when I provide a more detailed exposition of Merleau-Ponty’s later ontology. So, here I want to clarify that, throughout this whole discussion, I am not suggesting that Husserl in particular ought to be absolved of the charge that he is committed to what Derrida designates as a “metaphysics of presence.” Though I do think that Husserl honors the nature of alterity in ways that his critics often fail to appreciate or suppress, I am mostly convinced that his phenomenology is indeed part of the tradition of philosophy that privileges presence over absence and that even reduces absence to presence; after all, he does remark that “…Appresentation presupposes a core of presentation” (see *Cartesian Meditations*, §55, p. 122). For everything Husserl got right, I do think that his failure to recognize the truly radical kinds of absences that structure experience – those absences that cannot, in a sense, ever be present – is something for which he is rightly criticized. My contention, however, is that Merleau-Ponty is not likewise guilty of this. Though critics like Derrida often use Husserl’s phenomenology as a proxy for phenomenology as such and thereby sweep Merleau-Ponty into their criticisms of Husserl, I think this fails to cohere with a close, honest reading of Merleau-Ponty’s texts (in particular his later writings). This is not to say that I do not think that Merleau-Ponty’s thought is immune to legitimate criticisms, but I do not think that a commitment to a “metaphysics of presence” is one of them. I hope that my exposition of Merleau-Ponty’s later philosophy in chapter five will sufficiently demonstrate this point.

Though Merleau-Ponty (in the context of his own exposition of Husserl’s account of intersubjectivity) does remark that “absence itself is rooted in presence” (see *Signs*, p. 172), I think it is clear from many of his other writings that he also accepts and argues for the converse claim that “presence is rooted in absence,” for he
must be because we are able in some way to glimpse (however partially or peripherally) those absences – even and especially those radical absences – that such a tradition excludes from its conception of reality or illicitly assimilates to presence. As I suggested above, perhaps the most fundamental aporia is that even the most radical absences – even those absences that are more absent that any run-of-the-mill present absence, even those absences that we say can never be “present” or “given” precisely because they are conditions of presence or givenness – are, nonetheless, in a way, “present” or “given” because we do succeed in thinking them, because we are indeed able to gesture to them, because if they were not “presentable” in some fashion we would never think of them at all, and because if they truly were divorced from the world that is present to us in ordinary experience, or because if they were utterly outside of Nature or absolutely beyond perceptible, carnal Being, then Being would in fact be sundered into two irreconcilable, incommunicable halves, and the relationship of the one to the other would (as is always the case with any dualism) be inexplicable. This is why Merleau-Ponty frequently speaks

articulates, as we have seen, a number of different kinds of absences that can never be reduced to presence, or that can never be brought to “presence” in the manner of any ordinary object of perception or phenomenon. Even as early as the Phenomenology of Perception, Merleau-Ponty affirms certain kinds of absences that pervade and structure experience that are perhaps far more radical than anything Husserl ever articulated, and in his later writings Merleau-Ponty makes it clear that “the invisible,” though immanent to “the visible,” is irreducible to the visible, and what Merleau-Ponty designates as écart is something that can never be present because, as the differentiation between figure and background, it is the primordial generative condition of presence and meaning (and is thus a concept that strongly anticipates – if it is not already – Derrida’s concepts of différences and the trace). As we have seen, Merleau-Ponty affirms that presence always rest upon a “nucleus of absence” (see The Visible and the Invisible, p. 229).

So, Merleau-Ponty clearly comes to regard absence as not simply derived from presence but as a condition of presence, and to that extent as something that can never truly “be present”; and yet, Merleau-Ponty’s point is also that, if any kind of absence is intelligible at all and if dualism is false, there must be some sense or way in which even the most radically absent absences can be present. This is why he deploys the inherently paradoxical notion of an “originary presentation of the unpresentable,” which I mention below. Even in the context of the passage in which Merleau-Ponty claims that “absence is rooted in presence,” his point is not to reduce absence to presence but to indicate, following Husserl, the intertwining of the two, in particular the manner in which they are intertwined or co-given in the living body, such that there would be no (ap)resentation of interiority without a living, behaving body, yet there would also be no presentation of a living, behaving body without an (ap)resentation of interiority. My basic point, then, is that I do not intend to assimilate Husserl and Merleau-Ponty to one another but rather to use certain relevant concepts and arguments in Husserl strategically in order to elucidate Merleau-Ponty’s and to acknowledge the extent to which Merleau-Ponty is clearly indebted to them.
of the paradoxical notion “an Urpräsentation of what by principle is Nichturprésentierbar,” 278 that is, of an “originating presentation of the unpresentable.” 279 There are structures, processes, and relations that are “unpresentable” because they constitute “presentability” as such, yet they are, nonetheless, “presentable” in some way, for otherwise we would never be able to notice or think of them, and were they opposed to the world whose presentability they constitute, we would, again, end up with a dualistic, “two-world” ontology. So, as we have seen, absence can be a mode of presence: something can be present as absent. But paradoxically, even radical absence can be a mode of presence: something can be present even as radically absent. Alterity is precisely one of these presentable (and always already present) radical absences, one of these modes of being that is present as radically absent; it is an absence more absent than any other, an absence that is fundamentally different from any ordinary absence, an absence that is indeed radically absent, yet one that nonetheless succeeds in coming to presence; it is not just one present absence among others, and yet it is, nonetheless, an absence that is present, and indeed it is one that, as I will later discuss, is constitutive of any presence, constitutive of my sense of “objective” reality and even of my own presence to myself.

So, to return the question I posed above, how is it possible for a radical absence to come to presence without ceasing to be radically absent? The answer is that it is only possible if dualism – dualism of mind and body, of “immanence” (the domain of consciousness) and “transcendence” (the domain of reality external to consciousness), or of “the transcendental” and “the empirical”/“natural” – is false (along with its reductionistic counterparts). For a radical absence such as alterity to have any place at all in perceptible reality, it must do so below all of

278 The Visible and the Invisible, p. 239. Merleau-Ponty often uses this formulation to define what he calls “flesh” or “the invisible” (see e.g., Nature, p. 209).
279 The Visible and the Invisible, p. 203.
these oppositions. It must, in particular, disclose an enmeshment of immanence and
transcendence, of interiority and carnal, perceptible nature. In short, alterity discloses, as its
condition of givenness, that which is neither purely immanent nor wholly transcendent, neither
exclusively internal nor entirely external, neither an ego nor a thing: in a word, it discloses the
lived/living body. In other words, in order for otherness to come to presence it must be rooted in
what Husserl calls an “immanent transcendency.” In Husserl, “immanent transcendency”
usually refers either to the world or to a perceptual object, for the world is obviously something
that appears to consciousness – indeed, it is what is ultimately, implicitly intended in every
intentional act of consciousness – yet it also necessarily outstrips consciousness, and the same is
ture even of an ordinary object of consciousness. This is why Husserl often uses the metaphor of
a “horizon” to describe “immanent transcendencies,” for like a horizon, the world as such, and
even the identities of things presented to us within the world, necessarily exceed us; like a
horizon, the world is always more than the ways in which it presently appears, or always recedes
from us as we approach it; the more we disclose it, the more of it there always is to disclose. This
infinite excessiveness or “transcendence” of the world is essential to its presentation, and it is
also essential to the presentations of ordinary things and of others.

Now, for Merleau-Ponty the lived/living body is precisely the “immanent transcendency”
in virtue of which alterity may be presenced in the world, for it is not a pure consciousness yet
also not a thing; it is not a thing, but it is also not not a thing. This directs our attention to the fact
that lived experience is below or beyond the traditional immanence/transcendence dichotomy.
The lived/living body, as we have seen, is precisely a blurring of the distinction between
“immanence” and “transcendence,” for it is neither purely internal to an ego nor merely an

external object in the world among others. In other words, traditionally in philosophy it is assumed that something can only be *either* immanent *or* transcendent, *either* interiority *or* exteriority, yet the lived body is *both at once*, or is neither purely the one nor the other (which is to say, ontologically something else altogether).\(^{281}\) This is, I think, an example of the extent to which Merleau-Ponty anticipates deconstruction, for he consistently argues that the “both/and” *logos* of lived experience subtends, conditions, and disrupts the “either/or,” disjunctive logic typical of reflective thought. Thus, instead of being *either* consciousness *or* thing, *either* subject *or* object, *either* immanent (internal to consciousness) *or* transcendent (external to consciousness), the lived body is both at once, or is rather something constituted by the cross-contamination of the two, which is also to say something else altogether, something that is neither entirely the one nor the other.

We have returned to the point that subjectivity is perceptible in the world only if it is not *pure* interiority but is rather blended into exteriority. “Immanence,” then, must participate in “transcendence” if it is ever to have a place within the transcendent world or among transcendent things, and though Merleau-Ponty is arguably more successful in conceptualizing this, it is in fact a point that Husserl explicitly acknowledges:

Let us make clear to ourselves how consciousness, so to speak, can enter into the real world, how that which in itself is absolute can relinquish its immanence and take on the characteristic of transcendence. We immediately see that it can do so only by a certain participation in transcendence in the first, the originary sense; and this is obviously the transcendence belonging to Nature; only by virtue of its experienced relation to the organism does consciousness become real human or brute consciousness, and only thereby does it acquire a place in the space belonging to Nature and the time belonging to Nature…\(^{282}\)

All presence is coupled with absence, and alterity is an absence necessarily coupled with a particular, special kind of presence, namely the presence or expressivity of a living, behaving

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\(^{281}\) Again, this is also what Merleau-Ponty means when he speaks of the “ambiguity” of the lived body.

body. Our bodies are the only faces we may turn toward one another in the world, but since we
know we cannot accept a strict dichotomy between consciousness and the body, we also know –
as everyday experience prior to abstract philosophical reflection attests – that to see the bodies of
others is also already to see their consciousness, and that likewise for others to see my body is
also already for them to see me. Interiority (life, perception, consciousness, alterity, etc.,) is an
absence necessarily coupled with, and thus presented in and through, the exteriority of a living
body. Interiority is the absence at the “other side” of a living body’s presence (that is, at the other
side of its exteriority). Every mode of presence is also the presencing of an absence, and the
living body is simply the presencing of one kind of absence – or rather interiority is one kind of
present absence – in the world among others, albeit a special kind of absence; though it is
irremediably absent – more absent than any ordinary absence – the interiority of an Other can
come to presence in the world because it is one aspect of a phenomenon that is precisely below
the conventional opposition between immanence and transcendence, interiority and exteriority.
Thus, as Merleau-Ponty writes, “there is undeniably something between transcendent Nature,
naturalism’s being-in-itself, and the immanence of the mind, its acts, its noema. It is into this
interval that must try to advance.” And the lived/living body (as well as what Merleau-Ponty
will later call “the flesh of the world,” which the lived/living body precisely exemplifies) is this
interval. There is “…a sort of dehiscence opens my body in two, and…between my body looked
at and my body looking, between my body touched and my body touching, there is overlapping
or encroachment, so that we must say that the things pass into us as well as we into the
things,” yet Merleau-Ponty also makes clear that this “dehiscence that opens my body in two”
– that is, this non-disjunctive separation between my “objective body” and my “phenomenal

body” that constitutes me as a living, sentient body – is also what makes it possible for me to pass into other lives and for other lives to pass into my own. It is only because the lived/living body is neither a disembodied perceiver nor a mere thing, neither purely a subject nor a brute object, but is rather a “‘perceiving thing,’ a ‘subject-object’”\textsuperscript{285} that I am able to perceive directly another’s subjectivity (and that an Other is able to perceive directly my subjectivity) in such a way that does not negate its radical absence or inaccessibility.

I do not immediately experience my body as a “mere thing,” and while I surely do not experience the body of an Other in precisely the same way in which I experience my own, I likewise do not immediately experience the other’s body as such as a “mere thing”; as a living body, it too is a “subject.” To be “a subject” \textit{is} to be a “body-subject,” and to be a “body-subject” \textit{is} to be a living, behaving body. In other words, to perceive a living, behaving body (whether my own or that of an Other) is already to perceive a particular phenomenal whole (or Gestalt) before we later reflectively sunder it into “subject” and “object,” a “for-itself” and an “in-itself.” “My body \textit{is} a Gestalt and it is co-present in every Gestalt,”\textsuperscript{286} and it is a Gestalt precisely because it presents interiority \textit{together} with behavior and exteriority, or because it presents consciousness \textit{as} a form of flesh and \textit{as} a relationship with a world. We first perceive an \textit{embodied mind} before we ever oppositionally distinguish between “mind” and “body,” and an embodied mind just is a living, behaving body; an embodied mind is an irreducible compresence of interiority and exteriority, an “exterior” that immediately apparatus an “interior”:

\ldots Appresentation presupposes a core of presentation. It is a making present combined by associations with presentation, with perception proper, but a making present that is fused with the latter in the particular function of “co-perception.” In other words, the two are so fused that they stand within the \textit{functional community of one perception}, which simultaneously presents and apparatuses…Therefore, in the object of such a presentive-appresentive perception…we must distinguish noematically between the part

\textsuperscript{286} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{The Visible and the Invisible}, p. 205.
which is genuinely perceived and the rest, which is not strictly perceived and yet is there too. Thus every perception of this type is transcending: it posits more as itself-there than it makes “actually” present at any time...Let us apply this general cognition to the case of experiencing someone else. In this case too it should be noted that experience can appresent only because it presents...That implies, however, that from the very beginning, what this experience presents must belong to the unity of the very object appresented. In other words: It is not, and cannot be, the case that the body belonging to my primordial sphere and indicating to me the other Ego...could appresent his factual existence and being-there-too, unless this primordial body acquired the sense, “a body belonging to the other ego,” and, according to the whole associative-apperceptive performance, the sense: “someone else’s animate organism itself.” Therefore it is not as though the body over there...remained separate from the animate bodily organism of the other Ego, as if that body were something like a signal for its analogue (by virtue of an obviously inconceivable motivation).287

In this passage, if Husserl does not in fact succeed in conceptualizing what Merleau-Ponty articulates as the lived body, he comes very close indeed to doing so. As we have seen, Husserl frequently insists upon the unity of presentation and appresentation: presentation and appresentation are two co-given, co-constitutive moments of any experience. It is never the case that a thing first presents itself to me and then appresents something else (say, one of its hidden sides). I do not see the front of a building and then think or infer that it must have a back: I see the whole building, or rather I see the building as a whole (albeit from a particular profile). However, Husserl observes here that this unity of presentation and appresentation – this compresence of presence and absence – in experience discloses something peculiar in the experience of an Other. Otherness is only ever given as a kind of absence (or as a kind of “appresence”), yet like every appresence it must be tied inseparably to some kind of presence: whatever is appresented must be “the other side” of whatever is presented, whatever is apperceived as absent must be co-given with something perceived as present. Thus, if presentation and appresentation truly are united or co-given, then so too are their “objects” or referents, that is, so too are what they present and appresent. Since my apperception of an Other’s otherness (interiority) is only possible given the simultaneous perception of the Other’s

287 Husserl, Cartesian Meditations, §55, p. 122.
body (exteriority), or conversely since the presentation of the Other’s body is coupled with the appresentation of the Other’s otherness, it follows that the Other’s otherness and that the Other’s (living, behaving) body, that the other’s interiority and that the Other’s exteriority, must likewise be inseparably entangled. Again, the necessary unity of presentation and appresentation entails the necessary unity of whatever is thereby presented and appresented. Thus, the necessary unity of presentation and appresentation in lived experience discloses, in the experience of an Other, an irreducible “unity” of subject and object, or rather an enmeshment of interiority (immanence) and exteriority (transcendence), in virtue of which the Other’s otherness may be given as such, and this, of course, is what Merleau-Ponty will later call the lived body.

As Merleau-Ponty insists (and as Husserl himself argues in the above passage), it cannot be the case that an Other’s body or behavior stands radically apart from his/her subjectivity or otherness, as if it were a sign from which I would (inductively) infer his/her subjectivity or otherness. As we have seen and as Husserl also remarks here, if subjectivity and the body/behavior were truly disjunct in such a manner, the motivation for such an inference would be inconceivable. As we have also seen, according to Merleau-Ponty the lived body is better described not as a “unity” of subject and object (since that might convey the notion of two opposites that would somehow be joined together) but is rather below the very opposition between subject and object and is precisely that from which any distinction between the two is abstracted in the first place. The lived body is both subject and object, but this means it is indeed something else altogether: neither purely a subject nor merely an object; not a subject, but not not a subject; not an object, but not not an object. Only the incarnation of subjectivity enables me to have direct access to the subjectivity or otherness of an Other in a way that does not, upon my first glance or touch, negate the requisite transcendence or the Other’s subjectivity or otherness.
Only living flesh can at once join and separate self and Other because only living flesh is at once immanent and transcendent or below the very opposition between immanence and transcendence altogether. Only because the living/lived body is both subject and object can I be an other for others and can others be others for me. I directly yet non-exhaustively encounter the Other through his/her body. I can directly access the Other because (and only because) the Other’s subjectivity is embodied, yet because the Other’s subjectivity is never simply reducible to his/her body I can never access it without remainder.

Since my body enables me to be present to myself, it is also what enables me to be present to others, and likewise it is because others are also necessarily embodied that I am able apprehend them as such. It is only because subjectivity is incarnate that the Other can truly be encountered through his or her body, and reciprocally the fact that I am fundamentally only ever able to be present to myself through my own body explains how I am able to be present to others. Only because subjectivity is incarnate am I accessible to myself and are others accessible to me. Of course, there is a crucial difference between the way in which I am accessible to myself and the way in which other subjectivities are accessible to me, for other subjectivities are, in a sense, inaccessible to me,288 but only because subjectivity is incarnate – only because subjectivity is not a pure, self-transparent ego but rather a living body – can we resolve the paradox Husserl attempted to resolve, the paradox of how we can “access the inaccessible,” or the paradox of how one can have direct access to an Other who, in order to be Other, must remain inaccessible or irremediably distant. Only the incarnation of subjectivity makes possible this strange accessibility of the inaccessible:

…the other’s body which I see and his word which I hear, which are given to me as immediately present in my field…present to me in their own fashion what I will never be present to, what will always be

288 We will recall that this is what Merleau-Ponty calls the “truth of solipsism.”
invisible to me, what I will never directly witness – an absence therefore, but not just any absence, a certain absence and a certain difference in terms of dimensions which are from the first common to us and which predestine the other to be a mirror of me as I am of him, which are responsible for the fact that we do not have two images side by side of someone and of ourselves, but one sole image in which we are both involved, which is responsible for the fact that my consciousness of myself and my myth of the other are not two contradictories, but rather each the reverse of the other.289

Only a third alternative below or beyond the classical alternative between subject and object can (ap)present the non-presentable: the Other. Since the lived body is both subject and object (hence not entirely one or the other), the interiority of the subject is distinct from yet nevertheless not “hidden” behind or “imprisoned” within its body, and thus my perception of a living, behaving body is immediately (non-inferentially) an (ap)perception of an Other. Behavior, then, is the exterior presentation of an interior, yet it is the presentation of an interior that is not “interior” like a pilot in a ship but rather like a melody and the affective or emotional meaning with which it is co-given, or rather like the hand that grasps or caresses and the particular intentionality of desire or affection through which it is mobilized as such: in neither case is the “exterior” a barrier to a hidden interior that may only be breached inferentially, and yet there remains a distance between a sensible melody and its meaning, between the visible gesture of the hand and the invisible intention that animates it, such that they are ambiguous rather than closed or transparently determinate phenomena, and thus such that they may invite different interpretations, including some that are mistaken to varying degrees.290

Thus, the point to which we keep returning is that intersubjectivity is possible only through the lived/living body, or only through an intertwining of immanence and transcendence; it is possible only “without the body being anywhere pure thing, but also without it being

289 Merleau-Ponty, The Visible and the Invisible, p.82-83. Italics are Merleau-Ponty’s.
290 Though we need to understand veracity and error here phenomenologically. Here, “truth” and “falsehood” must be understood fundamentally not in terms of the correspondence between a proposition or a belief and a mind-independent state of affairs, but rather as two moments of phenomenal becoming, or as delimitations of a horizon of possible appearances. I discuss this phenomenological account of truth in the next chapter.
anywhere pure idea.” The ‘inter’ in intersubjectivity is possible only if subjectivity already participates in transcendence (in materiality or nature), that is, only if it is embodied. The transcendence of the world – indeed its very visibility – refers to the fact that it always outstrips whatever I may perceive or see. Yet, I can only perceive or see the world at all if I belong to it, if I already participate in its transcendence or visibility. Indeed, I can only see the world on the condition that I myself am visible, in just the same way that I can only touch something on the condition that I myself am tangible. Vision and touch thus already participate in the transcendence – in the visibility or tangibility – of the world seen and touched. It is for this reason that subjectivity can in fact itself be seen or touched. Subjectivity can be seen or touched because it must itself, through its body, be “meshed into the visible world.” My subjectivity – for example, my power of vision – can itself be “seen” because “its power depends precisely on the fact that it has a place from which it sees.” I can see something only if my vision is “inscribed in the order of being that it discloses,” and likewise I can touch something “only if my hand, while it is felt from within, is also accessible from without, itself tangible…”. If I see or touch something, I must be separated or differentiated from it, for if I were fused with it, I would not “see” or “touch” it at all; indeed, if I were fused or strictly identical with it, there would be no “it” for me to see or touch. As I mentioned earlier, in order for me to see something there must be some distance between myself and the thing that I see; vision is impossible if there is no difference between seer and seen. The same point also applies to touch: if I touch something, there must be some difference between me and the thing that I touch. However, there

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291 Merleau-Ponty, *Structure of Behavior*, p. 207. Italics are Merleau-Ponty’s.
293 Ibid., p. 166.
295 Ibid., p. 133.
must also be some sort of ontological continuity between me and the things that I see or touch, between vision and touch and the visible or tangible world itself disclosed to and through vision and touch. If there were no such continuity at all, there would be no vision or touch at all; if my subjectivity were divorced from the objects I see or touch, I would not be able to see or touch them: visible and tangible things would be utterly inaccessible to me if there were no continuity between us, or if I myself were not visible or tangible. I must be different or separated from the things I perceive, yet my perception must also be ontologically continuous with them.

Thus, subjectivity in general is possible only because it is enmeshed with the world rather than absolutely divorced from it, and this is what enables it to be accessible to, and indeed already enmeshed with, other subjectivities. There must be an irreducible difference between subjectivity and the extra-subjective world disclosed to it, yet at the same time they must also already envelop and interpenetrate one another. There must be both distance and continuity between subjectivity and the world if subjectivity is to have any place in the world or even to be possible at all. Subjectivity must not be utterly engulfed by the world, yet “he who looks must not himself be foreign to the world he looks at.”\(^{296}\) The “sphere of immanence” (or subjectivity) must be what Merleau-Ponty calls a “fold or hollow of Being,”\(^ {297}\) that is, different from yet at the same time continuous and entangled with the carnal world disclosed to and through it. The sense of touch is precisely a fold within the tangible world, as it is literally a folding of the tangible world back upon itself: when I touch something, I am always in some way touched back by it; for me to feel something, I always do so only in virtue of my own tangibility, and I always implicitly, reflexively feel my own tangibility whenever I touch something (for example, when I touch my keyboard, I do not just feel the solidity or texture of the keyboard, but also that of the

\(^{296}\) Ibid., p. 134.
\(^{297}\) Ibid., p. 227.
fingers I use to touch it; thus, there must surely be some difference or distance between myself and what I touch, but we must also be ontologically continuous, i.e., equally tangible).

Certain critics (e.g., Deleuze) accuse Husserl (and phenomenology by proxy) of reducing “immanence” to *immanence to consciousness* and urge that, if we are truly to overcome dualism or supernaturalism (that is, if we are not to smuggle in theological transcendence “through the back the door,” so to speak), we must conceptualize immanence as other than mere *immanence to consciousness*, for this notion always seems to depend upon the correlative notion of a world absolutely outside of consciousness. As Deleuze and Guattari put it, “…when immanence becomes immanent “to” a transcendental subjectivity, it is in the heart of its own field that the hallmark or figure of transcendence must appear…” 298 This is perhaps an accurate criticism of Husserl, since Husserl seems to maintain that all meaning – even that of the transcendence of the world – is fundamentally constituted by, hence immanent to, consciousness. Husserl often seems to conceptualize even the transcendence of the world as immanent to the ego to whom it appears, and thus it is reasonable to say that he restricts immanence to the sphere of subjectivity, to the relation between noesis and noema. However, I do not think that this critique applies to Merleau-Ponty, since Merleau-Ponty (as we will further see in chapter five) develops an account of Being that is fundamentally below any opposition between “immanence” and “transcendence,” or rather develops a concept of immanence that is precisely emancipated from (or irreducible to) subjectivity – an immanence that is not merely immanence “to” subjectivity and that in fact decenters subjectivity as the locus of all meaning in the world – without collapsing into a

reductive monism\textsuperscript{299}; that is, he develops an ontology that is neither a dualism nor a reductive naturalism, neither an idealism nor a traditional materialism.

The point that is most relevant here, and the one that I wish to emphasize, is that for Merleau-Ponty it is not just the case that the transcendent world is immanent to consciousness: Merleau-Ponty adds that in order for the transcendent world to be immanent to consciousness at all, consciousness must itself also be immanent to/within the transcendent world itself; consciousness must truly be \textit{of} the world if the world is ever to be an intentional object for it. This is why Merleau-Ponty will repeatedly insist that any “frontal” relationship between subjectivity and the world – that is, any relationship in which a subject stands over and against the world as an intentional object – is derivative rather than fundamental; rather, what is fundamental is the embeddedness of subjectivity in the world, or what Merleau-Ponty often describes as the \textit{lateral} relationship between the two (in Merleau-Ponty, the term “lateral” is always strictly contrasted with “frontal”).\textsuperscript{300} The “sphere of immanence” must belong to the “sphere of transcendence,” which also precisely means that there must be a kind of immanence prior even to the constitution of a traditional “sphere of immanence,” that immanence is first neither merely immanence \textit{to} consciousness nor the simple contrary of transcendence; it means

\textsuperscript{299} This concept of “immanence” is, of course, what Merleau-Ponty articulates in his later writings as “flesh.” In the same passage from which the above excerpt from \textit{What is Philosophy?} is taken, Deleuze and Guattari clearly allude to Merleau-Ponty’s concept of flesh and accuse it of essentially introducing transcendence in the same manner as Husserl’s concept of transcendental subjectivity. Though I cannot fully justify my claim here, I think such a reading of Merleau-Ponty’s concept of flesh is absolutely wrong and textually indefensible. “Flesh,” for Merleau-Ponty, is emphatically not a “transcendental” structure in the traditional sense of the term, nor is it reducible to the flesh of the living body. In Merleau-Ponty’s later writings, Flesh is a generative field of relations – that is, a matrix of differentiation – that is prior to any traditional distinction between immanence and transcendence, the transcendental and the empirical, or ideality and materiality, and as such it is essentially equivalent to Deleuze’s own concepts of ‘difference in-itself’ and the ‘plane of immanence.’ I hope such a comparison will become clear in the course of my further discussion of Merleau-Ponty’s concept of flesh in chapter five.

\textsuperscript{300} This is why Merleau-Ponty calls for the development of what he often refers to as an “intra-ontology,” which would be an ontology that only thinks Being from the “midst” of Being; it would be a thinking of Being that does not adopt a “frontal,” object-directed stance toward it, for such a stance deforms the original relationship between thought and Being.
that there must first be a kind of immanence that even allows anything to be immanent to consciousness in the first place, and which thus in fact antecedes and institutes the traditional distinction between immanence and transcendence (and which Merleau-Ponty will later call “flesh”). This is one reason Merleau-Ponty proclaims that there is a “paradox of immanence and transcendence in perception.”

So, Merleau-Ponty might say that Husserl was on the correct path but simply did not take it far enough. For Merleau-Ponty, the Husserlian conception of “immanence” cannot truly accommodate the genuine “transcendence” of the world, that is, the excessiveness of the world beyond consciousness, nor can it accommodate the fact that consciousness truly belongs to the world that exceeds it (for indeed, both of these notions are correlative). This is why, despite his indebtedness to Husserl, Merleau-Ponty claims that “psychological or transcendental immanence cannot account for what a horizon or a “remoteness” is any better than can “objective” thought.” Simply put, if the “transcendental” is contrary to the “natural,” then a transcendental subjectivity cannot truly belong to the transcendent world (or to “nature”), and if it cannot belong to the world, then neither can the world truly elude its grasp (and, moreover, the world does not truly elude such a subjectivity if, as Husserl supposes, such a subjectivity never finds in the world any meaning that it has not already deposited there). For now, the most important point is that, for Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology in fact demands a decisive break from transcendental immanence, or rather it demands that we reconceptualize “immanence” in such a way that emancipates it from its bondage to an ego behind the scenes of natural phenomena and that would, as such, not dissolve it into transcendent nature (which would equally be a mistake) but

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301 “The Primacy of Perception and Its Philosophical Consequences,” in *The Primacy of Perception*, p. 16.
302 *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 23.
would rather place it below or outside the traditional opposition between immanence and transcendence altogether.

For Merleau-Ponty, it is precisely the inherence of subjectivity in the world (or the incarnation of subjectivity) that discloses (or simply *is*) such an the intertwining of immanence and transcendence, and it is precisely this intertwining of immanence and transcendence in incarnate subjectivity – or rather, as Merleau-Ponty also often puts it, it is this “ambiguity” of the living body – that makes the presence of alterity possible and that is, indeed, already the presence of alterity. Again, consciousness must itself be an “immanent transcendency,” or in other words a living body; consciousness must be incarnate, and it is because it is incarnate that not only is a world accessible to it but that it is, moreover, accessible to others. As we saw earlier, my vision is possible only if it already participates in or belongs to the visibility of the world that is open to it, and this precisely means that my vision is itself, in a way, visible. “It is a marvel too little noticed,” writes Merleau-Ponty, “that every movement of my eyes – even more, every displacement of my body – has its place in the same visible universe that I itemize and explore with them.”

It is in this way that a “consciousness seen from the outside” is not a logical absurdity; it is in this way that alterity can precisely be a “negativity that is not nothing”; it is in this way that we can truly say that “the soul animates or be-souls the Body,” that “the soul is indeed ever one with the body.” It is because “…I am that animal of perceptions and movements called a body” that when others see my living, acting body – when they see my body engage with the world – so too do they see *me*, and so too do I see *them* in the same

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303 *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 134.
304 Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 349. See also footnote 39 above.
307 Ibid., §46, p. 176.
manner. Alterity must be a negativity, but it must be a negativity that is neither the categorical antithesis of ordinary positive (material, perceptible) presence (which would introduce dualism) nor a mere lack of such presence (which would reduce it to an ordinary absence such as, say, the back of a building, and which would thus fail to respect the phenomenon that it is); it must not merely be another “possible positive presence” (like a hidden profile that can be revealed), yet it must also not merely be a negation of positive presence, or something with no real place at all in perceptible, carnal reality, for then it would not be perceptible or real at all: it would either be the absolute erasure of presence or something utterly supernatural. So how, again, is it possible – how is it not indeed a blatant contradiction – for alterity (or for any kind of radical absence) to be present? How is it possible for an absence that is irreducible to any presence – for an absence that can never, in a sense, be present or given – to be precisely “present” or “given”? It is possible for such absences to be given (and it is the case that such absences are always already given) in lived experience because “Being is univocal,”309 because there is nothing in experience or in existence – nothing present, nothing absent, nothing even radically absent – that is not incarnate.

We have seen that it is impossible to access one’s own mind in total isolation, and this means that it is also impossible to possess or acquire even any concepts of mental qualities and faculties in total isolation. For example, it is only because I already exist in a world teeming with joys and sorrows, borne by and stretched between shared pasts and shared anticipations of futures yet to come, that I know what “joy” and “sorrow” or what “memory” and “time” (or what any of the emotions that attend memory and temporality) are. As Alison Jaggar writes in her account of the social construction of emotion:

The emotions we experience reflect prevailing forms of social life. For instance, one could not feel or even be betrayed in the absence of social norms about fidelity: it is inconceivable that betrayal or indeed any distinctively human emotion could be experienced by a solitary individual in a presocial state of nature. There is a sense in which any individual’s guilt or anger, joy or triumph, presupposes the existence of a social group capable of feeling guilt, anger, joy, or triumph. This is not to say that group emotions historically precede or are logically prior to the emotions of individuals; it is to say that individual experience is simultaneously social experience.\textsuperscript{310}

Much philosophical work, both within and outside of phenomenology, has been done on the nature of emotion, and I cannot survey all of it here. However, it will suffice to observe that emotions are necessarily endemic to how consciousness – how a living body – inhabits and encounters its world and that, to be more precise, they are necessarily infused with bodily expressivity, that they are always in principle expressible through or, perhaps better put, are always expressions of the intentionality and physiognomy of a living body. That is to say, emotions are necessarily experienced and intelligible as such as particular patterns of behavior or styles of conduct, and as patterns of behavior – as habituated ways of processing and meaningfully articulating salient elements of the world, as not merely internal “stimulations” or “disturbances” but, more fundamentally, as common ways of responding to and of communicating the manifold meanings that the world impresses upon and summons within us – they are acquired, sedimented, and known just like any other: by direct acquaintance with, and through the repeated mimicry of, those very patterns of behavior in others within situations that elicit them and that lend them their essential meaning as precisely ways of responding to meaning.

That emotion is not only constitutive of a living body’s rapport with the world but is, in particular, constitutive of its rapport with others is an obvious point and hardly requires justification, yet it is one that is nonetheless frequently overlooked and even suppressed by

certain entrenchent conceptual frameworks, namely those that regard emotions as either entirely private mental phenomena or as entirely reducible to physiological phenomena. All of the emotions with which we are familiar are only intelligible as *intersubjective* phenomena, as phenomena that emerge between subjects within a social situation or context, as special valences of meaning and value that saturate and inform the ways in which subjects relate to one another and to the world in which they dwell. Experiences of happiness, sadness, and anger are essentially implicated in typical modes of comportment toward the world – in the performances of a body at grips with the world – and especially in particular modes of relating to others, in particular modes of *affecting* and of *being affected by* others and the social situations in which one inescapably finds oneself. Simply put, emotions – just like any kind of “mental state” – are hardly intelligible as such if they are relegated to “the mind” conceived as separate in principle from the body, from the world, and from others, for we already know that all of these are “involved in an inextricable tangle.”\(^{311}\) Indeed, among mental phenomena, emotions are most clearly unintelligible if divorced from the living body’s conduct in the world amidst and in synergy with other living bodies. This is not to say that such emotions have no interiority or qualitative dimension or that they are *reducible* to forms of conduct (as I have already discussed, Merleau-Ponty is emphatically opposed to any kind of crude behaviorism or reductionism, and even devoted his first book, *The Structure of Behavior*, to refuting such views), but it is to say that they are essentially polarized toward fulfillment in, and are indeed inseparable from, the living body’s conduct and physiognomy, that they are immanent to the living body’s styles of outward self-presentation, and moreover that they essentially structure and derive intelligibility

\(^{311}\) Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 454.
from – that they constitute and are reciprocally constituted by – an intersubjective field of experience.

As Merleau-Ponty demonstrates, nothing “inward” is ever completely inward but is always already extended outward, always already othered, always already directed beyond itself toward a world and toward others. Thus, all mental phenomena are inherently entwined with the living body and its behaviors, and all forms of behavior are intersubjectively constituted: I know how to act in certain ways because others have already taught me how to do so. I understand my own subjectivity only through the subjectivities of others with whom my own is embedded. I understand the powers, potencies, and vulnerabilities of my own body only because others mirror and affirm them through their own bodies and behaviors. I understand my own experiences – including especially my own emotional responses to the world – only because others already enact them through their own corporeal powers and habits of expression. What would, say, anger be outside of a context in which not only are there others who make me angry but others who express and communicate it, others who teach me what anger is precisely by performing it for me? And what would anger be divorced from a situation or context that elicits it? I know what anger is not only because others have simply made me angry but because others literally show me anger, and anger is – like every emotion – not merely a physiological “stimulation” but a responsiveness to meaning, a way in which one is connected to the world and to others. For all of these reasons, Merleau-Ponty insists upon the inherently corporeal, behavioral, and therefore intersubjective nature of emotion:

It was thought to be self-evident that I can grasp only the corporal signs of anger or fear from the outside and that I have to resort to the anger or fear I know in myself through introspection in order to interpret these signs. Today’s psychologists have made us notice that in reality introspection gives me almost nothing. If I try to study love or hate purely from inner observation, I will find very little to describe: a few pangs, a few heart-throbs – in short, trite agitations which do not reveal the essence of love or hate. Each time I find something worth saying, it is because I have succeeded in studying it as a way of
behaving, as a modification of my relations with others and with the world, because I have managed to think about it as I would think about the behavior of another person whom I happened to witness.\(^{312}\)

The point that Merleau-Ponty makes in this passage is, I think, a profound one. Here, Merleau-Ponty invites us to perform a certain thought experiment (indeed, a kind of *epoché*): he asks us strip away from an emotion everything but the raw, physical sensation of it, that is, to abstract from it anything that might in any way derive its meaning from its manner of behavioral expression or from the intersubjective context in which it might occur. So, take sadness for example: remove from sadness all social markers or meanings, and remove from it all of the behaviors commonly associated with it; abstract sadness from all of the ways in which one might express it or see others express it (such as a frown, the shedding of tears or crying, a slump in one’s posture, a tremulation in one’s voice, and so on), and abstract it entirely from any conceivable situation that might elicit it (a breakup, the death of a loved one, being fired from one’s job, a bad grade on an exam, a paper rejected for publication, a tragic moment in a film or play, an instance of injustice, and so on). What thus remains? Are we to say that we are still left with “sadness”? We are, of course, left with very little, if anything at all, that truly resembles or conveys the lived experience of “sadness,” and still less can we say that in abstracting sadness from behavior and from all conceivable intersubjective contexts we have uncovered its “*essence.*”

This, I think, is a great example of the manner in which phenomenological reflection – in particular, a certain kind of “eidetic variation” – can in fact yield important truths, truths we all know by direct acquaintance yet might fail to appreciate in any other way. As Merleau-Ponty argues here, if we imaginatively vary “sadness” in such a way that we divorce it from all forms

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\(^{312}\) *The Film and the New Psychology,* in *Sense and Non-Sense*, p. 52.
of behavioral expression and from any possible situation in which one might feel it in oneself or encounter it in others – that is, if we just pare it down to some sort of putatively atomic, raw physical sensations – then at most we end up with an inventory of banal and vague symptoms – “trite agitations,” like a “throb” here or a “rush” there, a “welling up” here or a “trembling” there – that not only do not at all capture what it is like to experience it but that indeed hardly serve to differentiate it from many other emotions (such as shame, embarrassment, jealously, love, anger, and so on). The point that Merleau-Ponty makes here about emotion, then, is the same one that he makes about all “mental” or “subjective” phenomena, namely that they are not originally or ever entirely intelligible in a purely inward or introspective way, and thus still less is it the case that I fundamentally know what they are in isolation from my corporeal relationships with others and with the world, and even less still do I fundamentally know that others “have” or experience them by inferring that they do after comparing them to my own case. One does not first encounter emotions in a purely internal, private theatre of experience, then observe the ways in which one typically expresses such emotions behaviorally, then proceed to go out into the world to observe similar behaviors performed by others, and then finally analogically infer that others also experience such emotions on the basis of observed similarities between their behaviors and one’s own. What we said earlier concerning how we come to know minds in general applies with the same force to how we come to know emotions or affects: if originally we could only know that we have them introspectively and if, therefore, we could only ever know that others have them inductively, then we would never know what they are or perceive them in others – indeed, we would never “have” them – at all.

Emotions and affects are always modes of a living body’s responsiveness to meaning, and as such they are perceptible directly in and through the conduct of a living body, that is, in
and through the manner in which a living body responds to situations in which it finds itself, situations that are, of course, social or intersubjective from the start:

... What is the meaning of an act that I produce by applying an electrical current to an organism? The current is not the cause of the gesture. It is the body’s functional totality which is capable of smiling, and not the facial nerve. Full expression only appears with the total behavior of an organism. A living body is always behaving: it is a phenomenal body. Emotions are not provoked by stimuli but by situations, totalities that are meaningful only for a life. 313

As Merleau-Ponty argues here (and as he also suggests in the previous passage), emotions are not reducible to physiological states or sensations. This is not to say, of course, that emotions do not require some sort of physiological substratum or a certain set of biological conditions in order to be realized, which would be absurd to deny. Merleau-Ponty’s point, rather, is simply that a physiological stimulus or sensation is not alone sufficient to engender an emotion, for emotions must be endemic to certain ways of engaging others and the world. That is to say, the physiological processes through which emotions arise would not, in fact, give rise to such emotions at all – they would not give rise to what we call, say, sadness qua sadness, or anger qua anger, and so on – outside of a prior intersubjective context of conduct and meaning that elicits them. As Merleau-Ponty argues here, if I did not have a body capable of smiling and if smiling were not an expression I learned to perform in response to others or to certain already value-laden social situations, no “stimuli” would ever provoke me to smile, and as smiling is one salient way in which I respond to meaning in the world – in particular, since it is one way in which I enact “happiness,” 314 or one way in which I receive the world as pleasurable or

314 I want to clarify here that I am not denying that a behavior such as “smiling” might have other subtle expressive or intentional meanings. This is why I am careful to say here that smiling is one salient way in which we enact happiness. For instance, though it might commonly indicate ordinary happiness or cheerfulness, in certain instances it might indicate, say, irony or sarcastic mockery, and in other contexts or forms it might even indicate something sinister, malicious, sadistic, or even creepy (as is the case with a “rietus grin”). This is, naturally, consistent with everything Merleau-Ponty argues: nothing is meaningful independently of some intersubjective context, and that is especially true of emotion and behavior. And as we have seen, there is an inexpugnable ambiguity that attends all
congenial – if such a mode of behavioral responsiveness were unavailable to me I would surely, at the very least, experience the phenomena or meanings associated with it differently.\textsuperscript{315}

“mental” phenomena: we have direct access to them as such, but that does not mean they are ever transparent (and in principle they never are).

Moreover, the behaviors through which we enact certain emotions are not always or necessarily culturally-invariant, and Merleau-Ponty acknowledges this. For example, Merleau-Ponty mentions that in Japanese culture it is common to smile as a way to indicate anger in certain contexts (see *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 189). Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological account of the relationship between emotion and behavior does not necessarily “naturalize” or “universalize” the particular ways in which certain emotions are behaviorally expressed. Emotion (like subjectivity in general) is inextricably entwined with behavior, yet the ways in which specific emotions are behaviorally expressed tend to be habits of comportment that, as such, are always culturally shaped and reinforced. For Merleau-Ponty, the embodiment of subjectivity (hence the direct expression of “mental states” and qualities through behavior) is an ontologically necessary truth, yet this does not mean that the specific ways in which specific “mental states” or qualities are embodied or enacted through behavior are culturally-invariant, and Merleau-Ponty explicitly denies that they are.

\textsuperscript{315} It noteworthy here that an empirical condition that Merleau-Ponty does not discuss but that lends support to his account of emotion is “Moebius syndrome.” Moebius syndrome is a palsy of certain facial nerves that prevents those who suffer from it from using their faces to express various emotions in socially common and expected ways (e.g., they often cannot smile to express happiness or frown to express sadness), and those with the condition commonly report that such an inability to express their emotions in such ways has a profound effect on how they feel those emotions themselves. A wonderful and comprehensive study of Moebius syndrome – one that is centered on first-person accounts of those who have the condition and that is therefore, I think, an important companion to any phenomenology of emotion – is Jonathan Cole’s and Henrietta Spalding’s *The Invisible Smile: Living Without Facial Expression* (Oxford University Press, 2009). Many with Moebius syndrome claim that they feel only a dampened or reduced form of certain emotions, and some even claim that they never felt such emotions at all until they later learned how to use their bodies in other ways to express them.

One person with Moebius (“Lydia”) quoted in *The Invisible Smile* was raised in England, whose culture generally does not encourage overly animated, energetic, or ostentatious displays of emotion. Though she learned various ways to mirror or imitate the emotional expressions of others at home, it was not until she later studied abroad in Spain, whose culture precisely tends to encourage expressions of emotion through more dramatic, effusive behaviors or gesticulations, that she truly learned “how to feel.” Lydia claims not only that learning how to express her emotions using her whole body in such dramatic ways helped put her in better touch with her emotions, she even suggests that she did not have emotions at all when she was young and that, prior to learning this new body language through which to express emotions as an adult, it had been very difficult for her to feel them. As Lydia reports:

I do not think I had emotion when I was a child but now I have it. How did I get it? It was in Spain…they are so theatrical in their emotional expression. The body language I had learnt and used at university could be exaggerated in Spain, using the whole body to express one’s feelings. Over here in England it would be over the top, but there it was fine and because of this I learnt how to feel within me. At Oxford I had learnt a lot of imitating and mirroring and copying but had not, to a very profound depth, had the feeling…But in Spain everyone is so dramatic…Because of the cultural ‘up-regulation’ of feeling into gesture I learnt to feel…I could feel really ecstatic, happy, for the first time ever. Before, without expression, I had found feeling difficult…Before, my thought was frigid or cold. I needed the continuation of a thought into real-time expression within the body. – *The Invisible Smile*, p. 154.

As Merleau-Ponty suggests, all “language” is fundamentally “body-language,” and all meaning (linguistic or otherwise) has to be embodied in some manner. Thus, in much the same way that we often do not know what we “think” before find the words with which to express it, so too is it the case, analogously, that we often do know what we “feel” before we find the means to express it with our bodies. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty repeatedly argues that thought is to language as mind is to body, and it seems that Moebius syndrome is but one powerful empirical confirmation of this analogy.
Thus, emotions are simply unintelligible apart from our relations with others and apart from the ways in which we comport ourselves in the world. Only intersubjective situations can elicit emotional experiences and responses, or rather emotional experiences and responses must involve a living body’s global, holistic orientation to an already meaningful context of experience. Indeed, it is worth noting here that Merleau-Ponty argues that the same is the case even with respect to so-called “reflexes.” Throughout most of The Structure of Behavior, Merleau-Ponty devotes his efforts to refuting popular reductionistic (or mechanistic) accounts of behavior, in particular those that reduce behavior to “reflex arcs.” His argument is not simply that behavior cannot be reduced to “mere” reflexes but that even what we call “reflexes” are never “mere” reflexes, that is, that reflexes themselves are unintelligible if abstracted entirely from a living body’s global, holistic orientation toward a world. In other words, Merleau-Ponty’s point concerning “reflexes” is analogous to the one he later makes concerning supposed “sense-data,” namely that they are abstractions derived from a situated Gestalt – a prior contextual configuration of meaning toward which one is already intentionally directed, and in which one is already ensconced, through one’s body – that later come to be reified as autonomous and ontologically primitive elements, processes, or phenomena; they are elements of a situation that presuppose such a situation for their existence or intelligibility yet later come to be selectively isolated from that situation and reflectively inflected as prior to and constitutive of it. The point is not that there are no such things as “reflexes” any more than the point is that there is no such thing as an experience of the “redness” of an apple; rather, the point is that both require a prior orientation to meaning – an intentional, whole-bodied involvement with the world – that cannot be reduced to any such “simpler” elements or phenomena, for such “simpler” elements or phenomena would not function as they do or even occur at all were it not for precisely this larger
context of meaning in which they function or occur as such. For example, even the Patellar ("knee-jerk") reflex – the quintessential example of a "reflex" – can only be realized if the living body intentionally orients itself toward the world in a very specific (we might even say rather "artificial") way, which naturally we all know quite well from our annual physical exams: in order for one’s doctor to elicit such a reflex using a reflex hammer, one has to sit upright, relax one’s lower body, let one’s legs dangle loosely, and in general position one’s body “just so.” As we have seen, Merleau-Ponty makes a similar point about emotions, namely that in order to be elicited or even intelligible as such they must be elicited and understood as an embodied response to worldly, socially embedded meaning, and thus they must (at least in principle) be expressible and directly perceptible through styles of comportment; indeed, they themselves must already be modes of bodily comportment and expression.

So, for Merleau-Ponty emotions are unintelligible if they are not already implicated in our being-in-the-world, if they do not refer to ways in which we perceptually receive, hence also behaviorally negotiate, the situations in which we find ourselves; they are intrinsically enlaced with bodily conduct or expressivity, and I would never know what they are in myself – moreover, I even quite literally would not “feel” them – if I did not learn what they are in and through the bodily conduct or expressions of others in intersubjective situations, since only intersubjective situations can lend them their meaning as such. Thus, “I perceive the grief or anger of the other in his conduct, in his face or his hands, without recourse to any ‘inner’ experience of suffering or anger…because grief and anger are variations of belonging to the world….” 316 Since emotions are not meaningful as such – hence are not, in fact, “emotions” – independently of an intersubjective context, it follows that they must be encountered directly

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through the living bodies or behaviors of others, for if that were not so, one would originally and only ever know what they are by recourse to one’s own privileged, private interiority, yet that is precisely the sort of solipsism that makes any experience or understanding of emotion – or any experience or understanding of oneself and of others in general – impossible. Of course, this point is simply a particular application and implication of Merleau-Ponty’s larger point that dualism renders not only intersubjectivity but also, a fortiori, subjectivity impossible, that all forms of subjectivity must be entwined with an “outside,” that interiority must be blended into exteriority, that every “within” must be, in some way, perceptible directly from “without” if there is to be such a thing as subjectivity, interiority, or any “within” in the first place.

Emotions, however, are especially clear cases of “mental” phenomena that would be ontologically impossible if they were truly withdrawn entirely into some supposedly impregnable internal citadel of solitude, or if they were “purely” subjective rather than also already vectors and valences of corporeal intentionality, habituated manners of responding to meaning and value in the world:

We must reject the prejudice which makes “inner realities” out of love, hate, or anger, leaving them accessible to one single witness: the person who feels them. Anger, shame, hate, and love are not psychic facts hidden at the bottom of another’s consciousness: they are types of behavior or styles of conduct which are visible from the outside. They exist on this face or in those gestures, not hidden behind them.317

Merleau-Ponty, then, repudiates two common, entrenched yet false ways of conceptualizing emotions, two ways of conceptualizing emotions that, regardless of how common or entrenched indeed they are, nonetheless contradict our lived experiences of them: first, that they are reducible to physiological sensations, and second, that they are entirely private or internal feelings. Like any “mental” phenomena, emotions must be perceptible directly in and through the living body and must derive their meaning from the living body’s rapport with others and

with a world; they cannot be purely private or internal, and thus the ways in which they are expressed through the conduct of a living body cannot be categorically divorced from what they themselves are. Those behaviors through which emotions are conveyed cannot be “signs [that] are…given to me separately from what they signify.” So, to be clear, Merleau-Ponty’s claim is not just that emotions are commonly polarized toward behavioral expression or that behavior is a mere means through which emotions are naturally communicated, for this would be to suppose that emotions are fundamentally separate from their means of bodily expression, that behaviors are “mere signs” that are separate from the emotions they “signify.” In general, Merleau-Ponty repudiates any such opposition between “signifier” and “signified,” and in particular the notion that behavior is an external signifier of a purely internal, already preformed thought or mental state. If we reject dualism, we cannot accept any such opposition between “the internal” and “the external,” and so it is potentially misleading even to speak of a behavioral expression of emotion, as if a supposedly “internal” emotion were sharply distinguishable from its external behavioral manifestation. We cannot take the behavioral expression of emotion and the emotion itself to be radically separable from one another, for such a notion would reinstate dualism and would make the direct perception of emotions in others impossible. Merleau-Ponty, then, does not argue that emotions simply collapse into behaviors or that, in general, consciousness and behavior are strictly identical, but he does argue that emotion (or, in general, consciousness) and behavior are interdependent, that the behavioral expression of an emotion is in fact an aspect of the emotion itself, or that emotions are partially constituted by the ways in which they are expressed through the living body.

Thus, we see that the direct presentation or perception of emotion in behavior is an exemplary instance of the direct presentation or perception of another’s consciousness in general:

Faced with an angry or threatening gesture, I have no need, in order to understand it, to recall the feelings which I myself experienced when I used these gestures on my own account. I know very little, from inside, of the mime of anger so that a decisive factor is missing for any association by resemblance or reasoning by analogy, and what is more, I do not see anger or a threatening attitude as a psychic fact hidden behind the gesture, I read anger in it. The gesture does not make me think of anger, it is anger itself.319

It is important to underscore here the point I just mentioned: Merleau-Ponty does not deny that emotions and affects have interiority, yet (like everything “mental” or “interior”) their interiority is not wholly interior but is indissociably entangled with exteriority, thoroughly constituted through their behavioral expression or through the ways in which they are embodied as responses to worldly values, meanings, and intersubjective affordances. So, Merleau-Ponty’s claim that a gesture through which anger is expressed “is anger itself” should not be interpreted as a reductive equation of anger (or of emotion in general) with behavior, which such a claim might suggest in isolation. Of course, Merleau-Ponty perhaps does not articulate his claim here as carefully as he otherwise could or should articulate it, and only within the context of his broader philosophical commitments – that is, only within the context of his general conception of the relationship between subjectivity and behavior, and also only within the context of other specific remarks he makes elsewhere concerning the nature of emotion – is it clear that he does not mean to reduce emotions to forms of behavior.

As I discussed in the previous chapter and as I will further discuss below, Merleau-Ponty is emphatically opposed to “behaviorism” in any conventional senses of the term. Merleau-Ponty consistently affirms the irreducible qualitative and first-personal givenness (that is, the interiority) of experience. Thus, “the grief and the anger of another,” Merleau-Ponty writes,

319 Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, p. 184.
“never have quite the same significance for him as they have for me. For him these situations are lived through, for me they are displayed.” Merle-Ponty never denies that there is a significant difference between the “subjective,” lived-through character of, say, grief or anger and outward, public, “objective” expressions of grief or anger; however, he does deny that such a difference amounts to a dualistic opposition between the two. Dualism must be false, yet any view that would simply regard subjectivity as equivalent to bodily behavior would equally fail to cohere with lived experience or with any adequate account of subjectivity, and, as we have seen, it would also extinguish alterity. In general, any kind of reductionism is just as inconsistent with Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy as any kind of dualism, for the former is in fact the conceptual offspring the latter, and so Merleau-Ponty is always committed to demonstrating and describing the intertwining of mind and behavior, interiority and exteriority, subjectivity and world, which is a kind of relationship that is indeed difficult to demonstrate or describe because reflective thought so easily deforms it into either a dualism or a reductive identity. In any case, Merleau-Ponty’s claim in the above passage that a gesture through which anger is expressed “is anger itself” is simply meant to convey (in a dramatic way) the point that when I perceive emotion in an Other I do not fundamentally infer it from the Other’s conduct. For all of the reasons we have already discussed, Merleau-Ponty’s point here is that I do not first observe someone’s behavior and then tack on some sort of emotion to it afterward; I do not witness someone’s conduct and then analogically posit or “project” some emotion into it that I would thus presumably only know directly in my own case (via introspection): I immediately see the emotion in the Other’s behavior; the Other’s emotionally expressive behavior is (at least in part) the emotion. The other’s behavior immediately, directly means a particular emotion, and I no more first infer the

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320 Phenomenology of Perception, p. 356.
presence of it than I first infer the thought conveyed by a written sentence or first infer anything concerning the “inner” lives of others at all, which of course is to say that I do not first “infer” such things. As Husserl would put it, emotions are immediately appresented by an Other’s conduct, irreducibly co-given with the manner in which a living body expresses itself and copes with its world.

The strange or complex relationship between emotion and behavior – that is, the manner in which they intrinsically co-constitute one another without one reducing to the other – is one example of what Merleau-Ponty calls the “paradox of expression.”

Now, “expression” is a specific technical and complex concept in Merleau-Ponty, one that (perhaps like Derrida’s concept of “the trace,” to name just one example) is not strictly equivalent to its everyday, exoteric senses (which I myself have deployed throughout this discussion up this point) yet is also not entirely unrelated to them. I cannot fully exposit Merleau-Ponty’s concept of expression here, as to do so would require an extensive treatment of his philosophy of language (which is beyond the purview of the present discussion), yet it is integral not only to his account of language but also to his account of the relationship between subjectivity and the living body/behavior, and thus in particular it helps clarify how he conceptualizes the relationship between emotion and behavior.

What, then, does Merleau-Ponty mean by “expression” in his own technical sense of the term, and why does he regard it as paradoxical? We are all familiar with the cliché “chicken-and-egg” pseudo-paradox, and though surely it is an oversimplification to compare it to what

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321 Merleau-Ponty refers to “the paradox of expression” in *The Visible and the Invisible* (p. 144), though he does not fully develop the idea there, and in order to understand it one has to study the way in which it is developed across many of his writings, especially his writings on language and art. In what follows, I will attempt to provide as brief and clear of an exposition of this concept as I can without drawing upon all of the texts that would be necessary in a more extensive consideration of it. My goal here is only to elucidate Merleau-Ponty’s account of the non-reductive relationship between emotion (and, more broadly, subjectivity) and behavior.
Merleau-Ponty has in mind here, there is something instructive in such a comparison. Why is the “chicken-and-egg” relationship (at least superficially) paradoxical? It seems paradoxical because we all know that something cannot originally begin to exist ex nihilo, yet here we have two things (a chicken and an egg) that seem to presuppose one another in order to exist. A chicken cannot come from nothing: it must be hatched from egg. Likewise, an egg cannot come from nothing: it must be laid by chicken. And the problem lies in this causal circularity. In other terms, what we have here is a particular “bootstrapping” problem. The problem is that neither a chicken nor an egg can originate from nothing and that each precisely seems to be the origin of the other; it seems that one must come first, yet it also seems that neither can come first, (and surely it cannot be the case that they both come first at the same time). This double-bind is, in a way, similar to the one that characterizes what Merleau-Ponty’s calls “expression,” for the phenomenon of expression, in Merleau-Ponty, designates a generative process through which two “things” that may appear to precede or succeed one another, or that may seem to stand in some sort of asymmetrical relationship to one another (as, say, a condition in relationship to the thing it conditions), in fact originally come into being only together; indeed, they bring one another into being, for they mutually presuppose one another.322 The double-bind is that each seems to be prior to the other in some way, yet this discloses the fact that neither really is prior to the other and that the process through they come into being thus cannot be a process through

322 If the relationship I am describing here seems like it describes the relationship between “self and Other,” that is not an accident. What Merleau-Ponty will describe as the lateral, chiasmatic relationship between self and Other (or what Husserl describes as the primordial pairing of self and Other) is also an example of this “logic” or relationality of “expression” (though typically Merleau-Ponty does not use the term to describe intersubjectivity or intercorporeity). After this discussion of Merleau-Ponty’s concept of expression, we should be able to better understand what it would really mean to say that the self is an “expression of others” or an “expression” of the webs of intersubjective relationships that constitute it. It will also allow us to develop a more rigorous understanding of what it would mean to say that “humanity” is an “expression” of “animality.” I will return to Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the lateral, chiasmatic relationship between self and Other (and also between humanity and animality) in chapter five.
which one linearly causes or asymmetrically grounds the other; it must, therefore, be a quite strange or “paradoxical” process through which they come into being, since they reciprocally bring each other into being, or since they (like the proverbial “chicken and egg”) reciprocally depend upon one another in order to exist.

The reason this sort of paradoxical relationship is integral to Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of language is because, for Merleau-Ponty, it describes the necessary relationship between thought and language. On the one hand, and contrary to most conventional accounts of the relationship between the two, Merleau-Ponty argues (throughout many works) that thought cannot radically precede language, that there is no such thing as a “ready-made,” internally translucent “thought” that words would simply transmit outwardly, as if language were merely “an external accompaniment of thought.” Merleau-Ponty rejects the notion that language is simply “a means or a code for thought,” that words are simply “empty container[s]” or “passive shell[s]” of completely preformed, autonomously conceived meanings. Now, I cannot elaborate all of Merleau-Ponty’s arguments for this claim here (as my focus here is not his philosophy of language), but here it will suffice to observe that this claim is an extension of his repudiation of any sort of dualism: if (according to conventional understanding) “thoughts” are “internal” and language (whether written or spoken) is the manner in which thoughts are “externalized,” and if dualism is false, then there cannot be any radical divide between the order of thought and the order of language, and that means that the former could never have been originally isolated from the latter. In short, just as “the body” cannot be understood as a mere

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326 Ibid., p. 177.
“container” for “the mind,” so too is it the case that “language” cannot be understood as a mere “container” for “thoughts,” “ideas,” or “meanings.”

Moreover, as we have seen, Merleau-Ponty proves that thought can never be transparent to itself, yet the notion that thought radically precedes language presupposes precisely the notion that there is such a thing as thought in communion with itself, or such a thing as a subject with transparent access to its own ideas, before thought or subjectivity is externalized (or “othered”) in the world. Thus, “speech does not translate a ready-made thought, but accomplishes it.”\(^{327}\) For Merleau-Ponty, the relationship between thought and language is analogous to the relationship between mind and body/behavior because, indeed, every instance of language is already a behavior, and conversely every behavior, or every form of bodily life and comportment, is already, in a sense, a “language” inasmuch as it is communicative, or inasmuch as it is a particular style of responding to meaning. This is why Merleau-Ponty claims that every living body (human or otherwise) is already a creative, symbolic power or agency, and that “by saying that the body is symbolism, we mean that without a preliminary \textit{Auffassung} of the signifier and signified supposed as separated, the body would pass in the world and the world in the body.”\(^{328}\) This is why Merleau-Ponty claims that even the simplest act of perception is “already a language because it is an interrogation (movement) and a response…..”\(^{329}\) In short, \textit{logos} simply does not have its seat in the self-presence of a subject in total, perfect possession of itself, and thus we see (as we have already seen in several other ways) that Merleau-Ponty consistently and powerfully undermines the core tenet of traditional logocentric metaphysics; and insofar as such logocentrism is also the core, tacit tenet of every anthropocentric or human supremacist

\(^{327}\) Ibid., p. 178.
\(^{328}\) Merleau-Ponty, \textit{Nature}, p. 211.
\(^{329}\) Ibid., p. 211.
worldview – that is, insofar as the possession “logos” (conceived as a purely transparent, unmediated, and spiritual access to truth and meaning) is traditionally posited as the wedge that separates human from non-human life – we also already see the extent to which Merleau-Ponty challenges not only traditional Western metaphysics but also the anthropocentrism or human supremacism with which it has always been complicit. We already see the great extent to which Merleau-Ponty destabilizes one of the traditional barriers between human and non-human life, namely the abstraction or imaginary of a faculty whose supposed access to perfectly luminous, eternal truths and meanings would entail that it can be nothing but fleshless.

Of course, none of this is to say either that thought collapses into language or that language collapses into thought: rather, Merleau-Ponty will argue (as he always does) that they are intertwined (or “reversible”) and that ordinary conceptual frameworks cannot capture such a relationship. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty will elaborate language as fundamentally embodied and gestural, as enlaced with our intercorporeal relationships with others and with a world, and will even suggest that all relationships between living bodies and between living bodies and their milieus (whether such bodies are “human” or “animal”) are inherently semiotic (or “interrogative”), that insofar as all forms of life are modes of responding to the world “it is not a positive being, but an interrogative being which defines life.”

So, the intertwining of thought and language is one form or aspect of the general, more basic intertwining of subjectivity and corporeality. As I mentioned above, Merleau-Ponty will frequently draw an analogy between the relationship between mind and body and the relationship between thought and language. For Merleau-Ponty “we must…say the same thing about language in relation to meaning that Simone de Beauvoir says about the body in relation mind: it is neither primary nor secondary…There is

330 Ibid., p. 156.
no subordination between them. Here no one commands and no one obeys.” Merleau-Ponty’s claim that “language does not duplicate externally a solitary thought” also explains and comports with many ordinary experiences that we have of thinking and speaking, namely those in which we find that we do not really know what we think until we are able to express or speak it in some way. As Merleau-Ponty argues, “if speech presupposed thought, if talking were primarily a matter of meeting the object through a cognitive intention or through a representation, we could not understand why thought tends towards expression as towards its completion, why the most familiar thing appears indeterminate as long as we have not recalled its name, why the thinking subject is in a kind of ignorance of his thoughts so long as he has not formulated them for himself, or even spoken or written them…”. The experience Merleau-Ponty is describing here is one with which are all familiar; it is that experience of something “being on the tip of one’s tongue,” so to speak, or that experience in which we have the inchoate notion of something that can only be fully or truly thought or understood once we have found the right words with which to say it. Such an experience is quite paradoxical indeed, and it begins to disclose the equally paradoxical – yet directly lived – relationship between thought and language.

Why, moreover, is this relationship between thought and language “paradoxical”? So far, I have only described this relationship from one side, yet for Merleau-Ponty, as I just mentioned, they are intertwined, or reciprocally constitutive. So, it is not just the case that thought presupposes language; it is not just the case that there is no such thing as a purely internal thought that language would only later externally translate; rather, it is also the case that language presupposes thought. Though, on the one hand, thought presupposes language, on the

331 “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,” in Signs, p. 83.
333 Phenomenology of Perception, p. 177.
other hand we would never speak or write if we did not already, at least in some nascent form, “have something to say.” That is, though Merleau-Ponty denies that thought radically precedes and determines language, it is nevertheless the case that linguistic expression would never arise if there were not already certain latent thoughts or meanings to be expressed. So, for Merleau-Ponty, expression partially constitutes what it expresses, yet at the same time no expression would happen at all if there were not already something to be expressed – something latent or nascent that solicits or elicits it – in the first place. This, then, is why Merleau-Ponty considers all expressive relationships or processes to be “paradoxical.” Expression is a movement through which something is brought into being (that is, expressed), yet the movement of expression itself and the thing that comes into being through that very movement mutually presuppose or constitute one another: nothing expressed would exist if it were not for the movement of expression through which it comes to be as such, yet there would be no such movement of expression if the thing that comes to be expressed through that movement did not already, in some form, exist to motivate it. Thus, we have two “things” or phenomena that mutually presuppose one another; neither can exist without the other, and each somehow seems to precede the other. The relationship between thought and language is a primary example of this paradoxical relationship since, again, thought presupposes language, yet language also presupposes thought; there is, then, only ever the ceaseless “irruption of one into the other, or…interception of one by the other.”³³⁴

Such a relationship between thought and language seems to be aporetic (and in a sense it certainly is), yet Merleau-Ponty argues that such a relationship (or aporia) constitutes not only thought and language but indeed Being as such. The “logic” of what Merleau-Ponty calls

“expression” is the logic of what he will also call “reversibility” or “the chiasm,” for it always designates a genesis of things that are radically interdependent, a coming-into-being of phenomena that reciprocally constitute or ground one another or that are, as Merleau-Ponty often puts it (and as we will further discuss in chapter five), *laterally* related to one another, hence always co-given and determined by a limit between them that, though real, is always in principle undecidable. As we will see, this logic of intertwining (which is also the logic of what Merleau-Ponty calls “expression” at other registers) – this kind of (bi)laterality that characterizes all ontologically fundamental relationships – is perhaps best exemplified by the relationship between self and Other(s), yet we see here that Merleau-Ponty also identifies it at the level language and thought. Thus, “language is not meaning’s servant, and yet it does not govern meaning.”335 This constitutive lateral relationality between language and thought/meaning is the same kind of relationality that, for Merleau-Ponty, constitutes all beings and phenomena at the fundamental level of reality. At the fundamental level of reality, all things are intertwined in precisely the same way that language and thought are intertwined (so, although there are many different intertwinnings or “chiasms” in the world, we might say that “intertwining” is nonetheless univocal). It is precisely this logic of “intertwining” or of “expression” – this strange yet fundamental relational process – that brings everything into being and meaning before conventional logic steps in to demand that such things be categorized as either identical or opposed, or as either anterior or posterior, to one another. We already see, then, that Being for Merleau-Ponty is never an oppositional duality, never a subsumptive or syncretic unity, and never a hierarchy: dualisms, reductive unities or identities, and “naturalized” hierarchies are always false abstractions.

335 “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,” ibid., p. 83.
So, “expression” happens when two things or phenomena, though irreducibly different, mutually presuppose one another and therefore only come into being all at once (as an “event”), even though (reflectively) one might appear to be anterior or posterior to the other. In other words, and to be yet more precise, “expression” designates any generative, creative process in which the thing or phenomenon that is generated or created and the generative, creative process itself are reciprocally constitutive; that is, it refers to a process of genesis in which the thing that is generated and the process of genesis itself mutually presuppose and ground one another. Expressive accomplishments are “beings in which the expression is indistinguishable from the thing expressed….”

“Expression,” then, is a movement of coming into being or presence that is not one of linear, sequential determination or entailment between a condition and its consequence but is rather one in which the thing that emerges into presence and the very movement of its emergence into presence itself are two inseparable, co-constitutive moments of in fact one and the same phenomenon or movement, a movement in which the distinction between “condition” and “consequence” is thus blurred, for each of its moments is simultaneously the condition and the consequence of the other; it is a movement, then, in which terms ordinarily categorized as “condition” and “consequence” surge up in the world together in one fell swoop and endlessly slide into one another, a movement, again, in which the expression and the thing expressed, the creative act and the creation, mutually inform and condition one another. Expressive phenomena are those that explode into the world as wholes all at once and therefore truly are, we might say, events. So, expression, again, is a generative process in which

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336 Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 151. Though I wish to note here that Merleau-Ponty’s claim the expression and the thing expressed are “indistinguishable” is clearly hyperbole. It is not quite correct to say that they are truly “indistinguishable,” as Merleau-Ponty’s point, which he makes clear in many other places and ways, is that they are interdependent rather than strictly identical. Expression never coincides with what it expresses, yet both are nevertheless inseparable.
the thing that is generated and the form of its genesis itself are two equiprimordial moments, or in which it is the case that the thing that is generated is just as constitutive of its own process of genesis as its own process of genesis is constitutive of it. Thus, it is more accurate to say not that such a process of genesis is the genesis of a phenomenon but rather that it and the thing it generates are two moments one phenomenon: the phenomenon Merleau-Ponty calls “expression.”

On the one hand, since thought cannot radically precede “speech,” yet, on the other hand, since we would never “speak” if we did not already have something (some thought or meaning) to verbalize, what we call “speech” or “speaking” is an exemplary instance of expression. So too, of course, is artistic creation (or “inspiration”), in which, say, a blank canvas becomes a surrealist landscape that does not reproduce an already fully-formed image in one’s mind but that one had to first put hand to brush and brush to canvas in order to discover or “birth” (often through many errant strokes or failed attempts); it is not determined in advance by an already transparent or fully possessed “eidos” or “telos,” yet it is not utterly directionless or chaotic. As I mentioned earlier, though he does tend to focus on speech and art (especially painting), Merleau-Ponty acknowledges that there are many other expressive phenomena or processes in the world: “It is impossible to draw up an inventory of this irrational power which creates meanings and conveys them. Speech is merely one particular case of it.”337 Though he tends to focus on speech and art in those contexts in which he explicitly discusses “expression,” Merleau-Ponty also clearly argues that emotions (and that indeed all mental phenomena) are expressive phenomena.

So, we have seen that the phenomenon of expression is a movement of emergence in which the thing that emerges into presence is inseparable from its manner of emergence into

337 Ibid., p. 189.
presence, or in which the thing that comes into being and the process through which it does so are neither posterior nor anterior to one another but are rather reciprocally constitutive of one another, are two aspects or moments of a single, eventful irruption of meaning into being and of being into meaning; here, there is a confusion of condition and conditioned, of origin and consequence, or anteriority and posteriority, of form and matter. In Merleau-Ponty’s sense of the term, expression is always a particular intertwining of form and matter/content, for it is always a mode of expression that determines and is also reciprocally determined by whatever it is that it expresses. The content of expression cannot be disentangled from the manner or form of its expression, and vice versa. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, there is always a “pregnancy of form in content prior to the subsumption of content under form.”\textsuperscript{338} In expression, the expressive act or process is constitutive of what it expresses, yet at the same that expressive act or process is shaped, motivated, or informed by the very thing it brings to expression. Expression, then, is never simply the transmission of some sort of content or meaning that is absolutely prior to it, but rather it itself partially constitutes (or partially is) the very content or meaning it expresses; and yet, that content cannot only come after, or cannot be completely constituted by, the movement through which it is expressed, for if it did not precede that movement in some way nothing would have ever motivated such a movement in the first place. That is the aporia of expression.

As Merleau-Ponty puts it, “expression is everywhere creative, and what is expressed is always inseparable from it.”\textsuperscript{339} Every expressive act must express something: in order for an act of expression to take place, there must be something already available to be expressed. However, it is also true that any available stock of things to be expressed could only have been already

\textsuperscript{338} Ibid., p. 304.
\textsuperscript{339} Merleau-Ponty, ibid., p. 391.
acquired through previous expressive acts. Thus, there is indeed something aporetic about what Merleau-Ponty calls any expressive relationship or movement. In the expressive relations and processes that define vital, carnal existence, the limit between expression and expressed, between signifier and signified, between ground and grounded, between condition and consequence, between originarity and secondarity, is never effaced but is ambiguous or undecidable. Such expressivity especially characterizes not only art but also the general relationship between thought and language, between consciousness and the (living, acting) body, between intentionality/perception and behavior, and between affectivity and behavior.

The point I wish to emphasize, then, is that the relationship between emotion and behavior also precisely instantiates this paradoxical relationship that Merleau-Ponty designates as “expression.” In other words, emotion is, in exactly Merleau-Ponty’s technical sense of the term, an expressive phenomenon, because no emotion could exist if it were not embodied, performed, or “externalized” through behavior, yet also the behaviors through which emotions are externalized would never be performed if such emotions did not in some way already internally, latently exist in order to motivate them. Emotions surely motivate those comportments through which they are expressed, yet they are also partially constituted by such comportments themselves. In general, form and content are inseparable, and form is to body as content is to mind: they do not collapse into each other, but they do, as we have seen, co-constitute one another. This is precisely why Merleau-Ponty even claims that “the body is to be compared, not to a physical object, but to a work of art,” 340 for it is a site or movement of meaning-disclosure, yet what it discloses is always inseparable from the manner in which it discloses it; it precisely discloses subjectivity because subjectivity is how a living body dwells in the world amidst

340 Ibid., p. 150.
others. In other words, the meanings *that* a living body discloses are precisely its own styles of responding to worldly meaning, and these it discloses simply by being a living body, that is, simply in and through its incessant, creative responses to worldly meaning. In responding to meaning, the living body always discloses itself as precisely a responsiveness to meaning. A living body is nothing apart from the manner in which it responds to meaning, and therefore, like a work of art, when it expresses itself (which it always does) – when it expresses its subjectivity or agency – it precisely expresses something that is inseparable from the manner in which it is thereby expressed.

In short, the manner in which the body expresses “a mind” is inseparable from the mind or mental content it expresses. In particular, the bodily expression of an emotion partially constitutes, or is itself already, the emotion it expresses. This is why the behavioral expression of an emotion is a specific instance of what Merleau-Ponty calls “expression.” The bodily expression of an emotion, like the bodily expression of any mental state, is constitutive of the emotion itself, and yet there would be no such act of bodily expression if there were not already the latent emotion to prompt or solicit it, if there were not already the emotion I “feel” inwardly to motivate it. So, what is true concerning the relationship between interiority and exteriority in general is especially true concerning the interiority and exteriority of an emotion (or of any mental phenomenon). The interiority and exteriority of an emotion – the emotion I “feel” and the manner in which I express how I feel it – are co-constitutive. This is why, for Merleau-Ponty, it is just as incorrect to say that behavior is merely an external sign of an internal experience or “feeling” as it is incorrect to say that a word is merely an external sign of an internal, transparent thought or meaning. It is also why I often do not know what or how I feel until I find the right way to express it, in just the same way that I often do not know what I think until I am able to
articulate it. It is also why it is possible to say that I directly access others’ emotions through their behaviors – or why it is possible to say that to see others’ emotionally expressive behaviors is to see, not infer, their emotions themselves – while also acknowledging the difference or distance between emotion and behavior. In general, as we have seen, nothing “in” my mind is ever transparent: certainly not to others, but also not to me; and this is the case because everything “in” the mind is also incarnate or entwined with some manner of corporeal presence: never wholly external, but also never wholly internal. The body is “essentially an expressive space,” and it expresses (in Merleau-Ponty’s specific sense of that term) what we call “subjectivity.” We can now understand that subjectivity itself is an expressive movement or accomplishment in exactly Merleau-Ponty’s technical sense of the term. To say that subjectivity is an “expressive” phenomenon is simply another way to say that it is embodied. Since subjectivity is embodied, everything “subjective” or mental is destined to, or already enveloped within, bodily expression.

So, there is a distinction between the “subjective” or “felt” quality of an emotion and the way in which it is behaviorally enacted, for if there were no such distinction, not only would there be nothing “that it is like” to experience an emotion but it would also be impossible to feign an emotion. Nonetheless, emotions cannot be purely internal or private phenomena: their meanings as such are constituted intersubjectively and enactively; they only ever arise through a living body’s encounter with others and with a world, and they must, therefore, be directly perceptible “from the outside.” A happiness, sadness, or anger that cannot be enacted through certain behaviors is, at the very least, a quite different and perhaps considerably diminished form of happiness, sadness, or anger, and perhaps is not truly happiness, sadness, or anger at all. There

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341 Ibid., p. 146.
is no such thing as a joy that cannot be expressed at all (through the living body) or that is not inherently polarized toward some manner of behavioral expression, nor is there such a thing as a genuine expression of joy that would be devoid of interiority. An emotion that could not be expressed behaviorally is like a word whose meaning cannot be communicated to others: as the latter would not have any meaning at all, neither would the former. I only know what my emotions are – and thus I only really “have” emotions – because others show them to me, because I may show them to others, and because others teach me how to show them, because I already exist in a world in which such emotions (and the values to which they are responsive) are already at play, a world already saturated with value and passion. In short, there is no such thing as a private language, and so too is there no such thing as a private emotion. This is not, again, to deprive emotion of interiority. The point here is not to deprive emotion of interiority but rather not to deprive it of exteriority, which is just as much of a mistake. Emotions, like words, have no being or meaning apart from their expression within an intersubjective context or situation, but this fact no more denies emotions any interiority than it denies language (or thought in general) any interiority. Similarly, in just the same way that I often do not know what I think until I verbalize it, so too is it the case that I do not know what I feel until I discover (always with and through others) the apt way to express or enact it.

All of the things we have observed up this point are not just empirical facts; they are empirical facts, but more than that they indicate, and are grounded in, fundamental ontological facts concerning the constitution of subjectivity: they indicate that subjectivity is possible and realizable as such only as intersubjectivity or, more accurately, only as intercorporeity, which is to say only through reciprocal, lateral exchanges of meaning between living bodies. All “mental” phenomena – all thoughts, ideas, concepts, words, perceptions, intentions, feelings, and so on –
are incarnate and, through their incarnation, already entangled in skeins of relationships with other carnal beings and with a carnal world; they are, then, always “dialectical” in the original sense of the term, that is, they only ever emerge in response to – or only ever emerge as - “some pulsation of interpersonal life.”

I simply do not know what it is to love if I do not know what it is to be loved, and likewise all conceivable emotions presuppose a milieu in which such emotions are already at play, a context in which others already address, solicit, motivate, support, obstruct, respond to or even ignore me in my pursuits of various ends, for without such a context – that is to say, without a community – there would be no such things as “ends,” for there would be no individuals in the first place to perceive or pursue them: only the drama of coexistence imparts meaning or value to the world with which one is consciously engaged, and therefore so too does it alone impart emotion and affectivity to our conscious engagements with the world, for emotion and affectivity are essentially – no matter how unreflective or “rudimentary” – responses to worldly meaning and value. Emotions and affects are always already intersubjectively embedded modes of engaging and perceiving the world, and every mode of engaging and perceiving the world – every manner in which a living body is connected to its milieu – is always already permeated by affectivity, always already emotionally-laden, always already value-directed and passionate.

Moreover, as we have seen, emotions simply cannot be understood as interior states that precede and are radically distinguishable from the outward, behavioral manner in which they are typically expressed, but are rather indissociable from habituated modes of bodily expression and perception.

343 This is a point to which I will return in chapter four, where I will suggest that there may even be a sense in which “love” is endemic to all forms of sentient existence.
comportment. If to be a living body is to be continually open to, hence affected by, a world, then every way in which a living body encounters its world is already value-laden, already emotionally freighted. The “intentional threads”\textsuperscript{344} of the lived/living body that tie me to the world are precisely, as Heidegger felicitously puts it, modes of attunement to it, ways in which things show up for me as meaningful or important but which we have for far too long inadequately called “feelings” and, consequently, falsely regarded as purely internal phenomena; on the contrary, they are interactive and fundamentally intersubjective phenomena; they are chords struck by the world, and moreover they are chords whose tunes and resonances, whose harmonies and even dissonances naturally reverberate through and upon those that radiate from, and that bind to the same world, other living bodies; therefore, they are chords that already connect all living bodies to one another, that already constitute every living body or every supposedly “inner life” as an “instrument that another plays,”\textsuperscript{345} that already situate every living body in a common chorus that “sings the world.”\textsuperscript{346}

In general, then, to perceive is already to behave; even a living body at rest is a behaving body. Yet every perceiving, behaving body – every mode of perceptual and cognitive access to the world, every mode of behavioral comportment toward the world – is affectively, emotionally charged. Emotion and affectivity are essential structures of consciousness, and so too, we are already seeing, is community, for emotions or affects are intelligible as such only in virtue of others who express and enact them through projects and experiences that intersect with and evoke my own, others whose orientations toward the world always already envelop, interpellate, and make possible my own, others with whom I inhabit and co-constitute a lifeworld, others with

\textsuperscript{344} Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, p. xiii, 72, 106, 130.
\textsuperscript{345} Merleau-Ponty, The Visible and The Invisible, p. 11.
\textsuperscript{346} Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, p. 187.
whom I navigate that context of being outside of which there can be no meaning, that setting outside of which consciousness, identity, and value would be extinguished like oxygen in the vacuum of space. It is only because others mirror and model certain emotions and affects in their modes of dwelling in the world that I know what those emotions and affects are when they arise for me as modes or characteristics of my own dwelling in the world. In general, subjectivity is possible only because it is precisely not self-enclosed, only because it is fundamentally “flesh applied to a flesh,”347 which is to say a body in contact with itself through its ecstatic contact with a world and with other bodies. Subjectivity is necessarily a “coiling over”348 of flesh upon itself in virtue of those other forms of flesh that enfold it, including especially the flesh of others whose sensibilities and passions thus resound within it, whose capacities and incapacities, powers and vulnerabilities are ineffaceably inscribed into it. My own flesh is always already entangled with the flesh of others, and it is the flesh of others that crucially shapes and teaches me about my own, that transfers sense to my own, that not only opens me to “landscapes besides my own”349 but that also, in doing so, decenters my own and dispels “the solipsist illusion that consists of thinking that every going beyond is a surpassing accomplished by oneself,”350 or that, in other words, reveals to me the basic truth that I have no self of which to speak or be aware, and therefore no “internal” states, qualities, or capacities to project outward into others, if others have not already drawn me outside myself, if the interiorities of other living bodies have not already introduced me to my own interiority, if others have not already presented what it is to be “minded” through behaviors that inherently signify or perform mindedness. The behaviors of others inherently express lived, embodied experiences that, as such, irremediably transcend yet,

348 Ibid., p. 140.
349 Ibid., 141.
350 Ibid., 143.
in virtue of their embodiment, also overlap my own and that, in precisely overlapping my own, motivate and impart intelligibility to them; moreover, this overlapping of bodily experiences and agencies – this foundational intercorporeity – “brings to birth a ray of light that illuminates all flesh and not only my own.”

I have taken time to discuss Merleau-Ponty’s account of emotion not simply because it is important for its own sake but also because it reinforces and further elaborates his anti-Cartesian account of “the mental” and therefore his thesis that everything we might esteem as “purely” internal is already enfleshed, already shaped by other flesh, already constituted intercorporeally. And when we consider the fact (as we will in the following chapter) that it is always, in the end, a Cartesian account of “the mental” that motivates us to doubt or deny the presence of various mental states or capacities (especially emotional ones) in other beings, such an anti-Cartesian account has profound (ethical and not just epistemological or ontological) consequences.

A basic truth which is far too often overlooked is that if there is simply no subjectivity without intersubjectivity, so too is it the case that nothing that may be predicated of subjectivity – no emotions or affects, no mental states or characteristics at all – can exist in isolation, but can only exist communally. Though it is true that only I can experience, say, my own pleasures and pains, or that there is a basic qualitative difference between my own pleasures and pains and the pleasures and pains of others (inasmuch as I live through the former but never, in principle, the latter), to experience pleasure and pain at all is to be flesh in touch with itself through what Merleau-Ponty often calls “the flesh of the world”:

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351 Ibid., p.142. Emphasis mine.
352 Merleau-Ponty speaks of the “flesh in the world” in a number of places. See, for example, the “Introduction” to *Signs* (p.16), the *Nature* lectures (p.218, 223), *The Visible and The Invisible* (p. 84, 123, 146, 248, 250, 255, 261, 267, 271), and “Eye and Mind” (in *The Primacy of Perception*, p.186) Though it is surely relevant to the topic at hand, I am reserving a full explication of Merleau-Ponty’s concept of “Flesh” for chapter five.
shared carnality that enables and constitutes one’s contact with others and with a world and, through such contact with others and a world, contact with oneself. It is tempting to consider phenomena like pleasure and pain to be completely private states of mind or “qualia,” yet if the mind is not disembodied, then it is never completely private, and thus no mental state – neither pleasure nor pain nor anything else – is completely private either; such “internal” states or phenomena are never purely internal, never uncontaminated with exteriority, never withdrawn entirely from publicity. Thus, “insofar as I have sensory functions, a visual, auditory, and tactile field, I am already in communication with others.”

Every emotion or affect, every feeling or perception is already “the propagation of my own most secret life in another.” To experience, say, pleasure and pain (indeed to experience anything at all) is to be a body radically, incessantly exposed and vulnerable to a world and thus in principle and in fact exposed and vulnerable to the pleasures and pains of other living bodies that are, as such, likewise exposed and vulnerable to – likewise extended into, or embedded within – that same world, that same field of incarnate experience and being. To be capable of feeling pleasure and pain is already, through the very same bodily reflexivity through which pleasure and pain themselves are possible in the first place and of which they are particular instances, to be capable of sensing reflexively – which is to say, to be capable of sensing immediately or directly, not merely of inferring analogically – the pleasures and pains of others, and indeed to feel pleasure or pain at all is already to sense, directly albeit allusively, the pleasures or pains of others. Every feeling or affect is already drawn from an intersubjective, intercorporeal reservoir of affectivity, a “primary universality of sensation.”

The very moment I feel anything at all I already feel, already aspirate the

353 Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, p. 353.
354 Merleau-Ponty, The Visible and The Invisible, p. 11.
percussive echoes and reverberations of other feelings and passions, the senses and ambient rhythms of other bodies “already at work in the world.”356 If there is no such thing as an isolated consciousness, and if consciousness is inherently embodied – if to be conscious just is to be a living body – then it follows that there is no such thing as an isolated living body, either, and if there are no isolated living bodies, it follows that neither are there any truly isolated, purely private lived, bodily experiences: perception and affectivity – all conceivable modes and characteristics of meaningful, active and passive engagement with the world – are inherently intercorporeal. Every affect through which I am in contact with myself and my environs, every manner in which I am affected by the world in virtue of my living body as a “general medium for having a world”357 – every affect through which the medium of the world itself “ceaselessly assails and beleaguers subjectivity as waves wash round a wreck on the shore”358 – bears the traces of all other affects, including those of others: including those of other lives being lived amidst and at the horizons of my own, including those of other bodies and experiences that predate my own, including especially those of others who have already helped shape my flesh into the form that lets it exist and be affirmed as “a self,” others who have already taught me what it is to be alive, to suffer and to thrive.

Though indeed I experience, for example, my own headache differently from the manner in which I experience another’s, we have seen that there is in fact a manner in which I may directly experience or perceive – not merely “infer” – another’s headache, and this is not fundamentally different from the manner in which I may directly, empathically experience or perceive anything concerning the minds of others at all (as indeed I must be able to do if I am

357 Merleau-Ponty, ibid., p. 146.
358 Ibid., p. 207.
ever in a position to make inferences about them). To experience, say, another’s headache is surely a different mode of experiencing a headache than the one in which I experience a headache of my own, but it is nonetheless a mode of genuinely, directly experiencing a headache: it is at the very least simply a direct experience of a particular kind of absence (as indeed all experiences are). As Merleau-Ponty writes, “from the moment one is joined with someone else, one suffers from her suffering. If physical pain is involved, in which one can participate only metaphorically, one strongly feels this inadequacy.”\textsuperscript{359} Yet, I think it follows from Merleau-Ponty’s other arguments and commitments that to feel the absence of another’s pain is not merely to feel it “metaphorically” (though I suppose much depends upon what precisely is meant here by “metaphorically,” which is not entirely clear; such a term may simply serve to indicate the undeniable difference between first-personal and second-personal modes of experiential givenness): it is different way of really feeling it. When I cannot feel another’s pain as I feel my own, I “strongly feel this inadequacy,” and this inadequacy is precisely the way in which another’s pain is present to me: it is the way in which another’s pain is present to me as absent. So, if I cannot feel another’s pain exactly as I feel my own, it is nonetheless precisely that lack, precisely that incapacity on my part, precisely that very absence that I feel, and perhaps indeed it is that very absence – that otherness of a pain that can never be my own – that haunts me, that deprives me of absolute solitude, that, yes, “pains” me and, in doing so, teaches me something about my own pain I would not be able to know in any other way, namely that what I just referred to as “my pain” is in fact never purely mine, that I would have no pain that I could experience or refer to as “mine” if I were not already acquainted with pains that are other than mine, pains that appear in the mode of “not being mine.” To appear in the mode of “not being

“mine” is eidetically just as real and basic, just as immediate and direct a way for pain to appear to me, for indeed absence is, in general, not only a way in which many kinds of things and phenomena are present in everyday experience, but is a condition of the possibility of presence as such. Thus, the experience of one’s own pain is qualitatively different from the experience of another’s, but it does not follow that there is an ontological or epistemic gulf between them, and if there were such a gulf I would never be aware of my own existence and experiences as distinct from others (as precisely “mine”) in the first place. In general, though I cannot inhabit another’s mental states, it does not follow logically, from that fact alone, that I can only at best infer them; such a conclusion follows logically only if one assumes the dualistic exclusion of interiority (consciousness or alterity) from exteriority (the body) and only if one assumes that one may posit an “I” prior to, or fundamentally isolated from, others in the first place. We have already seen that both of these (often enthymematically suppressed) assumptions are false. Again, we directly perceive absence as well presence, and we do so because absence is always already the condition of presence, because absence and presence are not opposed but are always already mutually constitutive modes of being. And as absence is to presence, so is interiority (consciousness/alterity) to exteriority (the living, behaving body), for interiority and exteriority are necessarily intertwined, yet it is only exteriority – only my body or the body of an Other – that is “present” in the world. Of course, my consciousness and the consciousnesses of others are present in the world (for again, interiority and exteriority are inseparable), yet they are present in a different manner, which is to say they are present precisely as certain kinds of absences. No, I cannot feel another’s pain exactly as I feel my own, but it is nonetheless, at the very least, this
absence of the other’s pain that I can feel, and the absence of the other’s pain is a mode of its presence; it is “an absence [that] counts in the world.”\textsuperscript{360}

It is often inferred that to deny the absolute privacy of the Other’s (or of my own) interiority is to render it transparent from the outside. However, such an inference is invalid. To deny that interiority is \textit{completely} private is not to say that it is fully on display in the world; rather, it is to acknowledge, as we all know quite well from ordinary experience, that we directly yet non-exhaustively encounter the minds of others through their bodies/behaviors, that while consciousness is always self-othering or self-externalizing – or always inseparable from its bodily comportments – it is nevertheless withheld from exhaustive, translucent publicity. In a word, there is an ambiguity inherent to subjectivity, an ambiguity that, as we have seen, designates its simultaneous immanence and transcendence, which is to say its embodiment: its embeddedness in, yet irreducibility to or excess beyond, bodily behavior. This, again, is simply what makes alterity possible: it is what resolves the supposed “paradox of the alter ego,” the “accessibility of the inaccessible,” the “presentation of the unpresentable”\textsuperscript{361}; it precisely makes the “inaccessible” strangely \textit{accessible}. If the interiority of an Other were wholly interior or divorced from his/her exteriority, it would never appear to me at all. However, if the Other’s interiority were reducible to his/her exteriority, it would not in fact \textit{be} interiority. Behaviorism, then, effaces alterity just as surely as Cartesian dualism/solipsism: whereas the latter withholds the Other entirely from any possible manner of direct outward presentation, the former renders the Other’s otherness transparent from the outside or puts the Other on full display, and otherness is equally effaced in both cases.

\textsuperscript{360}Merleau-Ponty, \textit{The Visible and the Invisible}, p. 228.
\textsuperscript{361}Ibid., p. 203.
To conclude this discussion, we have seen that there is no self-reflexivity at all without other selves, no mind at all without other minds, and thus all pleasures and pains, all joys and sorrows, all memories and imaginings, all ideas and cognitions, all lived experiences – even those withdrawn into the most secret, most tenebrous and apparently unbreachable recesses of subjectivity – are, at the most basic level, shared. It is only because I am already thinking with and amid others that I am able to think at all; it is only because my consciousness is already embedded with other consciousnesses that I am able to be conscious (and especially conscious of my own consciousness) at all, and thus it is only with and through others that I am even able to begin to conceptualize what thought or consciousness itself is and later ascribe it to others and worry about the epistemic status of such an ascription. The very qualities or capacities I reflectively acknowledge in myself and proceed to analogically recognize in or attribute to others are, then, in fact qualities and capacities I have necessarily learned from others in the first place, mental qualities and capacities I have already developed in reciprocal relations with other minds, phenomena whose meanings others have taught me in and through our mutual exchanges with one another. If I am ever able to “transfer” a particular mental attribute from my own case to that of another, it is only because I first derived a notion of such an attribute from others or only because others first transferred such an attribute to me; it is only because I have already acquired some sense of the meaning of a certain mental attribute, and indeed it is only because I have acquired such an attribute itself in and through mutual transfersences of meaning between myself and others, or in and through the coupling of my living body’s modes of comportment and intentionality with those of other living bodies, that I am ever in a position to recognize and affirm that attribute in either myself or in others at all.
Thus, “the communication or comprehension of gestures comes about through the reciprocity of my intentions and the gestures of others, of my gestures and intentions discernible in the conduct of other people. It is as if the other person’s intention inhabited my body and mine his.”\textsuperscript{362} Any inferences and reflective judgments I may formulate concerning the characteristics or even the very existence of other minds must be founded upon direct, immediate, pre-reflective intentional relations and exchanges with others, transferences of meaning between self and other(s) that subtend and inform not only all propositional beliefs and doubts about others but even one’s own reflective conceptualization of oneself as an individual distinct from others – hence the very standpoint from which \emph{any} analogies between self and Other(s) may be drawn – in the first place. Since minds are necessarily incarnate, and since there is no such thing as a mind that could ever know itself, hence exist as such, in complete isolation, it is only through what Merleau-Ponty calls intercorporeity – only through a primordial, irreducible coupling or “intentional encroachment”\textsuperscript{363} of my living body and other living bodies – that I may know not only the minds of others but also my own. I may only know the experiences of others, and thus may only know others as such, through our shared ecstasy of embodiment, through that common carnality in which all of my possible and actual experiences are already embedded, through that “flesh of the world” that enables all forms of affectivity and of which every affect – every sensation, perception, or feeling – is the dissilient, incandescent expression.

\textsuperscript{362} Merleau-Ponty, \emph{Phenomenology of Perception}, p. 185.
\textsuperscript{363} Merleau-Ponty, “The Philosopher and His Shadow,” in \emph{Signs.}, p. 169.
Chapter Three

Other Others
Merleau-Ponty and the Problem of Animal Minds

“Since so long ago, can we say that the animal has been looking at us?...I often ask myself, just to see, who I am – and who I am (following) at the moment when, caught naked, in silence, by the gaze of the animal, for example, the eyes of a cat, I have trouble, yes, a bad time overcoming embarrassment. Whence this malaise?”

– Derrida

In September of 1996, my family and I welcomed a six-month old Silky Terrier (named “Sammy”) into our family. When I would leave for school in the morning, Sammy would climb up to the top of our couch in the living room and peak his head between the bars of the railing that ran beside it; he would fix his gaze on me as I prepared my things, furrow his brow, and begin to whimper; his eyes seemed sullen, his face forlorn. He certainly seemed sad to see me leave. When I would arrive home from school, Sammy would race around the living room and dining room, leap beside me on the couch, and climb on top of me. He often licked my face so furiously that his tongue would burn my cheeks, and he would tighten his grip on my shoulders as I struggled to pry him away and settle him down. He certainly seemed happy to see me arrive home; indeed, he regularly greeted me with what I can only describe as ecstatic, unalloyed joy. When I took Sammy for walks, he would usually trot contentedly and stop only to relieve himself, but when he would catch sight of another person or dog in the distance (perhaps even blocks away), he would halt dead in his tracks and take special notice; he would usually (much to my frustration) stay fixed in his place and hold his gaze on the person or dog until they passed us by or receded entirely from view. There was a peculiar attentiveness, an intensity of

364 The Animal That Therefore I am, p.3-4.
concentration – perhaps even a kind of curiosity or recognition – in his gaze and in the bearing of his body.

Sammy never enjoyed baths, and one time, when my mother prepared a bath for him in the kitchen (we bathed him in the sink), he hid behind a floor-to-ceiling curtain in an out-of-reach corner behind one of our couches (which, to our knowledge, was a place he had never before chosen to reside). We found Sammy behind the curtain only after ten minutes of frantic searching, and while normally Sammy would respond to his name immediately, this time all of our calls went unanswered. When we peered behind the curtain, Sammy lowered and turned his head in order to avoid eye contact and began to tremble mildly. It seemed clear to us that Sammy attempted to evade or stall his bath, and we should pause to appreciate the implications of such behavior: first, he had to have recognized, from observing my mother’s behavior, that a bath was imminent; this means that he had to have perceived – indeed, inferred – a particular intention or project on my mother’s part, and it does not seem to be the case that such a perception or inference could have been based upon mere “conditioning,” for he would frequently witness my mother perform other various tasks in the kitchen and near the sink that would not perturb him at all. Moreover, my mother did not always announce to him that he was about to have a bath (for he seemed to understand the term and would run away accordingly), and on this occasion she purposely did not do so for that very reason. It appears to be the case, then, that Sammy’s behavior in this instance was an example of the phenomenon psychologists call “novel” behavior. Second, Sammy had to have anticipated the unpleasantness of the bath on the basis of previous unpleasant bath-experiences, and it hardly needs to be mentioned that this implies that Sammy was not merely receptive to pleasure and pain but that he was also comported toward time, intentionally directed toward a future on the basis of a past. He did not merely register the stimuli
of the moment. He was not, as Nietzsche says of “the animal,” merely “fettered to the moment and its pleasure or displeasure”\textsuperscript{365} or “contained in the present, like a number without any awkward fraction left over,”\textsuperscript{366} but rather he was open to a past and a future. He was not merely absorbed in the “stimuli” of a supposedly discrete present, but was rather involved in, and oriented toward, a meaningful, temporally ordered context: bent backward upon a past and oriented forward in anxious anticipation of a possible experience to come. Sammy inhabited and negotiated a temporally emergent situation (or Gestalt), a space of practical possibilities, meanings, and values that comes to presence as such only within a pre-given horizon of unfolding retentions and protentions, traces and expectations. Third, not only did Sammy decide to avoid this unpleasant experience, but he decided to do so by engaging in a certain kind of artifice: rather than make us chase him around the house as he usually did, this time he chose to find a place where he would not be visible; he sought to find a place where he would be suitably concealed from us. Thus, contrary once again to the manner in which Nietzsche characterizes “the animal,” it was not the case that Sammy did not “know how to dissimulate” and could “therefore never be anything but honest.”\textsuperscript{367} And the fact that Sammy engaged in such artifice implies that he was not simply aware of us, but that he was aware of his own exposure – his own presence - to us. That is to say, he was aware of his own visibility. He was aware of himself as open and vulnerable to the


\textsuperscript{366} Ibid., p. 61.

\textsuperscript{367} Ibid., p. 61. It is also worth mentioning here that a number of other animals – most notably corvid birds, such as ravens, rooks, and crows – have been known to engage in even more sophisticated deceptive behaviors. Corvids demonstrate a wide range of impressive capacities and behaviors, but above all they are very clever thieves, and have been known to anticipate the behaviors of their conspecific competitors and set up “decoy” caches of food in order to mislead them. For more on corvid lying and cache-raiding, and for more on all of the other fascinating things that corvids do, see Bernd Heinrich, \textit{The Mind of the Raven: Investigations with Wolf-Birds} (Harper Collins, 2006) esp. p.167, 300-301.
perceptions and interventions of others: not only was he aware of my parents and I as others, but he was reciprocally, reflexively aware of himself as an other for us. If to be a self is to be an other for an other, then Sammy was indeed a “self.”

We should recall that on this occasion Sammy did not respond to frequent calls of his name even though he would ordinarily do so without hesitation. It thus appears to be the case that Sammy knew that he had a name. Sammy knew himself as a named – which is to say, recognized – individual: he understood that he was uniquely denoted by the term “Sammy,” for while in most other circumstances shouts of his name would have prompted him to come running and present himself, in this instance he did not reply in such a manner, and he did not do so presumably because he wished to conceal himself; his failure to reply to our calls suggests a conscious resistance to the self-disclosure that they solicited. Why else would he not have replied to them on this particular occasion? If it is indeed the case here that outward appearances reflect inward reality – that is, if Sammy’s behavior really was consciously evasive or deceptive – then we must admit that, contrary to certain common assumptions, the vaunted “mirror test” (which dogs so far have not been known to pass) may provide a sufficient but not necessary criterion for “self-awareness” (and therefore a sufficient but nevertheless not necessary criterion for selfhood as

368 It thus seems to be the case that such deceptive behavior implies what psychologists and philosophers refer to as a “theory of mind,” which is to say a capacity to ascribe particular “mental states” to others, or simply a capacity to recognize another being as minded. However, a “theory of mind” is often taken to mean a reflective or conceptual (perhaps inductive) apprehension of another’s mental states or of an Other qua Other, which is indeed suggested by referring to such a capacity as a “theory” of mind. And it is for this reason that I find the term to be misleading or unhelpful, for intersubjectivity (or a genuine and constitutive openness to alterity) does not (as I hope to have already made clear in the previous chapters and to clarify further in this one) imply or require a “theory of mind” in that sense (that is, intersubjectivity is neither necessarily nor primarily a matter of metacognitive representation and inference). Perhaps Sammy did have such a “theory of mind” in this more restrictive and “robust” sense (which certainly seems to be suggested by the kind of deceptive behavior he exhibited), but I maintain that one can, without contradiction, deny him this and yet claim that he was genuinely aware of us (and of many other people and animals) as others, and that this intersubjectivity motivated his behavior and indeed constituted his very manner of being.
such).\textsuperscript{369} Sammy was, of course, conscious, but moreover he was self-conscious (indeed, all forms of consciousness are, to some extent, self-reflexive). Sammy was a “mind” or a “self”; he was an “Other.”

There are many other examples of apparently “intelligent” behavior – many other evident indications of “mindedness” – that I could enumerate here. As a further example, when it was time to bring Sammy into the veterinarian’s examination room, he would invariably become rigid and refuse to walk, and I would be forced to carry him or to drag him across the floor of the waiting room; and if I carried him, his body would become tense and his legs would clench my arms. It thus appears to be the case that under such circumstances Sammy was apprehensive or afraid; there was not only anticipation but also something like dread discernible in his body. And as yet another example, when my mother and I would watch television together in the den in the evening, Sammy (who was usually confined to another level of our house) would sometimes bark incessantly until we allowed him to come downstairs; after I would allow him to come downstairs, he often sat at the foot of the couch and would clearly begin to “beg” until I picked him up and placed him between my mother and I. It seems to be the case, then, that he desired our company and deliberately conveyed this desire to us.

On the basis of all of the experiences I have enumerated (as well as countless others that I cannot mention here), it certainly appears to be the case that Sammy was in fact an Other with whom my parents and I happily shared our lives, as well as an Other who happily shared his life with ours. It appears to be the case that Sammy had the interiority and indeed the personality – the singular ensemble of thoughts, feelings, tastes, desires, aversions, interests, habits, temperaments, talents, dispositions, and unnamable idiosyncrasies – that we recognized and

\textsuperscript{369} I critique the mirror test in the next chapter.
affirmed in him; in short, he seems to have been the genuine member of our family that we took
him to be. But do the outward appearances in this case really reflect the inward reality – the
particular (non-human) mindedness or otherness – that they irresistibly suggested to us? Do they
reflect any “inward” reality – any true subjectivity – at all? Do they ever? Or do they merely
reflect the “inward reality” of we, the human spectators, to whom they appear? Did this entity that
we named “Sammy” bear merely a counterfeit visage? Was he just a body through which we
ventriloquized our own familiar sentiments and manner of being? Can we ever know whether or
not this is so? As obvious as it may be that the world is filled with a diversity of subjectivities –
as obvious as it may seem that the world is rich in minds and in forms of mindedness – these are
questions that have vexed philosophy for generations, and even a cursory acquaintance with the
ways in which we continue to regard and (mis)treat most non-human beings in the world shows
that there is much at stake in them.

Just as surely as we take for granted our coexistence with other human subjects, so too
do we usually, if we are honest with ourselves, take for granted our coexistence with non-human
subjects. Just as strongly as we experience and believe in the presence of human Others, so too
do we experience and believe in the presence of other (non-human or “animal”) Others. If we are
honest with ourselves, we know that we constantly intuit and affirm other animals as genuine
Others, as living beings with their own “inner” lives and experiences – that is to say, as entities
with “minds” – variably akin to yet different from our own. Indeed, what could be more real or
certain than the kinds of experiences and interactions I have described above? What could be less
doubtful or more obvious than this mien of sadness, this ecstasy of happiness, this glance (or
perhaps wag) of recognition and love, this howl of longing or desire, this clenched apprehension
and fear, this slump of shame, this bark that addresses me? In general, what could be more
obvious than the dynamic orientations toward a world – the manifold affectivities and intentionalities – that animal bodies and behaviors constantly express to us in everyday experience? And yet, such claims or intuitions – ascriptions of anything more than “mechanical” instincts, reflexes, or physiological processes (whether innate or conditioned) to non-human animals, which is to say ascriptions of minds “worthy of the name” to animals, and in particular ascriptions of emotions to animals – are frequently either dismissed as naïve or censured as irrational.

That my dog is ever “happy” when I arrive home or “sad” when I leave, that he is ever “afraid” to go to the vet, that he ever “plans” to “evade” or “stall” a bath, that he ever “desires” my company or that he “loves” my family, that he ever feels genuine “shame” when, having been caught urinating in the house, he lowers his head and avoids eye contact, that he ever “tells” me to throw his ball or to give him a treat or to take him for a walk: these, it is often said, are only so many sentimental flights of fancy or anthropomorphic “projections”: I merely represent my dog to myself in my own image. I transfer my own thoughts and emotions to my dog so that his behavior might be more intelligible to me, and perhaps so that my own sentimental attachments to him might be reciprocated, but what my dog really “thinks” and “feels” (if indeed he thinks and feels anything at all) I can never “know” because I can never leap inside his head or his flesh to find out. We therefore confront the following two alternatives: either my dog has no real “interiority” – no real beliefs, desires, preferences, emotions, memories, conscious anticipations or intentions, no sense-of-self or sense-of-otherness – at all, or his interiority is so “interior” or so alien, so far beyond the horizons of human intelligibility, that it is absolutely inaccessible to me, and anything that I might say about it would be untethered speculation. Either an animal has no genuine subjectivity at all, or its subjectivity must be passed over in silence.
However, it is clear to me that this not the case. It is clear to me that these two alternatives are neither sound nor jointly exhaustive and that therefore no acceptable account of either knowledge or subjectivity may entail otherwise.

Thus, I agree with Hume’s claim that “no truth appears…more evident, than that beasts are endow’d with thought and reason as well as men. The arguments are in this case so obvious, that they never escape the most stupid and ignorant.” Of course, what is humorous about Hume’s remark here is that while the evidence for animal mindedness is so clear that even “the most stupid and ignorant” recognize it, those who have typically – and ironically – failed to do so have been erudite philosophers (most exemplarily, Descartes), so-called rationalists and empiricists alike who, at least in this respect, fail to adhere consistently to reason and empirical evidence. I also agree with Hume’s remark (which immediately precedes the one I have just quoted) that “next to the ridicule of denying an evident truth, is that of taking much pains to defend it.” The early Modern (and especially Cartesian) notion that “a crying dog is no

370 A Treatise of Human Nature, eds. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 118 (1.3.16). Perhaps Hume’s remark suggests that the categories of intelligence and ignorance, hence also those of “the human” and “the animal,” need to be reconceived or problematized.

371 Hume does, however, offer a brief argument for animal mindedness in this section of the Treatise, according to which the account of human psychology and practical reasoning that he has already established applies equally well to non-human animals. The basis of this claim is that animals seem to engage in causal reasoning to the extent that they skillfully adapt means to ends, and that their practical activities are thus analogous to our own:

We are conscious, that we ourselves, in adapting means to ends, are guided by reason and design, and that ‘tis not ignorantly nor casually we perform those actions, which tend to self-preservation, to the obtaining pleasure, and avoiding pain. When therefore we see other creatures, in millions of instances, perform like actions, and direct them to like ends, all our principles of reason and probability carry us with an invincible force to believe the existence of a like cause…The resemblance betwixt the actions of animals and those of men is so entire in this respect, that the very first action of the very first animal we shall please to pitch on, will afford us an incontestable argument for the present doctrine.

While I am sympathetic to Hume’s argument here, in this passage Hume’s justification for attributions of mindedness to animals seems to be a classic argument from analogy, and as I will elaborate below (following Merleau-Ponty), I take such arguments to be seriously flawed (provided they are intended to account for our primary knowledge or experiences of others).

372 It should be acknowledged here that Descartes’ particular conception of animal life remains a topic of scholarly debate. It is not debatable that Descartes did, indeed, consider non-human animals to be mere “automata” or
machines, so the main question is whether or not Descartes nevertheless denied sentience – a basic receptivity to sensations and certain emotions – to animals. At first glance, it certainly seems that Descartes’ conception of animals as “machines” would entail that they do not have any feelings, for it seems strange indeed – or even inherently contradictory according to the ordinary sense of the term – to conceive of a mere machine capable of sensations and emotions (i.e., if animals are truly no different from clocks, it would seem to be just as strange to conceive of an animal experiencing pleasure or pain – or having any experiences at all – as it would be to conceive of a clock having such experiences). However, while all scholars grant that Descartes considers animals to be automata, some have urged that Descartes’ view nevertheless does not necessarily entail – and that Descartes himself did not maintain – that animals do not have sensations or passions. A good example of this interpretation is advanced by John Cottingham (see “A Brute to the Brutes?: Descartes’ Treatment of Animals.” Philosophy, Vol. 53, No. 206: 551-559, Oct., 1978), who denies that Descartes advances the “monstrous thesis” that animals have no real feelings or perceptual consciousness. Cottingham argues that Descartes’ claim that animals are “machines” only means for him that they do not have “thought” (or reflective consciousness), not that they do not have affects (unreflective sensations and passions), and he cites the letter to Henry More (of 5 February 1649) in which Descartes writes “I should like to stress that I am talking of thought, not of…sensation; for…I deny sensation to no animal, in so far as it depends on a bodily organ.” Cottingham also mentions Descartes’ denial of language to animals, according to which animal “speech” consists merely of sounds by which they communicate “their impulses of anger, fear, hunger, and so on” (1978, p. 556). Thus, while Descartes does deny reflective consciousness, reasoning, and language to animals, he is quite happy to attribute feelings to them.

However, I agree with Daisie and Michael Radner’s assessment that Cottingham does not successfully rescue Descartes from the “monstrous thesis” (see Animal Consciousness. Prometheus Books, 1996, p. 60-64). The essential problem with Cottingham’s account is that he does not adequately acknowledge Descartes’ view that sensations and feelings are “mixed phenomena,” which is to say phenomena that emerge only by virtue of the union of mind and body. As Descartes states in his Principles of Philosophy:

We…experience within ourselves certain other things which must not be referred either to the mind alone or to the body alone. These arise…from the close and intimate union of our mind with the body. This list includes, first, appetites like hunger and thirst; secondly, the emotions or passions of the mind which do not consist of pure thoughts alone, such as the emotions of anger, joy, sadness and love; and finally all the sensations, such as those of pain, pleasure, light, colours, sounds, smells, tastes, heat, hardness and other tactile qualities. – The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, Volume I. Trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 209.

Since for Descartes sensations and passions depend upon the union of mind and body, the central question now is whether or not Descartes attributes genuine minds (or immaterial souls) to animals, but he clearly does not do so. In his Replies to the Fifth Set of Objections, Descartes states that he does not think that the “souls of brutes are incorporeal” and that he considers the (by definition incorporeal) mind “not as part of the soul but as the thinking soul in its entirety” (see The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, Volume II, p. 246). Daisie and Michael Radner mention that Descartes wrote to one of his correspondents that blood constitutes the “soul” of animal life, but nevertheless “the blood is not “soul” in the literal Cartesian sense, for it is corporeal and does not think” (Animal Consciousness, p. 63). Descartes does maintain that both human and animal bodies are machines, but for Descartes what precisely distinguishes the human person from the animal is the fact that the human person is a “substantial union” of mind (res cogitans) and body (res extensa), while animals are only bodies. Thus, since for Descartes sensations and feelings can arise only from the union of a mind and body, and since Descartes denies that animals have minds (“incorporeal souls”), he cannot consistently attribute sensations and feelings to animals. Thus, at best Descartes’ position on animal sentence is inconsistent. Descartes’ own premises do indeed entail the “monstrous thesis” that animals are not sentient, even though at times he does not recognize this consequence and asserts that the opposite is the case.
different from a whining gear that needs oil”\textsuperscript{373} hardly merits criticism. And yet, lest I be accused of taking pains to defend the obvious, it is clear that skeptical and anti-realist attitudes concerning animal minds – hence a number of anthropocentric and tacitly Cartesian epistemological and metaphysical commitments – persist today, and indeed we should remind ourselves, as Merleau-Ponty insists, that “nothing is more difficult than to know precisely what we see.”\textsuperscript{374} Of course, today we have fortunately moved beyond Descartes’ view that all non-human animals are mere automata,\textsuperscript{375} but nevertheless I do not believe that we have moved far enough, for not only do attributions of certain “mental states” or modes of subjectivity to animals remain controversial where they often seem to be obviously correct, but (as I will argue below)

\textsuperscript{373} Quoted in Gary L. Francione, \textit{Animals as Persons: Essays on the Abolition of Animal Exploitation}, Columbia University Press, 2008. P. 29. Francione refers here to the fact that “Descartes and his followers performed experiments in which they nailed animals by their paws to boards and cut them open to reveal their beating hearts.” Indeed, in a letter to Plemius (15 February 1638), Descartes mentions an experiment in which he opened the chest and removed the ribs of a live rabbit in order to investigate its aorta. See \textit{The Philosophical Writings of Descartes}, Vol. III: The Correspondence. Trans. and ed. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothof, Dugald Murdoch, Anthony Kenny. Cambridge University Press, 1991. P. 81.

\textsuperscript{374} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{Phenomenology of Perception}, p. 58

\textsuperscript{375} Particularly within the scientific community, the consensus seems to be quite contrary to the classical Cartesian view. Contemporary studies of animal behavior and cognition have yielded (and constantly continue to yield) prodigious evidence of rich mental capacities in animals (many of which were once considered to be exclusively human). This research is so complex and extensive that it is not possible for me to provide an account of it here, but suffice it to say that the views of Descartes and his contemporaries are repudiated by most of the scientists who conduct this research; given the overwhelming evidence on the matter, doubts concerning the mindedness of most animals enjoy the same status as doubts concerning the basic facts of evolution and anthropogenic global warming. For example, it has been accepted for quite some time that elephants mourn, that rats exhibit empathy, that corvid birds engage in complex deceptive and problem-solving behaviors, that dogs and certain farm animals can suffer from post-traumatic stress and other emotional disturbances, that many birds and primates not only use tools but also make them, that many different animals in captivity can manifest boredom, sadness, and even attempt suicide, and that dolphins and whales have distinct intergenerational cultural practices and display what can only be credited as genuine language (indeed, those who study marine bioacoustics have recently suggested that dolphins may have proper names with which they refer to one another), and this is to name only a very small portion of all of the things we have learned about animals. Indeed, today scientists no longer wonder whether animals have minds so much as they simply wonder what kinds of minds they do have.

At the same time, however, we need to acknowledge that these progressive attitudes toward non-human animals are in tension with a certain strain of methodological skepticism that also persists in the scientific community. As I will further discuss below, such skepticism seems to be largely rooted in a misdirected anxiety over anthropomorphism, which is itself rooted in a subject-object epistemological framework that excludes (inter)subjectivity from knowledge and “objectivity.” Moreover, we also should be careful not to regard non-human subjectivities as worthy of appreciation and respect only insofar as they are similar to human subjectivity, for that assumes the very anthropocentrism that we here wish to critique. Nevertheless, studies of the social and linguistic behaviors of cetaceans, elephants, canines, felines, pigs, bears, birds, rodents, other primates, and so on, continue to reveal to us the presence of “\textit{other} others” in the world, and thus continue to decenter our place in it.
even those who are happy to ascribe a wide range of mental states and capacities to non-human animals (such as the majority of scientists today who study animal cognition) tend to justify such attributions in ways that presuppose or reinstate classical (and false) philosophical assumptions and abstractions.  

My thesis is that Merleau-Ponty offers us precisely the way to move further. Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological alternative to these conventional positions on the issue is, in fact, the one that is best able to solve it. Merleau-Ponty argues – and his ontology simply entails – not only that all non-human animals are “minded” but also that we know that they are minded for reasons that many people (even those who readily accept such a claim) overlook. It is only after we attempt to translate our lived experiences with animals into propositions that these experiences become susceptible to specious doubts and justifications alike. So, in order to undo such doubts and set our confidence in animal mindedness on a proper footing it is necessary to return to lived experience, for lived experience (or what Merleau-Ponty otherwise calls perception) is the foundation not only of our true claims to knowledge but also of the very conceptual frameworks and abstractions that may repress or distort such knowledge, frameworks and abstractions that lead us to overlook what we genuinely, always already know by direct acquaintance; it is, in short, necessary for us to “learn what we see.” In service to the questions I have posed above – questions concerning the existence of non-human minds and the basis of our knowledge of them – Merleau-Ponty precisely returns us to the soil of lived experience from which they arise, and in doing so I believe that he offers the most cogent answer to them.

As we have seen (and as we will further discuss), for Merleau-Ponty we are always already involved with others: to be in the world is always already to be entangled with other  

376 See, for example, my criticisms of Searle and Allen and Bekoff, below, and my criticisms of Nagel in the next chapter.
“minds” or with what we must come to understand, fundamentally, as other living, behaving bodies, other corporeal schemata. For Merleau-Ponty, a “corporeal schema,” again, refers to the agency or intentionality performed and immediately expressed in and through a living body’s pre-reflective openness to, and skillful absorption within, a world that it, as such, simultaneously constitutes and receives as meaningful; it is neither a purely internal space of reflective, subjective consciousness nor is it merely an external, objective thing or phenomenon that could be completely accounted for reductively in ordinary causal or mechanistic terms; rather, it is a manner of being – a particular directedness toward, and dynamic involvement within, a milieu or sense-laden context – that every living/lived body inherently and enactively is, that conditions in advance the possibility of any representation or perception of “things” or “objects,” and that therefore antecedes and founds the very distinction between “internal” and “external,” “subject(ive)” and “object(ive),” “mind” and “body” in the first place. Now, these other living bodies with whom I coexist – these other exploratory and expressive motor-intentional agencies, these other styles of being that diverge from but also, by virtue of their carnality, implicate and fold into my own – are not only those of other human beings but surely those of non-human beings as well, for non-human beings are, of course, living bodies – corporeal schemata, or intentionalities and therefore “minds” in the broadest, most non-chauvinistic sense of the term – as well. If this is correct, it follows that our knowledge of non-human (“animal”) others – that is to say, our knowledge of non-human animals as others (not as mere machines or “brutes” on the other side of a cognitive-ontological chasm) – is as basic, pervasive, and well-established as our knowledge of human others; indeed, countless instances of human-animal interactions and relationships attest to this fact, but we are often pressured to think otherwise.
Thus, my argument here is that Merleau-Ponty’s account of our lived relations with human others extends to and illuminates our lived relations with other (non-human) others. In short, Merleau-Ponty’s solution to the traditional “problem of other minds” is also a solution to what is perhaps the last vestige of Cartesianism: the “problem of animal minds” (or what Colin Allen and Marc Bekoff call the “other-species-of-mind problem”). If the classical problem of other minds is one of the great “scandals” of philosophy (and indeed it is), then so too is the problem of animal minds. It is true that the problem of animal minds seems to be far more intractable (and far less patently counterintuitive) than the old problem of other minds due to many of the apparently deep differences between human beings and various non-human animals. Here, my ultimate point is not to challenge the fact that many non-human animals often differ in significant ways from human beings (though surely it is the case, as we continually learn, that many animals are far more similar to us than we have traditionally supposed or admitted).

However, following Merleau-Ponty, I maintain that such differences never cleave the world into two sharply delineated, mutually exclusive ontological categories or orders of being, nor do they ever justify skepticism concerning animal mindedness in general, which could only be based upon such a supposed human/non-human divide in the first place and which is, logically, just as solipsistic as classical skepticism concerning human minds.

So, provided we repudiate classical dualism (along with all of the other binaries it has engendered), we must admit that the basis of our awareness and putative knowledge of the existence of other human minds is also the basis of our awareness and knowledge of the existence of other-than-human minds. If that is right, then logical consistency demands we admit that any reasons we may have to doubt the existence of non-human minds are also reasons to doubt the

377 Below, I discuss Allen’s and Bekoff’s response to this issue in their book *Species of Mind*. 
existence of other human minds; conversely, any reasons we may have to affirm the existence of human minds are also reasons to affirm the existence of non-human minds. If, for example, I doubt that a non-human animal is “minded” when I observe its behavior, it is probably because I implicitly accept a dualistic conception of the relationship between mind and body according to which mindedness can never be exhibited or encountered directly in and through behavior but can only be (say, analogically) inferred from it, and of course such inferences are always dubious. At any rate, dualism not only entails such skepticism but is the only commitment that logically warrants it. However, for the same reason, this dualism also plunges our supposed knowledge of other human minds into doubt. If subjectivity is the kind of thing that can be present only to itself – or if subjectivity is ontologically divorced from the external, material, perceptible world – then, by definition, it can never be perceived “from the outside,” and therefore the only subjectivity whose existence I can know for sure is my own.

Thus, if a Cartesian account of subjectivity is correct, I can no better claim to know that other human subjectivities exist than I can claim to know that other non-human subjectivities exist, and of course such an account of subjectivity entails that I can have no such knowledge of either at all. As Merleau-Ponty remarks, “there is…no behavior which certifies a pure consciousness behind it, and the other person is never given to me as the exact equivalent of myself thinking. In this sense it is not only to animals that consciousness must be denied.” So, if we do not think that skepticism concerning the existence of human others is tenable, then neither are we permitted to accept skepticism concerning the existence of non-human others. It is

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378 As I discussed in chapter one, the notion that knowledge of otherness is primarily based upon analogical inference is inherently fallacious, as it may only ever be supported by inconsistent or circular reasoning. Merleau-Ponty’s criticisms of such arguments from analogy for other minds are similar to his criticisms of the concept of anthropomorphic “projection,” which I discuss below.

379 The Structure of Behavior, p. 126. Of course, Merleau-Ponty’s remark here is made in the context of criticizing the kind of skepticism or solipsism in question.
often remarked that it is difficult enough to know what is going on in the mind of another human being, so we can hardly hope to know very much about what is going on in the minds of other animals, such as dogs, cats, rats, rabbits, deer, bears, lions, giraffes, elephants, parrots, snakes, whales, and so on. While I think that such a remark, like most forms of skepticism, assumes an overly pessimistic or unreasonably narrow account of what we can be said to “know,” there is something right about it. The point, though, is that we hardly ever think to doubt or outright deny the fact that our fellow human beings simply are “minded” (however elusive the specific “contents” of their minds or lived experiences may be), and yet typically we are not quite this charitable when it comes to those other living beings we lazily, thoughtlessly categorize as “animals.” Moreover, we never think that the distances between ourselves and human others support a priori skepticism regarding even specific “ascriptions” of mental “states,” attitudes, and capacities to human others. In the final analysis, this is simply an unacceptable double-standard. The logical problem here – the one that Merleau-Ponty suggests in the passage cited above – is that either we admit that the reasons that support skepticism concerning non-human minds are also reasons that support skepticism concerning other human minds, or we end up arbitrarily raising the bar or continually, and question-beggingly, shifting the goal posts for what it takes to count as evidence of either “mindedness” in general or of the presence of some mental quality in particular so that we may happily continue to entertain doubts about “animal” minds while never having to be perturbed by similar doubts about human minds. Indeed, this ad hoc reasoning clearly characterizes the entire history of efforts to isolate some single characteristic that only human beings would be able to claim to have so that we may, if not deny non-human mindedness altogether, at least secure for ourselves a superior, exceptional station in the order of animate existence.
This, then, is the upshot of Merleau-Ponty’s account of (inter)subjectivity: if we do not think that there are cogent reasons to deny the existence of other human minds, then we cannot think that there are any cogent reasons to deny the existence of other (‘animal’) minds. Anthropocentrism is surely an overdetermined and polyvalent term, but if here we take it to designate the thesis that only human beings are “minded” or that only human minds are minds “worthy of the name,” or that we can only rationally suppose that the world is populated by one “species of mind” (namely, our own), or that, at best, our knowledge of non-human minds is derivative with respect to our knowledge of our own human minds in the first instance, then it is the last remaining form of solipsism to be accorded any modicum of legitimacy today (and is perhaps the only form of solipsism that has ever been taken seriously). But all forms of solipsism are essentially the same and are therefore equally unacceptable. There is a traditional kind of solipsism that affirms that only my own conscious existence is real or certain, but there is also a solipsism that affirms that only the existence of human consciousness is real or certain; and, as Merleau-Ponty shows us, this latter point of view deserves to be called a kind of solipsism because it is motivated by the same erroneous ontological commitments as the former view. Moreover, we will also see that the very concept of anthropomorphism that informs skeptical attitudes toward specific attributions of mental qualities and capacities to non-humans – that is, the very notion we might simply be “projecting” human qualities into non-humans, or hastily drawing analogies between our own minds and the minds of non-humans, whenever we attribute certain mental qualities or capacities to non-humans – is just as solipsistic, or just as rooted in Cartesian epistemological and metaphysical commitments, as skepticism regarding non-human mindedness in general. So, as I hope to clarify in what follows, if, as we must agree, the classical

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380 I elaborate this analogy between anthropocentrism (along with the notion of anthropomorphism) and solipsism in the next chapter.
problem of other minds is “scandalous,” then the problem of animal minds is a fortiori scandalous as well. It is still not adequately recognized that to address and solve the first problem is also to address and solve the second. The “problem of other minds” and the “problem of animal minds” logically implicate one another, and Merleau-Ponty offers a decisive solution – indeed, the only solution – to both in one stroke.

Sammy was a very friendly, sociable, and sweet dog, yet he often preferred to play in a rather solitary manner; he often preferred to prance proudly around the house on his own with a toy rather than, say, play fetch or tug-of-war. This is not at all the case with Dexter, the Havanese we welcomed into our family after Sammy passed away. I could write as much about Dexter as I have about Sammy, but I think the manner in which Dexter communicates with us (especially when he plays) merits special attention. Dexter indefatigably loves to play fetch. When he wants to play, Dexter will drop a particular toy in front of me and will then back away a few feet and perform what is usually referred to as a “play bow.” Now, sometimes I am too busy or simply not in the mood to play with him, so I do not always respond to Dexter’s invitation (or demand) immediately. If I take too long to throw the toy Dexter has placed before me, he will invariably bark or growl at me and resume his ready, crouched position. If I continue to ignore him and remove myself from the area, he usually follows me into the other room, sits across from me, and stares at me until I acknowledge him with my gaze; and upon meeting my gaze, he will direct a single bark at me and then wait several seconds for my response. If no response on my part seems forthcoming, he will then issue another bark. If he eventually grows frustrated enough, he will retrieve his toy and push it to me once again. There in his eyes, in his bark, in his posture is not only obviously intentionality but also, I will venture to say, language. Dexter, again, will push his toy to me and issue a single bark and, if I take too long to respond or if I ignore a
sufficient number of his barks, he will issue a low, guttural growl, a kind of growl, it is worth noting, that is different from any of his other vocalizations, a growl that seems to have the unique function of expressing a frustrated demand for someone to throw his toy for him to retrieve. How is this not an instance of communication? Could a cogent theory of language deny that we have here an exchange of meaning, a chain of gestures and utterances that signify an intention, desire, or object? Do we not have here a deliberate and verbalized effort to direct my attention to something or to influence my behavior in a desired way? Does Dexter not genuinely speak to me? Is it not the case that Dexter deploys distinctive phonations not only simply to express to certain emotions (such as frustration and maybe even anger) but also to impress a conscious demand upon me, to tell me to do something for him, to signify his desire for engagement, to send me a message? How is this not “language”?

My parents and many others frequently report engaging in genuine conversations with the animals with whom they live. Do I perfectly understand what Dexter means every time he barks at me? Are his barks transparent in their meaning, perfectly translatable into my own human language? No. But no instance of communication, no linguistic exchange even between humans ever involves such transparency, either, and many human languages – perhaps no two human languages at all – are ever perfectly translatable into one another, yet this never stops us from understanding one another and from seeking to understand one another, or at any rate it never stops us from affirming that others – others who do not speak to us in own tongues – nevertheless have something to say. Indeed, when it comes to other humans, we usually have quite an expansive and charitable conception of what it means “to speak” (as we should): we readily acknowledge (as Merleau-Ponty himself argues) that most forms of “speech” are gestural and bodily rather than purely “verbal.” I have no doubt that Dexter’s barks denote, but most
philosophers of language, within both the “analytic” and “Continental” philosophical traditions, realize that there is so much more to language than mere denotation, that there is an irreducibly performative element to all uses of language. We readily acknowledge that the larger part of what we call “language” is “body language,” and of course all language is, like everything “mental” or “cognitive,” fundamentally performed with and through the body. Thus, we acknowledge all kinds of languages in the world. We acknowledge that sign language is a genuine language. We acknowledge that Chinese and German, for example, are both equally languages despite how radically different they are in many respects. We acknowledge that the languages of certain Native American peoples have just as much of a right to be called “languages” as, say, English and French even though, as Sapir and Whorf famously observed, they may be structured by categories, grammars, or even metaphysical schemas that are radically different from, and thus never totally commensurable with, the latter (and of course to regard them otherwise would simply be racist or ethnocentric). We also acknowledge that the “click” languages of the Khoisan and !Kung peoples of Africa are “real” languages even though they, too, are radically different from standard Western, subject-predicate languages. Why, then, do we persist in withholding such charitability (to say the least) when it comes to “animals”? If in the end denying “language” to certain Native American or African peoples would simply be racist or ethnocentric, it seems that in many (if not most or all) cases denying language to animals is rooted in yet another prejudice: speciesism.

Of course, it is not entirely true that we deny that animals have language. In much the same way that we have fortunately moved beyond the racism or ethnocentrism that would have once denied attributing language to, say, the Khoisan peoples, many scientists today have begun to advance beyond the reflexive speciesism that often motivates us to deny language to various
animals. Research into animal languages is currently expansive and flourishing, and it is impossible for me to canvas it here. Scientists do not only study the language of dog barks: they also study the rich expressivity of cats’ tails, they also study the sophisticated sign languages of elephants, they also study the semiotics of bird and whale songs, they also study the languages of dolphins (who are widely believed to use proper nouns), they also study the dance language of bees, they even study the ear twitching language of gazelles (which is, indeed, usually referred to as a “language” in the scientific literature). Yet, anthropocentrism continues to infiltrate how we investigate and talk about non-human languages, and in general we find a rather deep-seated cognitive dissonance in our attitudes toward ascriptions of various qualities and capacities to animals, one that perhaps reflects precisely a discrepancy between our lived experiences with animals and internalized conceptual and ideological frameworks that lead us to doubt those lived experiences upon reflection. So, despite the vast research into animal languages, it is nevertheless still common to find people (including those linguists and ethologists who research the matter) who wish to define language in such a restrictive or narrow manner that “genuine” language – that language “worthy of the name” – may still be reserved for humans.

A couple of years ago, for example, I saw several displays in an exhibit on animal language at the Museum of Natural History in New York that suggested that animals, even though they deploy vocalizations or phonations that clearly designate objects and aim to communicate some sort of intention or meaning, do not “really” have language because they lack recursive syntax, as if recursive syntax ought to define what it essentially means to “have” or to use language, which seems to be no different from stipulating that a subject-predicate grammar ought to define what it essentially means to have or to use language. Perhaps it is also no different from saying that “real” poems are written in iambic pentameter. Perhaps it is also no
different from saying that atonal music is not “real” music, or that avant-garde art (like Duchamp’s urinal) is not “real” art. When I think of language, I think of sending a message, one intelligible enough at least in principle to be received by some audience. So, if Dexter’s barks and behaviors send me a message that I can understand, they constitute an instance of language. Say you and I are having a face-to-face conversation, and you raise an objection to one of the arguments I have presented here. In response, I punch you in the face simply for raising the objection. I surely have sent you message, and it is likely one that you will understand. But what is the “subject-predicate grammar” of a punch to the face? I suppose we could extract a subject-predicate proposition from it (such as “I do not take kindly to having my arguments criticized” or “your objection is offensive to me” or “you have no right to question my reasoning and ought to be punished with bodily harm for doing so,” and so on), but why should we want or feel the need to do that? I sent you a message, and you received it. Why is that not enough to consider the phenomenon in question “language”? Naturally, the reply will be that such a definition is “too broad.” Now, if we must remain preoccupied with definitions, I agree that definitions can be too broad (for example, it will not do to define a human as just a mammal or to define a game as simply something that is done for amusement). However, it seems to me that definitions should be as broad as reasonably possible, as broad as they can be while still usefully conveying some phenomenon. What other reasons would we have to demand that definitions be narrower than this? We could stipulate that “real” language – that language “worthy of the name” – requires recursive syntax. But why should we say that recursion is a necessary condition for “true” language? What is the point of this narrower restriction? What do we gain by it, or conversely what would we lose for rejecting it? If we were to reject such a condition, would we thus be failing to capture some “essence” of language (and are we still even looking for “essences” in
philosophy anymore anyway)? It seems to me that there are no essential ontological reasons that support such a narrow definition. Nothing is really lost by considering any instance of “communication,” or any semiotic phenomenon, to be “language.” Some forms of language have recursive syntax, some do not. Likewise, some games are played with a ball, some are not; some works of art use paint, some do not. So, my basic point is that it seems that the only motivation to insist upon a narrower definition of language – that the motivation that is really tacitly operative behind the scenes of such a definition – is not to represent correctly some objective essence of language but rather to elevate certain language-using beings to a position of superiority over other beings. And my other basic point, then, is that most (if not all) definitions are value-laden, ethical and political constructs, and we should not pretend otherwise.

My point here, at the outset of this chapter, has not so much been to engage with philosophy of language for its own sake but rather to use the question of language as an example to illustrate the ethical and political stakes that are always at play in questions that might seem to be purely “ontological” or “scientific,” and to challenge a pattern of reasoning we typically find wherever questions concerning attributions of various mental characteristics or capacities to non-human animals are considered, for in most (if not all) cases we find that there is always an anthropocentric agenda that motivates the manner in which such characteristics or capacities are defined (or even selected for investigation in the first place); indeed, we often find that the characteristics or capacities typically taken to indicate human exceptionalism are defined in narrow ways in order to bootstrap that exceptionalism in the first place, that the presence of such characteristics or capacities are taken to “prove” a thesis that was in fact already determined to be true in advance of narrowly defining them and that they were only defined narrowly in order to ratify. We also especially find that anthropocentrism tends to motivate most skeptical or
negative appraisals of attributions of such characteristics or capacities to animals as mere “anthropomorphisms,” and for this reason, following certain arguments Merleau-Ponty develops on the issue, I wish to suggest that we have good reason to abandon the very concept of “anthropomorphism,” good reason indeed to abandon the very notion of an “anthropomorphism fallacy.”

The pattern of thinking I have just mentioned is one that we find to be pervasive throughout studies of animal cognition. Not only do anthropocentric biases inform what we study in the first place, they also inform the manner in which we define the phenomena we study, and this is clearly evident in the often ad hoc manner in which we shift the goal posts for what it means to “really” have a particular quality or capacity: nearly every time it is discovered that certain non-humans exhibit some quality or capacity typically considered to be exclusively human, there are many who then define such a quality or capacity in an arbitrarily narrow way so as to preserve its exclusively or exceptionally “human” status. Thus, for example, many will say that animals “communicate” but do not really “have language,” yet there does not seem to be a better basis for making such a judgment with regard to non-humans than there is with regard to many other humans who speak in ways that are quite different from how we do: in the latter case it is simply racism, ethnocentrism, or colonialism that motivates us to deny “genuine” language to humans whose “tongues” are quite alien to our own, and in the former case, similarly, it is nothing but anthropocentrism or speciesism – nothing but the prejudice and mystification of human specialness – that motivates us to deny “genuine” language to animals. A point to which I will return is that none of these “isms” or exclusionary, supremacist frameworks are relevantly different from one another, for in all cases they involve the notion that some characteristic is super important or “special” – thus something that ought be the essential, supreme, default
standard relative to which other phenomena or forms of subjectivity ought to be compared and
evaluated – merely because it is a characteristic “we” (supposedly) uniquely possess (and indeed,
to refer to this as a “notion” at all might already be to accord it more dignity than it merits, for it
is often not a commitment that derives from any actual conscious reflection or reasoning but is
simply a brute prejudice we internalize from certain systems of power and institutions in which
we are implicated); that we nearly always do not, as an empirical matter of fact, uniquely possess
such a characteristic is often a strategically important thing to indicate and appreciate but is also
beside the point, for “the point” concerns the underlying “logic” or framework that leads us to
think such a putatively unique characteristic is a mark (if not the mark) of ontological or
axiological supremacy.

So, it appears to me that Dexter and I converse with each other (despite the supposed
species barriers between us) just as genuinely as I converse with any human, and that there are
no sound, rational grounds to deny such appearances. If we are honest with ourselves, we know
that animal others “speak” to us in lived experience just as much or just as genuinely as human
others do, albeit in ways that may be quite different from certain familiar human ways of
“speaking.” Often when we play, Dexter will bark impatiently at me if I hold his toy and refuse
to throw it, and in order to discipline him not to bark I will continue to hold his toy in suspense
until he ceases barking; as I do so, Dexter stares at me and, yes, he does so intently; he sees me,
but he did not just see me: he looks at me, he looks to me; he also, with his barks and his growls,
speaks to me. So too do many other non-human beings speak to us. So too would many other
non-humans speak to us if we were to extend to them the same hermeneutic charity we extend to
other humans; so too would many other non-humans speak to us if we no longer violently
silenced them or assumed from the start that they have nothing to say; so too would many non-
humans speak to us if we suspended our own speech or voice and the assumptions according to which we often define what it means to speak or to have a voice in the first place; so too would many other non-humans speak to us if only we would, to put it bluntly, shut up and listen. We inhabit a world that is already teeming with non-human “voices,” a world that is already semiotically, dialect-ically so much more than human, and it is sad to contemplate how much of it we might be missing out on because of our refusal (or enculturated inability) to listen. But perhaps this is also why we deny genuine “voices” or “languages worthy of the name” to animals. When Dexter barks at another dog, I often wonder to myself what they might be saying, what conversation I might be missing out on. Perhaps this is really why we deny language to animals. Perhaps we deny language to animals because we are afraid of what they might be saying behind our backs.

Is it really reasonable to doubt that Dexter’s barks and gestures mean something like “pick up and throw the ball!” – is it reasonable to think I am merely “anthropomorphizing” Dexter when I take him to be saying this – or is it perhaps more reasonable to take such a thing at face value, as we are indeed wont to do in everyday, pre-philosophical or pre-scientific experience? I have been suggesting that surely the latter is the case. We never hesitate to take such appearances at face value when it is a human face or body that addresses us, but if it is a canine face or body – or if it is, in general, a non-human face or body – that addresses us, then a moment’s reflection may loosen our hold on what we unreflectively grasped as certain or obvious. If a human baby smiles and coos at us, we typically delight in how “happy” he or she is without a second thought, but if a dog furrows its brow, diverts its glance, lowers its ears, tucks its tail between its legs and begins to whimper, we might feel pressured to suspect others or ourselves of mere “anthropomorphism” should they or we claim that the dog is “ashamed.” It is
precisely the kind of exceptionalism I described above that is so often at play in the skeptical attitudes we take toward attributions of various qualities or capacities to animals, a skepticism that usually takes the form of a concern that we might merely be “anthropomorphizing” animals whenever we make such attributions. The logical or epistemic merit of such a concern – even the logical or epistemic merit of the very concept of anthropomorphic “projection” or of an “anthropomorphism fallacy” as such – is what I now wish to examine more closely (as Merleau-Ponty himself does in a number of his works). Merleau-Ponty explicitly argues that the notion of anthropomorphic “projection” is in fact incoherent, and he implies in several of his works that perhaps the very concept of “anthropomorphism” ought to be jettisoned altogether given that it seems inherently tied to Cartesian epistemological and metaphysical presuppositions or, more broadly, to an Enlightenment conception of knowledge that suppresses or marginalizes (inter)subjectivity and affectivity and that phenomenology thus reveals to be utterly untenable (and that, notably, later feminist philosophers rightly reveal to be utterly androcentric or patriarchal). Following Merleau-Ponty, I will argue that such a concern about “anthropomorphism” is, indeed, without grounds, and that in fact the concept of an “anthropomorphism fallacy” is itself a fallacy, namely a fallacy one commits whenever one dismisses the veracity of an ascription of a “human” quality or capacity to a non-human as an “anthropomorphism fallacy” (or even whenever one simply skeptically doubts such an ascription under the suspicion that it might just be an “anthropomorphic projection”): a fallacy that I therefore name the “anthropomorphism fallacy fallacy.”

As we have seen, since the living body (or corporeal schema) “blurs the distinction between subject and object,” it functions as the “hinge of the for itself and the for the

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The lived/living or behaving body is precisely an enmeshment of interiority and exteriority, of immanence and transcendence, of subjectivity and flesh from which we only later abstract those terms and regard them as opposed, mutually exclusive indices of reality. Subjectivity is necessarily incarnate, and that means it is not simply expressed “through” but is itself the expression of a living body, that the form of expressivity we call “life” or “behavior” is subjectivity. Thus, one perceives others immediately (pre-reflectively) and directly in their bodily bearing in the world. Consciousness burgeons forth in the world through the conduct of a living, behaving body. Others can only be encountered in the flesh, and it is because I am flesh that others are always already present to me, that others (who are likewise enfleshed) are always already intermingled with my own flesh and its vital intentions. Others are already implicated in my reflexive relationship to myself because they, as enfleshed beings themselves, are implicated in the flesh I thus share with them and in the world to which our shared flesh is exposed as the condition of its own reflexivity or sentience. Others, then, are from the start inscribed in my own bodily affects and potencies, projects and efforts, passions and vulnerabilities. The crucial point here, and the one with which the previous chapter concluded, is that once dualism has been discarded the classical problem of other minds reduces to the problem “other living, behaving bodies,” yet clearly to articulate the problem this way is at once to dissolve it. As Dillon explains:

The transfer of corporeal schema, the immediate (that is, reflexive-but-unreflected) perceptual linkage through which we recognize other beings as like unto ourselves, is the phenomenal ground of...intersubjectivity. A better word would be ‘intercorporeality’ because the problem of other minds is really a problem of other animate organisms: as the most basic levels, human communion is a communion of flesh and not a relation between isolated subjects.383

382 Merleau-Ponty, The Visible and the Invisible, p. 189.
383 M.C. Dillon, Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology, p. 122.
To affirm that subjectivity is embodied is to affirm that it is enacted by the living body and that we therefore directly perceive subjectivity whenever and wherever we, through our own living bodies, directly perceive other bodies living or behaving in the world. To be a "subject" is to be a living body, and to be a living body is to be a “subject.”

This clearly has profound implications, and not just concerning our “knowledge” of human others. If dualism is false, it follows that all living bodies are “subjectivities” or “minds”; it follows that to perceive any body as “living” or “behaving” is at once to perceive it as “minded.” This is why, as I suggested earlier, the classical problem of other minds and what is often called the “problem of animal minds” are implicated in one another or are, in fact, one and the same problem. If the classical problem of other minds collapses into the “problem of other living, behaving bodies,” then so too does the “problem of animal minds.” One would have to divorce subjectivity from the living, behaving body in order to acknowledge that animal bodies are “alive” and “behave” yet do not possess or exhibit "subjectivity." That is to say, skepticism concerning “animal mindedness” can only rest upon the very same dualism as traditional skepticism concerning human mindedness. If subjectivity is immediately “appresented” by a living body simply in virtue of the fact that it is a living body, one has to affirm all living bodies – human and non-human alike – as particular expressions (or appresentations) of subjectivity, and Husserl himself knew and acknowledged this:

I see a cat playing and I regard it now as something of nature, just as is done in zoology. I see it as a physical organism but also as a sensing and animated Body, i.e., I see it precisely as a cat. I “see” it in the general sense ordinarily meant when speaking of seeing…the cat is present there in the flesh – specifically, as a physical thing with sensing surfaces, sense organs, etc. The stratum of sensation is not there as something beside the physical thing; what is there is a Body, a Body which has physical and aesthesiological qualities as one. Likewise, the Body is also experienced as Body of a soul, and the word “soul” indicates again a founded stratum of qualities, and of course one that is still higher…The soul is not there as extended over the Body in the manner of being “localized” in the proper sense…the psychic
is, in experience, one – that is, in realiter one – with the Body.\textsuperscript{384}

We see here that Husserl already rejects any strict anthropocentric or speciesist delimitation of attributions of “mindedness” because he recognizes (as does Merleau-Ponty) that any acceptable account of intersubjectivity – that any phenomenological explanation of our experiences and knowledge of others, or that any explanation of how otherness in general arises in sense and presence in the world – logically applies to animals just as well as it applies to humans. Husserl attributes subjectivity to a cat just as readily as he attributes subjectivity to a human because he knows that one cannot consistently affirm that the living body of a human appresents subjectivity and at the same time deny that the living body of cat does as well. Either one admits that all living bodies (ap)present subjectivity, in which case it would be logically contradictory to claim that some do not, or one has to explain what makes certain living bodies so special that only they (ap)present subjectivity while certain other living bodies do not. As for the latter alternative, not only do I have no idea how anyone could plausibly, in a way that is not blatantly chauvinistic, establish that only some living, behaving bodies are “subjectivities,” but again, to do so would be impossible without recourse to dualism, for one would have to separate subjectivity from animate embodiment: if only some (not all) animate bodies exhibit “subjectivity,” then those that do must do so in virtue of something beyond the fact of their animate embodiment alone, but to reject dualism is to affirm that animate embodiment alone (ap)presents subjectivity; there is simply no way around that conclusion.

If one says that only some kinds of living, behaving bodies may express subjectivity, the question, naturally, should be “why?” Unless one advances some peculiar sort of morphological

\textsuperscript{384} Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, Second Book, §49a, p. 185-186.
essentialism (i.e., some notion that subjectivities can only be presenced by bipedal bodies, by bodies without wings, by bodies with two eyes, two ears, a nose, and a mouth arranged just so, and so on), then one will have to appeal to some quality or capacity that certain living bodies have independently of being living bodies, that is, one would have to appeal to some sort of disembodied quality or capacity. The reply here might be that one can consistently recognize a particular quality or capacity as embodied yet also recognize that it is exhibited only by certain living bodies. Perhaps such a capacity one might propose would be “reason.” Setting aside the difficult and fraught issue of defining “reason” (which anyone who makes such a proposal would bear the burden of doing), and also setting aside the fact that most thinkers have had a lot of trouble conceptualizing “reason” as a truly embodied faculty and that to do so would likely require a radical new understanding of it that would prevent us from restricting it to only a select few forms of embodied life, the issue for now is the issue concerning ascribing mindedness in general to bodies, and if we accept that all mental qualities or capacities (whether “reason” or anything else) are thoroughly embodied, then we accept that all living, behaving bodies directly express (or appresent) mental qualities or capacities of some sort, such that “reason” might be one way of existing in the world in a “minded” way – that is, one way of existing in the world as a living body – yet it would not be the only way of thus existing in the world. As Merleau-Ponty remarks, “before being reason, humanity is another corporeity.”\(^{385}\) Perhaps “reason” is one way of being a living body – perhaps it is distinctively if not uniquely a way of being a living human body – but it is not the only way of being a living body. “Humanity” is one “corporeity” in the world among others, and unless we embrace or assume a dualistic conception of the relationship between subjectivity and corporeity, we must affirm that all corporeities – all living bodies – are

\(^{385}\) *Nature*, p. 208.
ways of being “subjectivity,” or that any way of “being subjectivity” is also a way of being a body. “Humanity” is “first another way of being a body”\(^{386}\) (that is, first a way of being a living body), and non-human bodies are living bodies, too. Human beings and non-human beings are all ways of being living bodies, and so too are they all ways being “minds.”

So again, it is not logically permissible to affirm that subjectivity is embodied and not also affirm that to be “a subject” is to be a living body, for embodied subjectivity just is living, sentient flesh. To reject dualism is necessarily to accept the notion that a living, behaving body expresses “subjectivity” simply in virtue of being a living, behaving body. This is the only conclusion that follows from rejecting dualism, and it is also the only conclusion one may accept if one wishes to overcome the classical problem of other minds. Otherness (or mindedness) can only be, and always already is, co-given with the behaviors or expressions of a living body, and of course animals are living, behaving bodies just as well as humans are; thus, it would be logically inconsistent and indeed simply arbitrary to ascribe “mindedness” or “ensouled-ness” to the latter yet not to the former, and this is why Husserl’s account of perceiving a cat is exactly the same as his account of perceiving a human being. Regardless of the kind of living body one perceives, to perceive a living body is immediately to (ap)perceive a “mind” or “soul.” As Husserl insists in the above passage (and as we saw in the previous chapter), a “mind” or “soul” isn’t something we “add” to a living body after the fact of perceiving it; it is not something that is, as Husserl puts it, “beside the physical thing” we perceive: to perceive a living body is already, immediately, directly to perceive it as minded or “ensouled.” Of course, none of this should be taken to imply a monolithic definition of “subjectivity”: on the contrary, it is to affirm that there are as many different kinds of subjectivities in the world as there are living bodies, but

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\(^{386}\) Ibid., p. 208.
subjectivities they all are nonetheless. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty affirms that even just in the case of human beings “there are several ways for the body to be a body, several ways for consciousness to be consciousness.”\textsuperscript{387} As Deleuze teaches us, “univocity” is not contrary to pluralism.\textsuperscript{388} The carnality and universal “flesh of the world” that makes mindedness possible also refutes the notion that mindedness admits of any monolithic – especially any speciesist – definition. In the language of analytic philosophy, minds are multiply realizable and multiply realized. Since to be a living body is to be a mind and since the “…mind is incredibly penetrated by its corporal structure…,”\textsuperscript{389} there are as many kinds of minds as there are kinds of living bodies.

So, like Husserl, Merleau-Ponty affirms that we perceive “animals” as expressions of subjectivity just as immediately as we perceive humans as expressions of subjectivity, for humans and animals alike are living bodies, and given that dualism is false – or given that subjectivity is inherently suffused throughout the living, behaving body – living bodies are intrinsically, immediately expressions of subjectivity. To perceive any body as a living body is at once to perceive it as a form of subjectivity, and this is something we all know quite well through lived experience:

The animal, to an extent which varies according to the integration its behavior, is certainly another existence; this existence is perceived by everyone…Spinoza would not have spent so much time considering a drowning fly if this behavior had not offered to the eye something other than a fragment of extension; the theory of animal machines is a “resistance” to the phenomenon of behavior.\textsuperscript{390}

\textsuperscript{387} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{Phenomenology of Perception}, p. 124. Italics are Merleau-Ponty’s.
\textsuperscript{388} I surely have in mind here Deleuze’s discussion of the “univocity” of Being in \textit{Difference and Repetition}, in which he articulates Being itself as differentiation, an account of Being that Merleau-Ponty himself will articulate in his later writings. Yet, I also have in mind here Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of “the magic formula…\textsc{PLURALISM=MONISM}” (see \textit{A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia}. Trans. Brian Massumi. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987, p. 20). Though Merleau-Ponty distances his own later ontology from “monism” due to its association with certain reductionistic substance ontologies (i.e., classical materialism), I do think his later ontology is “monistic” in Deleuze and Guattari’s sense of the term, for it is a thoroughly anti-dualistic, anti-supernaturalist ontology; it is thoroughly a philosophy of what Deleuze calls (non-trascendental) “immanence.”
\textsuperscript{389} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{Nature}, p. 268.
\textsuperscript{390} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{The Structure of Behavior}, p. 126-127.
A point that Merleau-Ponty makes here, and one to which I will return, is that reductionistic attitudes toward animals – in particular, those that regard them merely as “machines” and thus deprive them of any genuine interiority – willfully suppress our lived experiences of them, that is, our direct experiences of them not as “machines” but as living bodies; they involve the willful suppression of our experience of the phenomenon of behavior, for behavior is a form of movement in the world that is importantly different from those that are merely mechanistic or causal in nature (as I mentioned in the previous chapter, there is an important difference between observing an animatronic tiger and observing a living one). Even to perceive a living fly is not to perceive a “mere thing” or something that is meaningfully comparable to an assemblage of, say, levers, gears, wheels, and pullies. As we have seen, to perceive any other living body – including, naturally, the body of a living fly – is, for one thing, to sense through a direct, reflexive corporeal transference with it, or to sense through one’s own corporeal intentionality or affectivity, that other body’s intentionality or affectivity as such. Descartes might have been able to convince himself that animals were just “automata” or “fragments of extension,” but it takes quite a sophisticated, deliberate, concerted effort to view them (or any living being) in such a manner (in much the same way that it takes a concerted effort to view perceptual objects as collections of “sense-data”), and it is also simply impossible to do so – indeed, it is simply impossible to view living beings in any reductionistic way – without assuming or reinstating the very metaphysics that Descartes himself helped entrench in Western culture. Thus, Merleau-Ponty criticizes the hypocritical, “bad faith” Cartesian conception of animal bodies as “automata,” remarking (rather sarcastically) that “Malebranche would not have beaten a stone as he beat his dog, saying that the dog didn’t suffer.”

To be clear, reductionism is the logical offspring and counterpart of dualism. Any reductionistic conception of a living body (whether human or non-human) is rooted in Cartesian metaphysics, for ultimately it reinscribes Descartes’ distinction between the body as a mere “machine” and the mind as an immaterial substance. Of course, Merleau-Ponty not only does not deny the relevance of physiology to consciousness and behavior but emphatically affirms and devotes rigorous attention to it; he does, however, for obvious reasons deny reductionistic accounts of consciousness and behavior. Merleau-Ponty is opposed to any kind of supernaturalism, yet reductive materialism – any conception of a living body in purely mechanistic or micro-causal terms – is just as much of a concession to Cartesianism as the very supernaturalism it opposes. The living body is a “system of motor powers that crisscross in order to produce a behavior,” yet “machinism exists only to the extent that behavior had been prepared from within and aroused.” As we saw in the previous chapter, even reflexes (like the Patellar reflex) require a living body’s global orientation toward a situation or horizon of meanings and possibilities: I must arrange my body in a certain position and adjust my body to the world in just the right way in order for such a reflex to be elicited or even abstractly conceptualized in the first place. The motor powers of the living body are unintelligible apart from their global, holistic embeddedness within, and orientation toward, a situation or lifeworld (Umwelt) that solicits their expression in the form of a behavior, a context or Gestalt with which they are always in dialectical participation. Responsiveness to meaning, or the co-constitution of an organism and its milieu, always comes before anything like a mechanistic “reaction” to stimuli; the latter is an abstraction from the former in the same way that the very notion of the body as a “machine” or object is an abstraction from the reality of the lived body. Thus, even

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392 Ibid., p. 148.
393 Ibid., p. 192.
“apparently simpler animals present us with something wholly different from mechanical activity.” Behavior is no more reducible to mechanistic causal processes than perception is reducible to aggregates of sense-data, and such an analogy is not accidental, since to behave is to perceive and to perceive is already to behave; behavior is a perceptual engagement with the world and every perceptual engagement with the world is necessarily expressed through a form of behavior. Again, behavior and perception participate in a Gestalt: a pregiven situation or field of meaning constituted by the incessant, bilateral interaction between the behaving body and the world, between perceiver and perceived:

The animal must be considered as a field; that is, it is both physical being and a meaning…only a field has properties such that it is always distinguished from things partes extra partes, because it always includes a relation between the parts and the whole…Behavior is not an ensemble of facts whose functioning would be ordered by architectonic connections realized within the organism. The functioning in its mechanistic forms appears second; it is not anterior but posterior to the organism. That’s why the notion of behavior constitutes a problem for anatomists. The interest in a notion like behavior is that it allows us to come back to this side of the frozen structure that anatomy reveals.

Every living, behaving body and its milieu reciprocally constitute one another: the former could not exist as such with the latter, nor would latter exist as such without the former; the behavior of a body is its responsiveness to meaning in the world, yet a behaving body’s world (its milieu) is partially constituted as meaningful – as the milieu of that distinct body – through that body’s behaviors, affects, and powers, that is, by all of the ways in which that body “makes sense” of its world. Such a co-production of sense or relationship of meaning between a living body and its world comes before we conceptualize any relationships of “efficient causation” that may subtend and help realize it. There are, of course, causal conditions or mechanisms that are necessary in order to realize anything that a behaving body does (e.g., there are obviously all kinds of muscles and nerves and chemical/neural pathways necessary for me to raise my hand to ask a question in

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394 Ibid., p. 169.
395 Ibid., p. 150-151.
a class), but in order for such causal conditions or mechanisms to be mobilized in the form of a behavior – that is, in order for a body to be not just an ordinary body but a behaving body – an already meaning-laden context must present itself to it and elicit it to respond to it as such. For example, without the setting of a classroom and all of the social meanings and values built into it from the start, a behavior such as “raising one’s hand to ask a question” would never come to pass; and thus it is a fallacy to observe the behavior of raising one’s hand in class, rip that bodily movement from the context that makes it not merely a bodily “movement” but a behavior, analyze that movement in terms of decontextualized causes, and then infer that those causes are prior to, and exhaustively constitutive of, the phenomenon of “raising one’s hand in class” with which one began. This is why, for Merleau-Ponty, “the notion of Umwelt no longer allows us to consider the organism in its relation to the exterior world, as an effect of the exterior world, or as a cause.”

Thus, a mechanistic conception the living body is a derivative abstraction; in the same way that sense-atomism selectively isolates discrete sensory qualities and tears them away from the perceptual wholes – not just the whole perceptual objects but also the context within which such objects appear – that lets such qualities even be sensed in the first place and then fallaciously regards such “sense data” as prior to, and constitutive of, those perceptual wholes, a reductive or mechanistic conception of a living body isolates certain physiological processes or phenomena or even the living body itself and tears them away from the complex, synergistic interactions between the living body and its milieu (and between the living body and other living bodies) in virtue of which such a body is a living, behaving body in the first place. Reductionism forgets that behaviors are not just bodily movements: they are forms of intentionality or

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396 Ibid., p. 178.
responses to meaning. If this were not so, then there would no difference between, say, raising one’s hand to ask a question and any random paroxysm. One can no better understand the behavior of an organism and its relationship with the world in a purely reductive or mechanistic way than one can understand a verbal linguistic exchange between people purely in terms of, say, the physiological structures that enable them to speak and the physics of sound waves that lets them hear one another. In any case, we simply have to recall that behavior (or the phenomenon of a living body) precisely precedes and founds the classical antithesis between spirit and matter, pure consciousness and mechanism, the disembodied subject and the body as a thoughtless, de-subjectified object. To conceive the living body as a mere mechanism or object is to revive the Cartesian opposition between body and soul, yet the phenomenon of the living, behaving body is prior to, and the foundation of, that supposed opposition.

It is not difficult to see how dualism informs anthropocentrism (and how anthropocentrism so often depends upon dualism): the mind is divorced from the body; since the mind is disembodied, bodily movement is inherently “mindless” and thus can be nothing more than merely mechanical in nature. This separation of mind and body then leads to the separation of human and animal, as the human comes to be identified with mindedness or logos and the animal is equated with embodiment or mechanicity. If anything is not a mind, then it can only be a mere thing or machine, and while we surely know that we humans are minds, animals are “just” bodies. Of course, the only way to conceptualize a living body (whether or not it is the living body of a non-human) as a mechanism or brute object or as “just” a body is through a process of abstraction that sunders subjectivity from flesh and behavior. Only by separating consciousness from the body can we regard a behaving body as a mindless mechanism and restrict mindedness to our own case. Again, in order to deny that animals are “minds” one has to
remove the mind from the living body; this is the only way one can look at a body, acknowledge that that body is alive or that it behaves in various ways, and yet deny that it “has” or expresses a mind. So, no living body is ever “just” a body; that is, no living body is ever devoid of subjectivity because to be a living body is to be a form of subjectivity or to “[belong] to a dynamic of behavior.”\textsuperscript{397} If consciousness is intertwined with behavior and if “behavior is sunk into corporeity,”\textsuperscript{398} then every living body or form of behavior is an enactment or form of “consciousness,” and thus, to repeat a point I made in the previous chapters, it makes as little sense to ask whether a particular behavior or living body expresses or “contains” a mind as it does to ask whether the previous sentence expresses or “contains” a thought. For Merleau-Ponty, subjectivity is to behavior as thought or meaning is to language. We have seen this analogy before, and it is one that Merleau-Ponty consistently emphasizes. Every gesture or instance of behavior inherently has a meaning in precisely the same way that every word in a language does, and to anticipate a point we will later see Merleau-Ponty make, one can no more understand the meaning of a gesture or instance of behavior solely in terms of any of its supposed mechanistic antecedents than one can understand the meaning of a word or sentence by only understanding, say, the efficient causation through which it was inscribed or the physiology of the vocal chords that allowed it to be spoken. Thus, “…the body’s gesture toward the world introduces it into an order of relations that pure physiology and biology do not have the slightest idea of.”\textsuperscript{399}

We see, then, that the living body itself may only be conceived as “mindless” – as a mere machine devoid of interiority – if the mind is first conceived as disembodied. Moreover, a reductive, mechanistic conception of the living body that would deny animals subjectivity would

\textsuperscript{397} Ibid., p. 183.
\textsuperscript{398} Ibid., p. 183.
\textsuperscript{399} Merleau-Ponty, “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,” in \textit{Signs}, p. 68.
also, as a simple matter of logical consistency, deny other humans (that is, humans other than oneself) subjectivity as well. If one regards all living bodies as nothing more than mindless machines, then it is arbitrary (or mere theology) to regard only one kind of mindless mechanism as home to a “mind” or “soul.” In any case, the unavoidable truth is that a reductionistic conception of the body and that a supernaturalist, Cartesian understanding of subjectivity mutually entail one another (and so we may very well say that dualism is rooted just as much in a false understanding of “the body” as it is in a false understanding of subjectivity). In short, if we give up the notion of consciousness as a “ghost in the machine,” so too must we give up the notion of the (living) body as a mere “machine”: these two concepts are utterly ensnared in one another; the living, behaving body is only a mere machine if the mind is a pure spirit. As we have seen, however, a living body is never “just” an ordinary object, and thus any conception of it as such is a false abstraction. A dead or dissected body – a body such as one might view it on an operating table, or a body such as a scientist might objectify it – is simply not a lived/living body.

The irony, of course, is that though most scientists would likely proclaim themselves to be anti-Cartesian in their worldview, their typical reductionistic approaches to understanding animal (and often even human) subjectivity and behavior is thoroughly Cartesian historically and conceptually. Many scientists, of course, resist reductionism, yet reductionistic attitudes toward non-human beings nevertheless remain prevalent. All of the common forms of skepticism concerning attributions of mental characteristics to animals that I have been critiquing here are rooted in reductionism if not simply abject chauvinism. Whenever someone (especially a scientist) bemoans “anthropomorphism” and suggests that we are committing some sort of crime against reason or “objectivity” by imparting interior lives – personalities, emotions, affects,
thoughts, and so on – to animals, he/she is assuming that objectivity must be divested of subjectivity, that “objective” knowledge can only be knowledge of objects and that, therefore, if we are to make any rational or “scientific” (and many scientists conflate “rationality” with science) claims about an animal we may do so only from a position that regards that animal as an object. Many people – including scientists – continue to regard animals as little more than objects (perhaps in order to make it easier to consume, torture, and exploit them), and we find that most forms of skepticism toward ascriptions of various mental qualities to animals are grounded in a prior decision to objectify them, a prior decision to regard them from a perspective that is as detached from them as possible. Later I will critique the whole epistemological framework that advances precisely the notion of “objectivity” I just mentioned. For now, though, the basic point is that any objectification (or de-subjectification) of a living body is Cartesian metaphysics in disguise. The notion of the body as “thoughtless” is the counterpart of the notion of thought as disembodied; one can only “de-mind” the body if one also dis-embodies the mind. This is why it is impossible to deny subjectivity to animals without assuming an essentially Cartesian metaphysical (and epistemological) framework. To deny subjectivity to animals is to regard them, as Descartes did, as mere machines; regardless of how complex we admit such “machines” to be, to regard them as such is nonetheless to regard them as mere objects, as entities deprived of true subjectivity. But to regard any living body as entirely devoid of interiority is precisely to separate interiority from the living body (and thus is not really even to regard the living body as a living body). In this way, all forms of reductionism – all claims that a living body is not “minded” but is rather just a mechanism – reinstate dualism. As Merleau-Ponty concludes, “the notion of the animal-machine…is at the heart of Cartesianism.”

\[400\] Nature, p. 198.
I began this chapter with some reflections on the dogs with whom I have shared most of my life, Sammy and Dexter. Most humans who have lived with dogs know what it is like to enjoy deep bonds of intimacy and affection with a non-human being; they know what it is like to be recognized and affirmed in the eyes – or in the bark, or in the wag of a tail – of an *other*. Only a phenomenological account of subjectivity can make sense of this, as only a phenomenological account of subjectivity can make sense of how subjectivity or alterity in general emerges in experience, and a phenomenological account of subjectivity seems logically inconsistent with any essentialist or speciesist circumscription of subjectivity. So, if (following Merleau-Ponty) we have rediscovered subjectivity in behavior or in the living body, then in order to deny subjectivity to animals we must also deny behavior or living bodies to them, which is plainly absurd. It seems, however, that there is one last rearguard option available to the inclined skeptic, and it is the one I mentioned above: is it not perhaps the case that Sammy and Dexter were merely “*anthropomorphic*” constructions of my own making? Is it not perhaps the case that the qualities I affirmed in them were merely anthropomorphic *projections* of my own qualities? Given the apparent differences between humans and many animals, one might say that “attributions” of most particular mental “states,” characteristics, or capacities to animals – especially those that we presumably know for sure are ones that we humans distinctly possess – are mere “anthropomorphic projections.” To impart any “human” or “human-like” characteristic to an animal is to “anthropomorphize” that animal; it is to “project” into the behavior of the animal human faculties and characteristics.

So, were my experiences of Sammy and Dexter merely infested with sentimental, anthropomorphic “projections”? Had I let my “emotions” or “feelings” get the better of me and lead me to commit an egregious error in induction, a deeply flawed analogical inference, that sin
against reason we call an “anthropomorphism fallacy”? As Merleau-Ponty argues, such an interpretation or dismissal of such experiences overlooks (and indeed begs) the very question that needs to be answered: what is it that prompts such a supposed projection in the first place? How are we to account for why this body – or for why any-body – emerges for us as an Other? Not only are such charges of “anthropomorphism” or “projection” usually *ad hoc*, but Merleau-Ponty also argues that they are explanatorily incoherent. Charges of projection do not (and cannot) explain *how* such supposed “projections” are possible (or *why* they happen in the first place), yet to provide such an explanation is in fact to neutralize the skepticism that the a notion of an “anthropomorphism fallacy” is intended to legitimate. As Merleau-Ponty puts it:

Nothing would be served by saying that it is we, the spectators, who mentally unite the elements of the situation to which behavior is addressed in order to make them meaningful, that it is we who project into the exterior the intentions of our thinking, since we would still have to discover what it is, what kind of phenomenon is involved upon which this *Einfühlung* rests, what is the sign that invites us to anthropomorphism.\(^{401}\)

In short, what we might call “projectionism” cannot explain why we experience animals (or any living beings, including humans) to have the mental characteristics that we take them to have without begging the question or plummeting into the abyss of an explanatory infinite regress. “Every theory of projection,” Merleau-Ponty later reiterates, “…presupposes what it tries to explain, since we could not project our feelings into the visible behavior of an animal if something in this behavior itself did not suggest the inference.”\(^{402}\) If a skeptic alleges that an interpretation of a form of animal behavior is a kind of “projection,” we are right to pose the following question: what *occasioned* this projection in the first place? If the skeptic’s claim is not groundless, he/she must explain the possibility (or ground) of such a “projection,” but the possibility of such a projection actually renders the skeptic’s position incoherent, for we cannot explain what prompts such a projection in the first place by appealing to prior projections

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\(^{401}\) *The Structure of Behavior*, p. 125.
\(^{402}\) Ibid., p. 156.
without reasoning in a circle or lapsing into an explanatory infinite regress. We see, then, that Merleau-Ponty’s criticisms of “projectionism” – that is, his criticisms of a general skepticism toward what is usually called “anthropomorphism” – parallels his criticisms of analogical accounts of our knowledge of other minds in general, for indeed such supposed “anthropomorphic projections” are typically conceptualized as particular kinds of (faulty) analogies.

Merleau-Ponty’s argument here, then, is this: if it is possible for us to “project” ourselves into animals, we must have certain experiences with animals that motivate such projections in the first place, but these experiences cannot themselves be explained – or explained away – as mere “projections,” for such an explanation begs the question or issues in an infinite regress. In other words, the skeptical charge that any attribution of mindedness to animals is a mere projection invites the question: what occasioned such a “projection” in the first place? How is it possible for us to “project” ourselves into animals? Such a “projection” of human features into animal behavior (if it does not spring out one’s head utterly randomly or ex nihilo) could only be occasioned by an experience that precisely “invites us to anthropomorphism.” Thus, the possibility or phenomenal ground of such a projection actually renders the skeptic’s position incoherent, for a “projection” of human features into animal behavior can only be occasioned by an experience that evokes the presence of these features in the first place, but then such a “projection” cannot be understood fundamentally as a mere “projection” at all without lapsing either into logical circularity or an explanatory infinite regress. “Projectionism” begs the question, for it presupposes the very experiences that it is supposed to explain (or explain away): an experience of animal behavior is explained (or explained away) as an instance of “anthropomorphic projection,” but this anthropomorphic projection is itself only possible on the
basis of an experience of behavior that, again, “invites us to anthropomorphism,” that is, an experience of a form of behavior that is precisely ‘anthropo-morphic’ in certain ways, which is precisely what “projectionism” is supposed to explain in the first place. Thus, skeptical “projectionism” is circular (and self-defeating) insofar as the experiences or ascriptions it wishes to dismiss as mere “projections” are only possible on the basis of the very kinds of experiences it is supposed to explain (away) as such. The projectionist thesis is that any time I take Sammy or Dexter to have certain mental characteristics or personality traits I might only be projecting my own mental characteristics or personality traits into them, but what supports this explanatory thesis concerning why I regard Sammy or Dexter in such ways? It surely must be demonstrated rather than merely asserted. Yet, one cannot explain the experiential or motivational genesis of such projections by simply saying they are grounded in some tendency we have to project ourselves into others, for that is patently circular: one thus asserts that we project ourselves into others because we are prompted to do so as a result of some tendency to project ourselves into others, which is quite like saying, as Nietzsche observes, that opium causes sleep “‘by virtue of a faculty,’ namely the virtus dorimitiva,” an answer that “belong[s] in comedy.”

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On the other hand, if we attempt to rescue projectionism from circularity, we confront an infinite regress. Suppose I say that my dog is “sad,” and a skeptic replies that this apparent sadness is (or might merely be) a projection on my part. What, then, prompted this projection of sadness on my part? Such a “projection” of sadness can only follow upon an experience of my dog that suggests “sadness,” but this experience that “suggests sadness” must ex hypothesi be another projection on my part, and this projection will have to follow from a prior experience that suggests it, and this prior experience will also have to be a projection, and so on ad

Thus, in order to account for why we “project” familiar human features into non-human animals we cannot appeal to prior experiences that would be reducible to mere projections, and so there must be some primary layer of lived experience that informs them, a relatedness with non-human others as others that is prior to, and the foundation of, veridical and erroneous perceptions or interpretations of behavior alike. This infinite regress directs us to a primary experience that cannot be explained away as a “projection”; it shows us what Merleau-Ponty argues time and again: lived experience is the ultimate foundation of what we call truth and knowledge.

Now, there is a different reply to skepticism concerning “other species of mind” that ought to be considered, one that I think is tempting to many contemporary philosophers and scientists. We might maintain that ascriptions of subjectivity (or of particular mental characteristics) to animals are justified as “inferences to the best explanation,” or as the best explanatory accounts of various forms of observed behaviors. This view is well represented by Colin Allen and Marc Bekoff in their book *Species of Mind*. Allen and Bekoff argue that we are right to think that many animals have rich conscious/cognitive lives, or that many animals have the mental characteristics and capacities we attribute to them in everyday experience, for our attributions of such characteristics and capacities – in particular, our attributions of “higher-order mental states” (e.g. emotions, conscious intentionalities, capacities for certain forms of reasoning or self-directed activity, perhaps even languages, and so on) – to animals are, in principle, no different from other explanatory, scientific hypotheses or posits: they are justified as inferences to the best explanation of observed phenomena. Thus, Allen and Bekoff write that “…mental-
state attributions, when justified, are justified by inference to the best explanation,”
and it seems that their view is one that is shared by many contemporary ethologists and philosophers of science.

However, I think it is clear that this view falls prey to the same problems we have just addressed, and even to problems we already discussed in the previous chapter. That is, this view actually concedes and reproduces the very premises of the kind of skepticism it is supposed to answer. On this view, our primary knowledge of “animal minds” – our access to the conscious lives of non-human others – is always only inferential, but we have already seen that this kind of view is deeply flawed. Indeed, this view is really just a version (or an inversion) of the skeptical “projection” thesis, and thus it falls prey to the same basic problem: the “inference to the best explanation” explanation of how we may claim to “know” that non-humans are “minded” in various ways begs the question concerning our fundamental access to non-human minds. That is, Merleau-Ponty’s main objection to the skeptical charge that attributions of various mental qualities to animals are mere “projections” also applies to Allen and Bekoff’s view: if we have reason to ask the skeptic “what invites us to anthropomorphism?,” then we also have reason to ask Allen and Bekoff “what invites us to infer intentionality?” One can only “infer” intentionality from apparently intentional behavior, and this means that one never first “infers” intentionality (or any other mental state) at all. An inference to intentionality can only follow from a prior experience that suggests intentionality. Allen and Bekoff’s view lapses into

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405 It is worth noting that Allen and Bekoff are influenced by Daniel Dennett’s view that attributions of intentionality to animals are “intentional stances” that we take toward them: hypotheses we formulate about them in order to predict their behavior. For Dennett, ascriptions of intentionality to animals are only tools for scientific explanation. Allen and Bekoff’s view is quite similar to Dennett’s, and I think that both views are therefore susceptible to the same objections. Neither Allen and Bekoff nor Dennett, for instance, realize that the primary “intentional stances” we take toward animals are not propositional, third-personal ascriptions. For Allen and Bekoff’s discussion of Dennett, see Species of Mind, chapter 6.
circularity because one must implicitly presuppose intentional behavior in order to draw an inference to intentional behavior. Indeed, “inferences to the best explanation” are really just rationally justified “projections.” Thus, Allen and Bekoff accept the skeptic’s basic idea of “projection” but contend that certain “projections” are warranted; they agree that we often “anthropomorphize” animals yet simply contend that such “anthropomorphisms” are often inductively cogent.

Allen and Bekoff are surely correct that many so-called anthropomorphic ascriptions are inductively warranted. The problem, however, is that such a notion of anthropomorphic projection cannot account for how or why we originally take non-humans to have various mental qualities. We have already seen why we cannot regard analogical or inductive inference to be the source of our knowledge of human minds, yet logically there is no reason to suppose that matters are any different with respect to our knowledge non-human minds; indeed, it is only an arbitrary double standard that supports the notion that we may admit direct access to human minds yet must only regard our access to non-human minds as indirect. Allen and Bekoff’s view that we are justified in claiming that, say, a dog is “happy” or “ashamed” because it provides the best explanation of the dog’s behavior is no different from the sort of view (advocated by A.J. Ayer and others) that we are justified in claiming that a human being is, say, in pain because we infer it analogically or because the hypothesis of such a pain-state is the best explanation for why this human being is crying, screaming, moaning, writhing, clutching some part of his/her body, begging for the torture to stop, and so on. We have already seen the problems with such an account, so I will not entirely rehearse them here. The point, then, is to ask why, if we do not accept such an account of our primary knowledge of human “mental states,” we ought to accept such an account of our primary knowledge of non-human mental states. In general, if we admit
that we have direct access to the subjectivities of human others because their subjectivities are already enmeshed with their living bodies or behaviors, then we must also admit that the subjectivities of non-humans are likewise accessible directly (that is, non-inferentially) through their living bodies or behaviors. I hasten to underscore here that I do not wish to deny that there are often important differences between humans and non-humans any more than I wish to deny that there are often important differences between different kinds of non-humans, differences that indeed contribute to the inexpugnable ambiguity of intersubjective existence, an ambiguity that means that mistaken judgments of non-human others are always possible just as much as it means that mistaken judgments of human others are always possible. My point, however, is that there is no difference in the essential ontological or phenomenological structures that make our “knowledge” of human and non-human subjectivities possible, that the structures that make our experiences of human Others and of other Others (qua “Other”) possible are the same structures.

We might say, then, that “intersubjectivity” is “univocal,” since intersubjectivity is intercorporeity and since, no matter how different many living bodies in the world may be from one another, being a living body is nonetheless univocal. There is nothing “totalizing” about such a notion, for as I alluded above (and as I hope to further clarify in the following chapters), “univocity” is far from inconsistent with radical difference or pluralism, and indeed any truly non-dualistic ontology is one that affirms both at the same time, or rather one that recognizes that they are already one and the same. If being a living body is univocal despite the often significant differences between living bodies, then being a “mind” or a “subject” is univocal as well, such that, though there are minds quite different from our own, it cannot be the case that how we access other human minds is fundamentally different from how we access other-than-human minds. This is a point to which I will return toward the end of this chapter, but I think it is
relevant to mention it here. There may be significant difference between living bodies, hence significant differences between minds, yet nonetheless such differences cannot be cleaved into oppositions lest we retreat to dualism. This means that we cannot regard our intersubjective relations with fellow humans to be *essentially*, structurally different from our intersubjective relations with non-humans, such that our supposed knowledge of non-human minds would be either enabled by categorically different conditions or processes or beset by categorically different problems. In short, any human/animal dualism is a repetition of mind/body dualism, and we assume human/animal dualism whenever we assume that our lived experience or “knowledge” of another human mind is *fundamentally* different from our lived experience or knowledge of a non-human mind. As I mentioned earlier, Merleau-Ponty’s (and Husserl’s) general account of intersubjectivity logically must apply to non-humans just as much as it applies to humans. Merleau-Ponty (and Husserl) recognized this, and what remains to be done is to extrapolate and heed the consequences of this truth rigorously.

So, we see that Allen and Bekoff’s proposed solution to the “other species of mind problem” presupposes the thesis that generates this very problem (as well as the classical problem of other minds) in the first place: what we might call the *privacy* of consciousness thesis. That is, their inference to the best explanation solution to the “problem of animal minds” is (like any inductive solution to the problem) only cogent if we assume that the conscious lives of (animal) others are utterly “private,” for only if the conscious lives of (animal) others are utterly private are they only accessible inductively or inferentially. Allen and Bekoff recognize that the “privacy of consciousness thesis” poses an unavoidable challenge to all beliefs or knowledge claims about the conscious lives of animals, and they offer a clever reply to this challenge:
…If all “private” means is “not directly sensible,” quarks are private phenomena too. Scientific understanding of quarks is based on what philosophers call inference to the best explanation: the selection of the most plausible hypothesis among competing alternatives for the best explanation of observable phenomena.\footnote{406 Ibid., p. 53.}

In other words, if “privacy” just means “not knowable by direct acquaintance,” then the “privacy” of an entity or phenomenon does not justify skepticism because “knowledge” does not necessarily entail “knowledge by direct acquaintance.” Epistemic justification does not require verification by direct acquaintance. If “privacy” only means “not directly sensible,” then the skeptic’s definition of privacy covers quarks as well as other consciousnesses. Thus, if we are not skeptics about subatomic particles, then neither should we be skeptics about other (non-human) consciousnesses. This reply to skepticism, however, is only tenable if we accept what we already know to be the very untenable premise that consciousness is entirely private or self-enclosed. Allen and Bekoff do not explicitly argue that consciousness is private or completely divorced from phenomenal, material presence, but they either knowingly concede this premise or inadvertently sneak it in through the back door, so to speak. Allen and Bekoff’s clever reply to the “privacy of consciousness thesis” actually leaves it intact; they only dispute the conclusion one should draw from it. In other words, Allen and Bekoff’s view concedes the point that the conscious lives of others are as radically inaccessible as the quarks inside protons and neutrons, and though we have already seen how Merleau-Ponty’s reply to this claim goes, such a claim is almost too counterintuitive to warrant a reply. Allen and Bekoff might be correct to insist that there are certain things we can know without having direct perceptual access to them, but they are wrong to assume we cannot have direct perceptual access to other minds (whether human or non-human, for again, logical consistency demands that they be committed to explaining our access to the former in the same manner that they explain our access to the latter). On this score,
even though Allen and Bekoff reject behaviorism, their whole argument is consistent with, and even seems to concede, the behavioristic notion that interiority is a “black box” hidden behind observable behavior; while the behaviorist argues that we should restrict ourselves only to exteriority (observable behavior), Allen and Bekoff argue that we can legitimately infer interiority “behind” exteriority. As we have seen, however, it is necessary that we have direct access to other minds if we are to have any access to them at all. It is, in fact, necessary that we fundamentally know others by direct acquaintance.

To be clear, when ascriptions of mental characteristics to non-humans are dismissed as “anthropomorphic projections” they are being dismissed as particular kinds of bad analogies or hasty inductions: the charge is that we hastily impute certain qualities to animals because of similarities we perceive between them and ourselves. As we have seen, however, our immediate, lived experiences of others are not based on induction; our primary knowledge of others is not inferential or mediated by analogical reasoning. Thus, Allen and Bekoff attempt to refute such skepticism in a misguided way by arguing that many of the claims about animals that get dismissed as “projections” are in fact warranted inferences. This is misguided because such “claims” are fundamentally neither projections nor inferences at all. If “ascriptions” of mental characteristics to animals are not fundamentally analogical (or, broadly speaking, inductive) inferences, then it is misdirected to critique them as such: it is misdirected to regard them as “bad analogies” or “weak inductions”; however, this means that it is likewise misdirected to defend them as good analogies or strong inductions as well (as Allen and Bekoff do). An attempt to refute skepticism in such a way concedes too much to it; it buys into the skeptic’s flawed understanding of interiority or intersubjectivity, for it assumes, as does the skeptic, that our access
to other interiorities is fundamentally inferential or that our “knowledge” of others can only be justified inductively, which is the very assumption that Merleau-Ponty shows to be false.

The failure of Allen and Bekoff’s supposed solution to what they call the “other species of mind problem,” along with the inherent logical incoherence of the skepticism their view is supposed to solve, throws into relief what Merleau-Ponty has already shown us: we do not “know” other minds (human and non-human alike) inferentially. The inferential stance of a scientist is an abstraction, a later-order posture of detachment that one adopts toward the phenomena of non-human life. We primarily “know” others pre-reflectively through our living, behaving bodies. We know others through the antepredicative (pre-inferential) encroachment of our perceptual capacities, corporeal schemas, motor projects, and bodily affects. We do not, for example, primarily “attribute” intentionality to behavior if by “attribute” we mean formulating a reflective, predicative, perhaps analogical judgment that it is intentional: we immediately, directly see behavior as intentional; “behavior” as such is always already, irreducibly intentional, and this why Merleau-Ponty’s account of our experiences of animal behavior is no different from his basic account of our experiences of human behavior:

The gestures of behavior, the intentions which it traces in the space around the animal, are not directed to the true world or pure being, but to being-for-the-animal, that is, to a certain milieu characteristic of the species; they do not allow the showing through of a consciousness, that is, a being whose whole essence is to know, but rather a certain manner of treating the world, of “being-in-the-world” or of “existing.”

To “behave” is to perform some sort of style of being-in-the-world, some form of subjectivity; it is to “sing the world” through a “kinetic melody” of gestures and passions; it is to be polarized toward a milieu, an intersubjective field of practical tasks, exigencies, and possibilities.

Knowledge of “other minds” (whether human or otherwise) is grounded in the lived imbrications

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407 The Structure of Behavior, p. 125-126.
408 Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, p. 187.
409 Merleau-Ponty, Structure of Behavior, p. 155.
and synergies of corporeal schemata, in the primordial “system Self-others-things.” No matter how distantly or radically “Other” another mind may be, other minds are always encountered “in” the flesh. Other minds are always already forms of flesh, always already “the flesh of my flesh.”

So, I return again to my childhood dog, Sammy: did he really love any of us? He cried and yelped every time I left for school in the morning, and when I arrived home from school in the afternoon he usually raced in a figure-eight circuit around the living room and dining room, climbed on top of me, licked my face furiously, and resisted my efforts to pry him away and settle him down. He shared our company nearly every hour of the day and would often protest being sequestered from us in another part of the house. So, did he love my parents and I? I am sure that he did, but is my certitude warranted? Do the exterior appearances in this case really indicate the interiority we could not help but perceive “in” them? I am sure that they do, and I am sure about this for same reasons I am sure about pretty much anything. I will return specifically to the topic of love toward the end of this chapter, but as Merleau-Ponty suggests, my confidence in (or putative knowledge of) the loving regards of others is grounded in my pre-reflective engagements with them, in the manifold envelopments of our bodily intentionalities and affects through which we learn what love is and through which subjectivity in general is constituted, enacted, and known as such prior to reflective predication. The expressive intentions or gestures that others address to me are immediately, irreducibly intelligible as such. Behavior is simply an irreducible modality of meaning in the world; it is the very vehicle of selfhood and otherness. Thus, “other persons...are not there as minds, or even as “psychisms”, but such for example as we face them in anger or love – faces, gestures, spoken words to which our own respond without thoughts intervening...”

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John Searle\textsuperscript{413} seems to argue for much the same phenomenological and even refreshingly “commonsensical” point in his paper “Animal Minds,”\textsuperscript{414} yet while I agree with his conclusion, I think the argument he provides in favor of it is considerably flawed, and so it may serve as another good example of how even anti-skeptical arguments often reproduce the premises of those skeptics or anthropocentrists they critique. Searle begins this paper as follows:

I have said that many species of animals have consciousness, intentionality, and thought processes. Now why am I so confident about that? Why, for example, am I so confident that my dog, Ludwig Wittgenstein, is conscious? Well, why is he so confident that I am conscious? I think part of the correct answer, in the case of both Ludwig and me, is that any other possibility is out of the question. We have, for example, known each other for quite a while so there is not really any possibility of doubt. Philosophically speaking the interesting question is why in philosophy and science we have so much trouble seeing that such sorts of answers are the correct ones?...Why have so many thinkers denied what would appear to be obvious points, that many species of animals other than our own have consciousness, intentionality, and thought processes? Think for a moment how counterintuitive such denials are: I get home from work and Ludwig rushes out to meet me. He jumps up and down and wags his tail. I am certain that (a) he is conscious; (b) he is aware of my presence (intentionality); and (c) that awareness produces in him a state of pleasure (thought process). How could anyone deny either a, b, or c? As his namesake might have said, “This is how we play the language game with ‘certain.’”\textsuperscript{415}

I do, of course, agree with Searle here, but I should mention that there are a number of points that he makes in this article with which I do not agree. It would be beyond the scope of this chapter for me to articulate and critique all of the details of his argument, but in the end, I do not think that Searle soundly explains the basis of our confidence in the existence of animal minds (which I think Merleau-Ponty does soundly explain). So, I agree with Searle’s conclusion. I especially agree (as Searle suggests here) that the burden of proof should be shifted away from those who attribute minds to non-humans and onto the shoulders of skeptics. However, I find significant flaws in the argument Searle presents in support of this conclusion. Perhaps the most significant

\textsuperscript{413} Notably, Searle’s famous “Chinese room” thought experiment appropriately refutes behaviorist and functionalist accounts of consciousness at the apparent cost of reinstating a dichotomy between interiority and exteriority, or between first-personal and third-personal modes of givenness, and so an examination of the flaws in that argument would also be germane to the present discussion, but here I am choosing to focus my attention on an essay in which he specifically addresses “the problem of animal minds.”


\textsuperscript{415} Ibid., p. 206-207.
point from which I depart is his claim that behavior is “simply irrelevant” to our confidence in, or putative knowledge of, animal mindedness. By now it ought to be obvious why this claim is wrong. As Merleau-Ponty demonstrates, behavior is the foundation of our knowledge of animal minds, though not for reasons that others have traditionally supposed. That is, our knowledge of animal minds is not primarily based upon inferring mindedness from behavior. Searle rejects this view as well, but concludes that behavior is therefore irrelevant to such knowledge. This conclusion does not follow, but Searle seems to think that it does because he fails to appreciate the phenomenological foundation of our “knowledge” of human and non-human otherness and thus the necessary, constitutive role of the body in such knowledge. That is to say, Searle rejects the relevance of behavior to our knowledge of non-human subjectivities because he assumes (as do Cartesians and behaviorists alike, though he claims to be neither) a divorce between subjectivity and behavior. As we have seen, if we reject Cartesian dualism and its reductive counterparts (as Searle himself explicitly does), then consciousness must be understood neither as something “housed” or hidden “within” a body (like a pilot in a ship) nor as something reductively equivalent to the body (as logical behaviorism maintains), but rather as something that is itself thoroughly embodied such that it cannot be understood as belonging entirely to either side of the classical subject/object divide; it is and must be the living, behaving body (which is neither a pure subject nor a brute object) – or rather it must be an involution or “pairing” of behaviors or corporeal intentionalities prior to reflection and predicative inference – that founds our knowledge of other minds (human and non-human alike) and that enables us to make particular reflective inferences about the minds of others.

416 Ibid., p. 216.
Searle does not think that our confidence in animal mindedness is based upon analogical induction from behavior, but while he ought to realize that no form of inductive inference can ground our basic knowledge of the existence of other minds (for such inductive inferences tacitly presuppose a lived, carnal, pre-inferential exposure to others), he opts instead for a different argument from analogy, according to which we know that animals are minded because “if the animal has a causally relevant structure similar to our own, then it is likely to produce similar mental states in response to similar stimuli.” Thus, Searle concludes that “the grounds on which we found our certainty that animals are conscious is not that intelligent behavior which is the same or similar to ours is proof of consciousness, but rather that causal structures which are the same or similar causal structures to ours produce the same or similar effects.”\(^{417}\) Like all arguments from analogy, however, Searle’s gets things precisely backwards; he “puts the cart before the horse,” so to speak, for we would have no basis for even supposing a “causal structure” to be a relevant indication of subjectivity if we were not already, prior to such an objective identification and analysis of such a structure, acquainted with subjectivity or otherness as such: it is not, for example, my objective knowledge that another being has a nervous system akin to my own that founds my knowledge of that being as a genuine other, for the relevance of a nervous system (or of any other causal structure) can register for me as such only after I am acquainted with what subjectivity is, or only after I am perceptually exposed to alterity, or only on the condition of my lived relations with others (relations that enable me to engage in any manner of reflection at all). We first come to know that certain entities are “other minds” only through lived experience, and it is only later that we perhaps investigate the causal, physiological substrata that might play a role in realizing them as such. Indeed, why should I recognize, say, a nervous system and not a circuit

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\(^{417}\) Ibid., p. 217.
board or a piece of wood as “causally relevant” to subjectivity? To claim that we know that a particular being is minded because it has a nervous system, and then to claim that we know that a nervous system is causally relevant to “having” or being a mind (but that, say, a circuit board or piece of wood is not) because most of the minded beings we encounter in the world have nervous systems, is to argue in a circle. The only way to break out of such a vicious circle – that is, the only way to make sense of the fact that a “causal structure” (like a nervous system) can even show up as a “relevant” objective indication of subjectivity in the first place – is to suppose that we are already, prior to the objective identification of such a structure, acquainted with subjectivity or alterity as such. Only once we are exposed to the presence of others, or only on the condition that we are already embedded in relations with others, may we subsequently investigate what the physical, causal underpinnings of subjectivity might be, but this means that such an investigation and the facts it yields are secondary or derivative accomplishments, accomplishments that are founded upon, rather than the originary foundation of, our “knowledge” of others. Our primary knowledge of others must therefore be a knowledge that is grounded not by inference or reflective analysis but rather by lived experience, by the webs of relationships with others within which we always already find ourselves.

Finally, another problem for Searle’s account that ought to be mentioned is that it cannot explain how we could legitimately attribute – or why indeed we would even be motivated to attribute – some kind of mindedness to a being whose physiological or “causal” makeup is considerably different from our own. This is a serious problem because presumably an octopus and certain other invertebrates, for example, demonstrate forms of mindedness or intentionality (octopi, for example, have been observed to engage in tool usage and fabrication and other complex forms of problem solving, and generally seem to be responsive to their environments in
many sophisticated and dynamic ways), and yet there is very little about their physiological or “causal” constitution that is analogous to our own. And if we are not comfortable enough with examples of invertebrates, the much-employed hypothetical example of a fully sentient extraterrestrial being with a makeup entirely different from anything with which are familiar here on Earth will do just as well to illustrate this problem. In short, Searle’s account seems to have what in analytic philosophy of mind is termed a “multiple realizability” problem, since it seems untenable to restrict consciousness a priori to any specific physical makeup, yet here Searle only seems willing to permit attributions of consciousness to beings whose physical makeups are akin to ours. Thus, Searle’s reply to the “problem of animal minds” would seem to introduce a kind of chauvinism according to which the only beings that we may ever confidently or legitimately recognize as others are those whose “causal structures” are analogous to our own. Like all forms of chauvinism, this arbitrarily assumes one’s own standpoint as the sole measure according to which something can be said to have a “standpoint” at all.

So, we see that skepticism concerning non-human minds depends upon the same (false) ontological commitments as ordinary skepticism concerning other human minds: in both cases the claim that we can never know whether a body is “minded” depends upon the assumption that mindedness is essentially disembodied. In order to dismantle such skepticism, it is necessary and sufficient to dismantle the dualistic commitments upon which it is based. If subjectivity is necessarily embodied, then the living, behaving body of the Other is not an impregnable barrier to his or her subjectivity or otherness; it is not something I need to “get beyond” or “behind” – indeed, not something into which I must analogically transport myself – in order to apprehend the Other qua Other; it is not an exterior that somehow contains or conceals an entirely separable and private interior, for the living body is neither a pure subject nor a brute object but is rather both
subject and object, which is to say something that is prior to, and the foundation of, the very
distinction between the two. The lived body is precisely that from out which the poles of subject
and object, interiority and exteriority, inward consciousness and outward behavior are abstracted
and later reified as opposed. If we begin from an opposition between subject and object, we will
never be able to explain how I (as a subject) can ever know or even perceive that a body (whether
human or non-human) is minded. If consciousness is pure interiority, then it is by definition
inaccessible from the outside. Again, if interiority and exteriority belonged to mutually exclusive
orders of reality, the “inter” in “intersubjectivity” would be inconceivable.

As we saw in the previous chapters, Merleau-Ponty’s solution is not to begin from a
dualistic subject/object standpoint in the first place, but rather to begin with what is actually
primary: the lived body and its constitutive involvements with other living bodies. If we “reject
the age-old assumptions that put the body in the world and the seer in the body, or, conversely, the
world and the body in the seer as in a box,”418 then we must realize that “interiority” is not quite as
“interior” as it has traditionally been conceived, and that we do not need to infer the presence of an
Other “behind” behavior or a living body any more than we need to infer the presence of an
animating thought “behind” an instance of language: subjectivity and behavior – just like thought
and language – are inseparable yet not superposable. To recall a point discussed in the previous
chapter, “language bears the meaning of thought as a footprint signifies the movement and effort
of a body,”419 and of course Merleau-Ponty also means, or argues elsewhere, that the movement
and effort of a body “signifies” or “bears” subjectivity in precisely the same way that language (or
art) signifies or bears meaning; there surely is a difference between subjectivity and behavior just
as there is surely a difference between language (signifier) and meaning (signified), yet they are

419 Merleau-Ponty, “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,” in Signs, p. 44.
nevertheless intrinsically compresent and co-constitutive. The reflexivity or auto-affection that defines a living body – that is, the self-differentiating or self-signifying sense that a living body has of itself precisely by virtue of its exposure to, or contact with, what is other than itself – just is perception, intentionality, or “interiority” at the foundational level.

It may be replied that this definition of subjectivity is too broad, for while one may grant that every subject must be an embodied subject or a living body, one may yet doubt the converse claim that every living body must be a “subject,” for this would entail that we accord “subjecthood” to a number of forms of life that may not seem to count as such, like termites, clams, sea sponges, amoebas, paramecia, and even plants. My first reply to this concern is one that I made earlier, namely that were we to agree that not all living bodies are “subjects,” we would need to develop a set of criteria to differentiate those living bodies that are subjects from those that are not, and I think that any attempt to do so would be beset by a number of philosophical problems that would be just as difficult and worrisome, and perhaps even more so, than the one that such a set of criteria is supposed to solve in the first place. It is difficult – and I think, in the end, impossible – to conceive of how one could mark such a distinction in a non-question-begging or non-chauvinistic way.

The most important answer to this objection, however, is that Merleau-Ponty shows us that we must give up any framework that takes subjectivity to be disjunct from a manner of bodily being-in-the-world, and for him this means (as we will further see in chapter five) that the typical human manner of being-in-the-world can no longer be privileged as the locus of all meaning and value in existence. If we truly reject Cartesian dualism (along with its reductionistic counterparts), then we must accept that consciousness is essentially incarnate: it is not “in” a body but is a manner of animate, responsive bodily existence itself. Subjectivity is, at the most basic level,
corporeal reflexivity or bodily intentionality. Incarnate consciousness *just is* a living body, which is to say, again, that all living bodies are by definition “consciounesses,” and that there are as many different consciounesses in the world as there are living bodies. A lived/living body is an embodied mind. If “being a subject” simply means “having subjectivity,” then we cannot conceive of a living body that is not in some sense “a subject” unless we somehow separate subjectivity from animate, bodily being-in-the-world. So yes, from the premise that mind and body are necessarily intertwined it follows that all minds are embodied but not that all bodies are minded. However, it *does* follow that all living bodies are “minded,” for a living body *just is* an “embodied mind.” Is, then, a paramecium “a subject”? Yes, because it is a living body and because all living bodies are by definition modes or expressions of subjectivity, but it should be emphasized once again that “subjectivity” is precisely not a monolithic phenomenon, or that there are as many different subjectivities as there are different forms of embodied life. Though speaking of beings as “subjects” remains far too caught up in the very conceptual frameworks that Merleau-Ponty labors so much to dismantle and perhaps already abstracts such beings far too much from the webs of carnal interdependencies that constitute them, if we must use the term, then paramecia are “subjects” and so too are clams and sea sponges, so too are termites and worms, so too are amoebas and bacteria, so too are trees and slime molds. Being a “subjectivity” or an “Other” is simply coterminous with being a living body, and it is for that reason that it may be at once “univocal” and “plural.” If subjectivity is embodied life, then every living body is a form of subjectivity and we thus cannot deny subjectivity to, say, a paramecium without denying it a living body. This is the only conclusion one may consistently draw if one rejects a Cartesian opposition between mind (subject) and body (object). We cannot conceive of a living body that is not in some sense “a subject” unless we were somehow to decouple subjectivity from animate, bodily being-in-
the-world, and that is precisely what Merleau-Ponty proves we cannot do. A living body that is not, at least in some respect, a “subject” or a “mind” is a contradiction in terms.

So far, we have seen not only that a kind of general or “global” skepticism concerning animal mindedness is unjustified but also that skepticism toward attributions of particular mental states, characteristics, or capacities to animals – a skepticism that typically take the form of suggesting that such attributions are merely “anthropomorphic projections,” and which is the most prevalent form of skepticism concerning animal minds that we encounter in our post-Cartesian (yet not nearly post-Cartesian enough) world – is likewise untenable. Of course, as I mentioned earlier, interpretations of behavior may be mistaken, but (as Merleau-Ponty argues) this does not cast doubt on the primary evidence we have of existing with others, the primary evidence we have of being seen and touched by others, of being loved or hated or simply recognized or even ignored by others; indeed, such mistakes presuppose this evidence. Some of these others greet us with a handshake and a smile, and others do so with paws and a tongue. Only a Cartesian conception of “subjectivity” – that is, only the notion that subjectivity is ontologically divorced from, or “hidden” within, the living, behaving body – could motivate or license me to doubt a priori that a dog can express or evidence love and affection just as much as a human Other can, or that I can simply share my life with a canine or non-human Other just as genuinely as I share my life with human Others; in all cases, it is behavior – it is a living body – that immediately, inherently means the love and affection or, in general, the otherness.

However, after everything I have argued thus far, one might yet reasonably wonder in what way or sense we may ever be “mistaken” about the meanings that behaviors (ap)present to us in the world. “But can’t we be wrong?!” someone might shout. Have I not insulated all conceivable ascriptions of subjectivity (or of specific mental characteristics) to animals from
critique or refutation? We have already broached the answer to this objection in the previous chapters, but I now wish to address it more explicitly and in greater depth. The answer to it will require us to reconceptualize how we understand “truth” and falsehood, “knowledge” and “justification”; that is, it will require us to develop (or recall) a phenomenological (re-)conception of these concepts; it will require us to ground such concepts in “our contact with the perceived world which is simply there before us, beneath the level of the verified true and false.”

We can be wrong, but the sense or explanation of how we can be wrong might not be as simple, straightforward, or comforting as one might like; it will surely not be as simple, straightforward, or comforting as the notions of “truth” and “falsehood” to which classical Western epistemology has accustomed us, for we will have to see such things not as static properties of propositions but rather as moments in the infinite perceptual unfolding of the world from which all propositions are derived, and thus as refusing us the sort of epistemic security or closure we might ever hope to attain through our progressive, ever refined efforts to know others or the world.

As we have seen, if ascriptions of subjectivity or of particular mental qualities and capacities to animals are not fundamentally analogical inferences, then it is fundamentally misdirected to critique or dismiss them as flawed or hasty analogies (i.e., as “mere projections”). If analogical inference cannot be regarded as the basis of our knowledge of other minds (whether human or non-human), and if therefore we cannot appeal to analogical reasoning (or to any form of inductive reasoning) in order to explain or justify our fundamental knowledge of others, it follows that we also cannot appeal to analogical or inductive reasoning in order refute or criticize the “knowledge-claims” we make about others as well. If we do not fundamentally know the

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421 With the scare quotes here, I intend to indicate that by “knowledge-claim” I do not mean a reflective inference but rather an ascription of subjectivity or of some sort of mental quality to another being through direct perception,
“inner” lives of others inductively – if we do not fundamentally even know things about the inner lives of others inductively – then we cannot criticize “knowledge-claims” concerning the inner lives of others on the basis of inductive reasoning, but this is precisely what skeptics who reject or doubt ascriptions of subjectivity or of specific mental characteristics to non-human entities do when they reject or doubt such ascriptions under the suspicion that they might be “mere anthropomorphisms,” since such skeptics take “anthropomorphism” to involve either an a priori illicit or inductively dubious analogical transference of one’s own subjectivity or mental characteristics to a non-human entity. Moreover, as we have also seen, anti-skeptical inductive justifications of such ascriptions or transferences (such as the approach advocated by Allen and Bekoff) are just as fallacious as skeptical repudiations of them, for they too take them to be reducible to inferences. Contrary to what the words “ascription” or “attribution” might connote here, our “ascriptions” or “attributions” of mental qualities to others (whether human or non-human) are never fundamentally propositions, representations, or inferences, but are rather direct, in-the-flesh perceptions, and it is inappropriate either to critique or defend them in a way that conceptualizes them otherwise. Is it, then, possible to critique or defend them at all? As I will elaborate below, the answer is yes, but doing so requires a phenomenological reorientation of what “truth” and “falsehood” and “justification” mean: the kind of “knowledge” we acquire of the world through everyday lived experience, and especially the manner in which we know others, demands that we reformulate what we mean when we say our “beliefs” about reality are “true” (or through an experience or act of consciousness in which one immediately lives or takes oneself to “know” that the being in question possesses subjectivity or a certain mental quality. The sense in which it is a “claim” is the sense in which my consciousness “makes a claim” to, say, the figure I now see in a store window being a mannequin; of course, this figure could turn out to be a real person, but I do not “infer” that the figure in the display window is a mannequin: I perceive a mannequin, and this perception inherently impresses a certain kind of non-propositional, pre-inferential claim on something in the world. In this sense, by “knowledge-claim” – and also by “ascription” or “attribution” – I mean what Husserl has in mind when he speaks of “fulfilled” or “unfilled” intentional acts of consciousness, which are terms I use below.
“false”) or “justified”; it demands that we understand “truth” and “justification” in terms of an ever-open process of what Husserl calls “verification” through our continual perceptual engagements with things and others.

So, the issue I have just posed is this: what are we to make of the strong intuition that we can be wrong about the inner lives of others (and especially about the inner lives of non-human others)? Do not my (and Merleau-Ponty’s) arguments imply that we can never be wrong? Of course, it is possible to be mistaken about the mental lives of others, both human and non-human. It would be absurd to deny this given ordinary lived experience, and indeed to deny it would be inconsistent with any commitment to the existence of true alterity, for if I may never be wrong about the minds of others, then either others would be nothing more than mere constructs of my own mind or their subjectivities would be exhaustively, transparently on display in the world, and we have already seen that the solipsism of the former notion and that the reductive behaviorism of the latter notion are equally unacceptable (and are indeed two sides of the same erroneous ontological framework); neither alternative is consistent with an experience of alterity. So, does it not appear here to be the case that I am trying to “have my cake and eat it too,” that is, on the one hand to allow for the obvious fact that we may be (and often are) wrong about the minds of others yet, on the other hand, to refute any conceivable demonstration that we are ever wrong and, in particular, to insulate any ascriptions of “human” mental qualities or capacities to non-humans from criticism? Indeed, in what sense at all can we be “wrong” about the mental lives of others if our beliefs about them are not to be regarded as false, or perhaps as hastily drawn, inferences? For that matter, how can we ever be “right” about the mental lives of others if we cannot be wrong about them in the sense just described?
As I have suggested, to answer this problem or objection we have to turn to (or recall) the general phenomenological account of truth and falsehood (and justification). What I have just articulated only appears to be a problem, or the objections I have just posed to myself only have weight, if one’s basic, paradigmatic model of falsehood is a failure of propositional correspondence, yet phenomenology shows that the correspondence (or failure of correspondence) between a proposition and a mind-independent state of affairs is not in fact the primary form or valence of “truth” (or of “falsehood”), for below the level of propositional correspondence is the movement through which things and others emerge into presence and meaning in the world, and below the level of propositional knowledge is “knowledge by acquaintance,” or knowing things and others through the unfolding of immediate, lived experience, and these have their own modes of “truth” and “falsehood” and “justification.” On this account, or at this level, “truth” refers to the harmony between our immediate intentional (not “inductive”) expectations and the world’s affordances, and “falsehood” refers to the disappointment or disruption of such expectations. Husserl often refers to the former as “fulfilled” intentions and to the latter as “nullified” intentions; such intentions only come to be either “fulfilled” or “nullified” in the course of lived experience, and our classical definitions of “truth” and “falsehood” are precisely parasitic upon this (never-finished) process of fulfillment or nullification. As Husserl puts it:

…It is of the essence of the physical world that no perception, however perfect, presents anything absolute in that realm; and essentially connected with this is the fact that any experience, however extensive, leaves open the possibility that what is given does not exist in spite of the continual consciousness of its own presence “in person”…It can always be that the further course of experience necessitates giving up what has already been posited with a legitimacy derived from experience. Afterwards one says it was a mere illusion, a hallucination, merely a coherent dream, or the like.422

422 Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, First Book, § 46, p. 102.
An intentional attitude is “fulfilled” when the world’s appearances harmonize with it, and it is “unfulfilled” or “empty” if what is intended is not (yet) presently present but is only presently absent. If what is intended in an unfulfilled intention comes to be fulfilled through the further course of experience – if something that is absent yet intended as present later comes to be present – then Husserl often says that the original intention has become “verified”; that is, it has come to be revealed as “true.” On the other hand, if the world turns out not to cohere with what is intended in an unfulfilled intention – if something that is absent yet intended as present turns out not to be present after all – then the original unfulfilled intention has become “nullified”; that is, it has come to be revealed as “false.” We will recall, for example, that whenever I perceive the front of a building I immediately (non-inferentially) apperceive the (non-flat) back of it: the front of the building is “presently present,” yet just as directly or immediately is the back of the building “presently absent”: never once do I wonder whether what I take be a “real” building might just be a two-dimensional movie prop. Thus, I am intentionally directed toward the front of the building and at the same time I am intentionally directed toward the back of the building, and yet, since the former is present whereas the latter is absent, the intention through which I “posit” the former is “fulfilled” whereas the intention through I “posit” the latter is “unfulfilled,” “empty,” or “unverified”; in order for me to transform my unfulfilled or empty intentional attitude toward the back of the building into one that is precisely “fulfilled,” I must move around the building so as to perceive its back, so as to make what was once absent now present, so as to verify that the building is indeed a three-dimensional building and not merely a movie prop. If the (non-flat) back of the building comes to be disclosed through my perceptual explorations of the building – if my once unfulfilled or empty intention comes to be fulfilled or verified – then I know my original intentional attitude toward it, that my original attitude through which I affirmed the presence of a
“real” building before me, was “true.” On the other hand, if I walk around the building and am shocked to discover that it was just a convincing movie prop after all, then my original intentional attitude toward it, my original attitude through which I affirmed the presence of a “real,” three-dimensional building before me, has turned out to be “false”; it is “nullified” by a new presentation of the world and thus supplanted by a new fulfilled intention on my part. On this account, “falsehood” is a moment in the world’s appearance to me in which the world has upset or failed to cohere with my immediately intended expectations of it.

It is in this way that Husserl (and that phenomenologists in general, including Merleau-Ponty) conceptualize “truth” and “error”: “truth” and “error” are fulfilled and unfilled, “verified” and “nullified” immediate intentions of consciousness, or moments of a continual process of phenomenal unfolding, before they are ever properties of propositions; indeed, to conceptualize truth and falsehood as properties of propositions is already to have abstracted them from the unfolding of lived experience, from the ways in which we come to “know” the world in and through our ceaseless dialectical exchanges with it, from the ways we come to know what is or is not real through riskily committing ourselves to reality – riskily “plunging ourselves into the world”423 – and letting reality, or rather letting the further unfolding of lived experience, either reward or rebuff the risk. To use another example, when I think I see my friend across the street, I am immediately intentionally directed toward my friend; something in the world appears to me in such a way that I come to affirm it as my friend, that I “intend” it as “my friend over there,” that I am directed toward it in the mode of “that-is-my-friend-over-there.” Yet, the person I take to be my friend is quite some distance from me, and his body is not directly turned toward me, so it

423 I am borrowing and modifying this phrase from Merleau-Ponty. See The Visible and the Invisible, p.38-39. This chapter of The Visible and the Invisible, “Reflection and Interrogation,” is also one of the main places where Merleau-Ponty elaborates his notion of “interrogation” (which I have already mentioned and will mention again below) and his phenomenological account knowledge and philosophical reflection.
occurs to me that perhaps this person is not my friend after all. I wish to greet him if he is indeed my friend, yet I also fear the embarrassment of turning out to be mistaken. So, I take a risk: I run across the street, approach this person who appears to be my friend, and greet him as if he is my friend: in one possible scenario, he turns toward me and is revealed to be my friend, and thus my original unfilled intention comes to be fulfilled, my original intention is revealed to have been “true”; yet in the other possible scenario, he turns around and is revealed not to be my friend, and thus new appearances upset the intentional attitude I originally had toward him, an aspect of the world reveals that my prior mode of intentional directedness toward it – that my mode of directedness toward the world wherein I affirmed “that-is-my-friend-over-there” – was “false,” and the risk I took is not rewarded. But fundamentally every mode of conscious engagement with the world – especially knowledge – is precisely this sort of risk. Consciousness commits itself to the presence or absence of certain things, and its commitments are either “verified” or disrupted through the successive, ordered flow of appearances. Thus, “truth” or veridical perception is “an open series of concordant explorations” and, as Merleau-Ponty further observes, “we know neither what exactly is this order and the concordance of the world to which we thus entrust ourselves, nor therefore what the enterprise will result in…” yet that is precisely the drama – precisely the risk – through which “truth” and “falsehood” are first encountered, and through which “knowledge” is first achieved, before they are ever raised to the level propositional adequation or “S knows that P” knowledge and justification.

As Merleau-Ponty often puts it, embodied subjectivity constantly “interrogates” the world – constantly puts certain “questions” to it through its practical engagements with it – and the world constantly responds in kind (either positively or negatively) and solicits its further

424 Merleau-Ponty, The Visible and the Invisible, p. 5.
425 Ibid., p. 39.
engagement or interrogation. I am constantly putting questions to the world that the unfolding of the world’s appearances will answer in one way or another, yet these questions also always come from the world itself. This ceaseless dialogue between self and world is the primordial crucible of every “truth” or instance of knowledge. As I will discuss further in the following chapter, phenomenology rejects the classical distinction between (“mere”) appearance and reality. This does not, of course, collapse reality into “mere” appearances because to repudiate the notion that “objective” reality is absolutely beyond all appearances is also to repudiate the correlative notion of “mere” appearances, that is, of appearances that would ever be radically cut off from reality. Thus, “the real is perhaps not obtained by pressing appearances; it perhaps is appearance.”

Indeed, “the real” is appearance, and that means that knowing “the real” is the endless task of letting reality appear in all of the ways it can appear, that what we call “truth” is a moment in the unfolding of appearances, or rather the delimitation of a horizon of possible appearances.

Husserl and Merleau-Ponty both frequently refer to things as horizons for an important reason. Once we reject the classical distinction between being and appearance, the being of a thing does not collapse into “mere” appearances, yet it is also not something absolutely independent of appearances. So, to say that things are constituted as “horizons” is to say that they are ensembles of overlapping possible manners of appearance; it is to say that the being of a thing consists of all of the ways in which it can appear. It is for this reason that, at the fundamental, phenomenological level, “truth” and “falsehood,” “reality” and “illusion” designate horizons of possible appearances, or rather moments in the perceptual unfolding of a thing. Merleau-Ponty articulates this phenomenological account of truth and falsehood, reality and illusion as follows:

…when an illusion dissipates, when an appearance suddenly breaks up, it is always for the profit of a new appearance which takes up again for its own account the ontological function of the first. I thought I saw on

the sands a piece of wood polished by the sea, and it was a clayey rock. The breakup and destruction of the first appearance do not authorize me to define henceforth the “real” as a simple probable, since they are only another name for the new apparition, which must therefore figure in our analysis of the dis-illusion. The dis-illusion is the loss of one evidence only because it is the acquisition of another evidence. If, out of prudence, I decide to say that this new evidence is “in itself” doubtful or only probable… the fact remains that at the moment I speak it incontestably gives itself as “real” and not as “very possible” or probable; and if subsequently it breaks up in its turn, it will do so only under the pressure of a new “reality.” What I can conclude from these disillusions or deceptions, therefore, is that perhaps “reality” does not belong definitively to any particular perception, that in this sense it lies always further on… 427

In order to illustrate this concept of truth (reality)/falsehood (illusion) as phenomenal horizonality, Husserl often likes to employ the example of mistaking a mannequin in a store for a person. 428 I see something that I take to be a person but it is actually a mannequin. My initial intentional attitude toward this object of perception is “false” or later nullified upon the further unfolding of experience: I approach what I take to be a person and realize that it is, in fact, a mannequin. However, the fact that a mannequin may, under certain circumstances, appear (falsely) to be a “real” person is nonetheless constitutive of what it is to be a mannequin: the possibility of appearing as a person is part of a mannequin’s horizon of possible appearances. Likewise, in mistaking a mannequin for a person I also implicitly learn something about what it is to be a person, for presumably persons may also appear to be mannequins as well (as anyone who has ever experienced a skilled mime can attest): the fact that a person may, under certain circumstances, appear to be a mannequin is also part of a person’s horizon of possible appearances, hence part of what it is to be a “person.” The horizons of mannequins and persons, then, overlap (which is why it is possible to mistake one for the other), yet they obviously do not coincide (since they are not one and the same kind of thing, and if they were, we would not be able to “mistake” one for the other in the first place). Knowing what something is, then, is a matter of

427 The Visible and the Invisible, p. 40-41. Italics are Merleau-Ponty’s.
fleshing out its horizon of possible appearances; it is a matter of attempting to disclose it in as many ways or from as many perspectives as possible, a matter of continually engaging with it in order to “verify” those possible manners of its appearance that are “true” and differentiate them from those that are dissimulative. And since, in principle, one can never truly exhaust all of the ways in which something may appear – since the phenomenal horizon of a thing is, like any literal horizon, infinite – it follows that one can never know anything strictly exhaustively; it follows that the more one knows a thing, the more of it there will be to know. So, the main point here is that, before we talk about propositions and “truth-values,” about “inferences” and epistemic justification, “truth” in, say, the case of taking something to be a mannequin is the revelation of the mannequin in experience upon closer inspection, that is, a moment in the unfolding of one’s perceptual engagement with the world, or part of a horizon of possible appearances. Truth, then, is fundamentally not a property or static relation but a moment of a process, a moment of that movement of phenomenality without which nothing would have any being or intelligibility in the first place. “Truth” is the continual harmonization of consciousness with worldly appearances before it comes to be fossilized as a correspondence between a statement and a “state of affairs” or as a relation of “adequation” between “thought” and an “object.” “Truth” is precisely what the continual unfolding of appearances verifies (whereas “falsehood” is what the continual unfolding

429 Though the horizon of a perceptual object is “infinite” it is nevertheless a bounded or finite infinity. That is to say, if a perceptual object can be experienced in a coherent way at all, it cannot appear as just anything (e.g., presumably a mannequin cannot appear as a teacup or an elephant). Thus, like every horizon, an object’s horizon of possible appearances is infinite insofar as one can never exhaustively disclose all of the ways in which it can appear, yet the range of ways in which can appear nonetheless has limits (even if these are blurry). The concept of a “bounded” or “finite” infinity may seem paradoxical, yet notably it is a staple notion in mathematics, and given that Husserl was originally trained as a mathematician, it is not unreasonable to suppose that he was influenced in part by the concept that infinite geometric series have sums and by Georg Cantor’s proof that there are such things as infinities of different sizes. Similarly, a limit in calculus is, like a horizon, a distinct or finite “thing” even though it designates an asymptote, something can only ever be approached yet never reached.
of appearances nullifies), and since the unfolding of appearances is infinite, so too is the task of knowing the world.

What exactly, then, does this have to do with the problem I previously posed? We have already seen that our primary relationships with others – ontologically, perceptually, epistemically – do not consist of reflective, propositional attitudes and inferences; such attitudes and inferences are derivative. “Anthropomorphism” is typically understood as precisely a particular kind reflective stance we might take toward a non-human entity, namely one in which we transpose (i.e., “project”) human characteristics into it. Such a “projection” is really just an analogical inference by another name: I observe a non-human animal behave in a certain manner, I compare its movements with my own and recognize them as similar to my own in a number of salient ways, and consequently I impute to it those mental characteristics or capacities connected to that similar form of behavior in my own case. For a long time, there has been the prevailing suspicion that most such instances of anthropomorphism are fallacious, that anthropomorphism is usually some kind of faulty or hasty analogy. This is why we find that most forms of skepticism concerning attributions of human qualities to non-humans regard such attributions as “anthropomorphic projections,” for the expression “anthropomorphic projection” is, in nearly all such cases, deployed pejoratively to mean “flawed analogy.” We have already seen Merleau-Ponty’s arguments against this notion of anthropomorphic projection, and later I am going to have even more to say about why it is untenable, such that I am not simply going to argue (as, for example, Allen and Bekoff and Frans de Waal do) that “anthropomorphism” is often rationally justified but that, in fact, the very concept of anthropomorphism itself is rationally unjustified, for it is inherently rooted in false, Cartesian philosophical commitments; that will not mean that “ascriptions” of “human” qualities to non-humans are never “correct” or “warranted” (indeed,
clearly I think they often are), but it will mean that we will have to rethink and change how we talk about them, that we will have to rethink, in ways we have already seen and are now further seeing, what it means to “ascribe” a human quality to a non-human being, what it means for such an “ascription” to be “correct,” and ultimately how we even come to regard a quality as “human” – or how we even know that a certain quality is one that we humans possess – in the first place. For now, the point I wish to emphasize is that to regard attributions of human qualities to non-humans as particular types of bad inferences (as skeptics who dismiss such attributions as “anthropomorphic projections” do) is to assume that they are fundamentally inferences in the first place, but they are not, for none of our fundamental attitudes toward or modes of knowing others are inferential. My ascriptions of subjectivity to non-human bodies in lived experience are no more inferential than are my ascriptions of subjectivity to human bodies: they are, again, direct perceptions.

In chapter one I discussed Merleau-Ponty’s arguments for why it is fundamentally fallacious to attempt to establish our knowledge of human others on the basis of analogical reasoning. The same point applies here concerning our knowledge of non-human others: we do not primarily know other subjectivities (whether human or non-human), nor do we primarily even know anything about other subjectivities (whether human or non-human), through analogical inference, and our primary “ascriptions” of subjectivity or of particular mental qualities to others (whether human or non-human) are not inferences; they are not internally formulated representations that I impart to a living body after that living body has presented itself to me, but are rather meanings (ap)perceived directly in that living body itself. So again, the question is this: if ascriptions of subjectivity or of specific mental characteristics to others (whether human or non-human) are not fundamentally inferences, in what sense can they ever be incorrect (or correct)? If
we assume that truth and falsehood are fundamentally matters of propositional correspondence, and if we maintain that our fundamental “beliefs” about others are not in fact propositional (or inferential) at all, then it would follow that such “beliefs” can never be wrong (or right); it would follow that such beliefs would be utterly beyond the pale of truth and falsehood or epistemic justification. Such “beliefs” (if we can call them that) would have to be “non-cognitive,” which is to say they would not admit of any truth-value at all; they would never be false, but also never true. However, we know that the initial assumption just mentioned is false: rather than accept propositional correspondence as the only possible concept or mode of truth, we can (and should) also accept a phenomenological one, namely as the fulfillment of an intention through the continual unfolding of appearances, or as verification through the ever-open acquisition of relevant experiences. As I will argue below, all forms of knowledge are ultimately grounded in “knowledge by acquaintance,” but, even if one were to deny this, it is nonetheless obvious that knowing others is primarily knowing by acquaintance, not propositional or representational knowing or knowing by inference, and the former has its own irreducible standards.

Again, at this level “truth” is the “fulfillment” and “error” is the “nullification” or “disappointment” of an intentional act of immediate consciousness in and through the flow of immediate, direct conscious experience before they are abstracted as a “correspondence” and “non-correspondence” between a statement or representation and a state of affairs: this dynamic,

430 It is notable that one of the prevailing forms of anti-realism in metaethics is non-cognitivism, according to which moral statements are reducible to expressions of “non-cognitive” – i.e., merely emotional – attitudes, and as such are neither true nor false; they simply do not admit of a truth-value at all, because only propositions admit of truth-values, and mere exclamations of, say, attraction and revulsion are not propositions. I hope it will be clear that I am not arguing that our attitudes toward or about other minds are merely “non-cognitive” because they are not propositional or inferential; rather, I am suggesting that phenomenology rejects the opposition between “the cognitive” and the “non-cognitive” (in the senses in which those terms are used in analytic philosophy) in the first place, and that such an opposition must not be interpreted as strictly coextensive with the distinction between the “reflective” and the “pre-reflective,” for there is a sense in which our pre-reflective attitudes toward (or “beliefs” about) others may be said to be “true” or “false,” or rather (to put the point another way) propositions and inferences do not have a monopoly on “truth” (or “falsehood”).
endless process of “verification” – this endless process of either the fulfillment or disruption of our immediate intentiona...inferences of mental characteristics to them happen below the level of propositional, reflective thought and inference. The manner in which we can be perceptually (non-inferentially) wrong about others is analogous to the manner in which we can be perceptually wrong about the non-present features of any perceptual object. As I discussed in the previous chapter, when I see an object from one side and take it to have a back, I do not “infer” that it has a back: I (ap)erceive its back just as immediately and directly as I perceive the side that is now frontally facing me. Of course, in most cases it is true that the object in question has a back, and in certain imaginable scenarios it would be false that it does. But only in rare cases do I draw a reflective inference concerning the rear side of an object I am now seeing, and even if and when do draw such an inference, I do so only after lived experience has “done its work,” so to speak, that is, only after the rear side has been directly (ap)resented to me, or only after I have immediately, pre-reflectively intended the rear side as “present too.” I do not first think to myself a proposition or some sort of reflective truth-claim or knowledge-claim (e.g., “this building has a southern-facing side”). To say that in lived experience I am formulating predicative judgments or inferences concerning the absent profiles of objects is to commit a kind of category mistake: it is to import into pre-reflective, lived experience
abstractions acquired through reflection that, as such, only come later and indeed presuppose pre-reflective, lived experience for their formulation or intelligibility in the first place.

Thus, as Merleau-Ponty writes, “it is true that the lamp has a back, that the cube has another side. But this formula, “It is true,” does not correspond to what is given to me in perception. Perception does not give me truths like geometry but presences.” As Merleau-Ponty suggests, there is indeed a sense in which perception can be veridical or erroneous even though it cannot be understood to be so in the manner of inferential or strictly predicative veracity or error; there is a sense in which “truths” and “falsehoods” are given in experience even though they cannot be understood as propositional truths and falsehoods. And everything that pertains here to our lived, perceptual orientations toward objects applies as well to our lived, perceptual orientations toward others, since others are also directly (ap)presented to us, or are kinds of absences already infused into the presence of a living body. As we have seen, I no more infer the back of, say, a lamp than I infer that a person is angry, sad, or happy. I no more infer that a building now facing me from its northern side also has a southern side than I infer that the person I see across the street is my friend. My perceptions of lamps and buildings can be mistaken just as well as my perceptions of others can be, and though (as we have also discussed) I surely cannot “verify” my perceptions of others in the same way that I can verify my perceptions of ordinary objects, my perceptions in either case are nonetheless genuinely either “true” or “false,” yet they are true or false below the level of propositions or inferences because perceptions themselves are not propositions or inferences. The basic point here, then, is that if there is an intelligible non-propositional or pre-propositional sense or mode of “truth” and “error” – if there is a sense in which perception can be “correct” or “incorrect,” “apt” or “misled” prior to the reflective

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abstraction of propositions from perception – then it is possible to be non-propositionally or pre-propositionally right or mistaken about others (whether human or non-human), and such a notion of truth and error is precisely a phenomenological one.

It is thus possible to say that one can be “wrong” about the interiority of an animal without having to take recourse to some notion that one has “anthropomorphically projected” some characteristic into it, which is a notion one would never use to describe a wrong perception of a human other’s interiority, yet it is only a double-standard to regard such a notion as absurd in the latter case yet not in the former. When I perceive certain entities (regardless of whether they are human or non-human) as minded or as possessing certain mental qualities, I never first infer their minds or mental qualities, and yet such perceptions can intelligibly be “wrong.” So, if we should not say that my mistaken “ascriptions” of mental characteristics to other humans fundamentally or necessarily result from illicit or faulty analogical inferences I make about them, then neither should we say that my mistaken ascriptions of mental characteristics to animals fundamentally or necessarily result from similar illicit or faulty analogical inferences (that is, from some fallacy called “anthropomorphism”).

Even setting aside Merleau-Ponty’s criticisms of the concept that I discussed earlier, given that we now see the patent logical inconsistency involved in regarding our ascriptions of mental characteristics to animals as either potentially or inherently “anthropomorphic projections” (that is, as flawed analogies) while not regarding our ascriptions of mental characteristic to fellow humans in the same light, it is beginning to become apparent that the primary function of the concept of “anthropomorphism” is not to ensure that our ascriptions of certain mental characteristics to animals are not mistaken but rather to ensure that we do not make or ever commit to them at all: in short, its primary function is to restrict certain characteristics to humans;
it has never really been about adhering to sound rules of logical reasoning and epistemic inquiry (since it lacks logical or epistemic merit), and still less has it been about respecting “otherness” (since in most cases it does more to suppress “otherness” than to help affirm it). We are beginning to see that the concept of an “anthropomorphic projection” or of an “anthropomorphism fallacy” has never really been a value-neutral, apolitical cautionary principle against making faulty analogies: it has always been a thoroughly ideological principle, a principle designed and deployed in order to reinforce an ideology we call anthropocentrism, human exceptionalism, or perhaps simply “humanism.” In any case, efforts to restrict certain qualities exclusively to humans, or rather dismissals of attributions of such qualities to non-humans as mere “projections” precisely so that they may be preserved as exclusively human, assumes the same analogical logic – hence the same Cartesian epistemological framework – as efforts to justify attributions of those qualities to non-humans analogically or inductively. In short, we can neither deny attributions of qualities to animals as bad, fallacious analogies (i.e., as “projections”) nor justify them as good analogies or inductions because they are not essentially analogies or inductions at all.

Phenomenology does not abandon the distinction between reality and illusion or between truth and error but rather understands them as moments in the presencing of phenomena before they ever become conceptualized as properties of propositions. If, then, we want to “know” an Other, we have to try “to get to know” that Other; we have to interact with the Other, share experiences with the Other, and most importantly let the Other show itself and be vulnerable to the Other. Every time consciousness extends itself to the world, and especially every time consciousness extends itself to another consciousness, it takes a risk: this person I see on the street who appears to be my friend might be a stranger; this person who is now my friend might one day betray me; this person I love might not love me back, or this romantic relationship I have just
started might not work out; likewise, the dog who I think is my friend might not be; this cat who I think loves me might only tolerate me because I feed him and clean his litter box. Animals who I think mean certain things when they address me might mean nothing of the sort at all. Animals who I take to be “happy” or “sad” or to exhibit any number of emotions or mental states might experience things quite differently than I assume, or they might experience things in ways that such categories fail to capture. I can be wrong about human subjectivities, and I can be wrong about non-human subjectivities. One thing, however, that I cannot be wrong about is that if I ever wish to know other subjectivities at all I must surrender myself to this ever-present possibility that I might always be wrong about them, and that this possibility that I might always be wrong about them is nonetheless not inconsistent with the possibility of ever truly knowing them, and indeed if I could never be wrong about them they would not be others. Yet more importantly, there is nothing fundamentally or essentially different about how I know – or fail to know – human and non-human others.

All living bodies are alterities. In principle, my own subjectivity may never totally coincide with the subjectivity of an Other. Thus, any attitudes we take toward others, or any qualities we directly perceive in others, can always be shown to be wrong or can always be upset in the ongoing drama of conscious (co)existence. Alterity is precisely the ever-present, ineliminable possibility that we can be wrong about others. Indeed, experience as such entails the ever-present possibility that we can be wrong about what we take to be “real” in and through experience: the person I think I see in a department store is actually a mannequin, the person who I think is happy is actually severely depressed, my friend is actually a traitor, my lover no longer loves me but puts up appearances to the contrary, the dog who seems content is actually bored or angry, the cat who seems to want to play is actually telling me he wants new food. I can always be
wrong about the “inner” life of a non-human other just as well as I can be wrong about the “inner”
life of a human other, yet for some reason we tend to think that the former is grounds for
skepticism or some sort of special reticence whereas the latter is not, and in the end there are no
good reasons for such a double-standard. The upshot of all of this is that there is such a thing as
“genuinely” knowing others even though it is not a form of propositional knowledge, and thus
there is such a thing as having “genuinely” true beliefs about others even though these “beliefs”
are not propositional and even though their truth is not some static correspondence between a
mental or linguistic construct and a radically extra-mental or extra-linguistic reality. This is also to
say that there is such a thing as knowing others, or that there is such a thing as having true
“beliefs” about others, even though that knowledge, or even if though the truths of those “beliefs,”
must remain ever open, which of course is what one ought to expect given the fact that others
themselves are ever-open, always in process of becoming who they are, and also given the fact
that alterity is inherently, by definition, inexhaustible, or given that the otherness of any Other
whom I seek to know will always exceed me, that the otherness of any Other will always, like a
horizon, recede from me the closer I get to it, the more I “know” it.

Can I be wrong about human and “animal” others? Yes. Does being wrong about human
or “animal” others primarily or essentially consist in a lack of correspondence between some
proposition, representation, or inference I reflectively formulate in my mind and some radically
extra-mental reality? No. When I perceive another’s subjectivity, I riskily commit myself to it;
when I perceive some specific characteristic in an Other, I riskily commit myself to its presence.
These perceptions or “beliefs” about others are always defeasible. Others – whether humans or
dogs or cats or birds or monkeys or elephants or bears or mice or cockroaches or jellyfish – may
never quite coincide with how I perceive them and may always disrupt or upset my lived
expectations of them. How, then, can I “know” them? In what, sense, then, may I ever be able to determine the extent to which my perceptions or expectations of them are correct? The answer is the same way I know or verify the correctness of any perceptual experience: by having and opening myself to more experiences, by constantly taking the risk of testing my lived attitudes or expectations – the intentions through the world is immediately given to me – against the world itself. When it comes to “knowing” others, we simply need to keep having experiences with them, and we simply need to keep adjusting, refining, revising, reorienting our perceptions of them in the light of such ongoing experiences. Most importantly, we must attempt, as best we can, to let others show themselves as they are, yet always with the painful awareness that the very alterity that allows them to appear as such at the same time prevents them from ever appearing transparently or “without remainder,” that the perspectival limits and distances that allow us to know others at all also constitute the insuperable possibility of “being wrong” about them, the persistent possibility of dissemblance and heartbreak, of also wonder and surprise. Whether we are dealing with human or non-human others, we simply must continue to “flesh out” the horizons of their being, to continue to have experiences with them, or rather to let them show themselves in every conceivable way and always with the humility of knowing that we will never know them, or that they will never show themselves to us, completely, that their subjectivity or selfhood will always recede from our reach, always deny us any kind of epistemic or ontological security, that overrated (and never attainable) value we otherwise call “closure.” “…The experience of disillusion…,” Merleau-Ponty writes, is that “wherein precisely we learn to know the fragility of the real,” and I wish to add here that it is also that wherein we learn the “fragility” or vulnerability of subjectivity, for subjectivity is inseparably tied, through its body, to “the real” and to others.

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432 The Visible and the Invisible, p. 40.
Knowledge – especially knowledge of others – is never impossible, but it is always an infinite task. And, as we have just seen, this is also why knowing others is always filled with risk, but it is also why relationships with others are so rich and meaningful: I can know a particular Other – and I can know, say, a canine Other no differently from the manner in which I know a human Other – but there will always be more of that Other to know, and we should neither demand nor even wish for anything less (or more) than this.

Thus, it is always possible for us to misinterpret animal behavior; it is always possible to “falsely ascribe” certain meanings – say, certain emotions or intentions – to the expressions and gestures of an animal. As we have seen, skepticism about other minds (whether human or otherwise) is implausible and incoherent for a number of reasons, but this does not mean that our interpretations of behavior can never be mistaken; all it means is that such mistaken interpretations are not mere “projections.” If every supposed “projection” follows from a prior (indeed primary) lived experience that elicits it, then lived experience is the bedrock ground of sound and mistaken interpretations of behavior alike, and it is precisely this irreducible, anterior level of lived experience to which we must attend. The most important point – the one that must always be underscored and the one to which we must always return – is that there is a differentiation and attendant enmeshment of living bodies that subtends and founds all predicative comparisons, identifications, and judgments (veridical and mistaken alike).

We are always prone to error, but such is the lot of lived experience. We can always be mistaken about the meanings of animal behaviors, but such mistakes do not legitimate skepticism about “other species of mind.” If the failure of skepticism does not imply the impossibility of error, neither does the possibility of error license skepticism. We can be (and often are) wrong about the interior and intentional lives of animals, but so too are we frequently wrong about the
meanings of human behaviors: miscommunications between human beings – misperceptions of emotions, desires, motivations, beliefs, and intentions – are endemic to human experience. As Merleau-Ponty argues, ambiguity is essential to perception: so long as we are always already outside ourselves and in the world, we can never totally expunge or transcend perceptual ambiguity; and insofar as such ambiguity is essential to perception, it is also essential to our primary access to “truth” and “knowledge,” our primary access to a world and to others. Thus, if miscommunications between human beings do not license skepticism about knowledge of “human minds,” then neither do miscommunications between human beings and non-human beings license skepticism about “other species of mind.” We are involved with animal others – that is, we are involved with animals as others – as deeply and pervasively as we are involved with conspecific (human) others. Indeed, those cases in which we mistakenly impute emotions and intentions to animals only attest to how radically intersubjective lived experience really is, to how deeply we are caught up with others in the skein and flow of life. The ever-present possibility of perceptual error, then, only reinforces the ethical imperative of phenomenology: to attend to our experiences more carefully so that we may live more wakefully and responsively.

We often demand proof for the presence of a “mental state” in a non-human animal that we never think to demand for the presence of the same state in another human. A demon that is perhaps far more insidious than the one Descartes imagines in his Meditations – one that, rather than tempt us to take illusion for reality, tempts us to take reality for illusion – whispers in our ear “beware of anthropomorphism,” and all of a sudden the world becomes far less populated than we originally assumed it to be. However, we have learned (and we will continue to learn) that these demons are one and the same. If we must speak of epistemic justification, we are just as justified in taking non-human beings to be “minded” as we are in taking fellow human beings to be
minded. Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology reveals to us an important truth we already know through lived experience but that (like many other important truths) various abstractions tend to lead us to forget or doubt: that we are always already involved in the world not only with human others but also with other others.
Chapter Four

“Their Own Vision of Things”
Knowledge, Affect, Animal Alterities, and (more on) the Problem of Anthropomorphism

“The mental image of the psychologist is one thing; what the consciousness of that thing is must still be understood.”
– Merleau-Ponty

“The emblem of intelligence is the feeler of the snail…”
– Adorno and Horkheimer

“…Any academic who doubts the depth of animal emotions ought to get a dog.”
– Frans de Waal

In the previous chapter, I argued that not only is skepticism toward “anthropomorphism” unfounded, so too are many well-intentioned justifications of it, for they tend to concede the same problematic epistemological and metaphysical commitments as the skepticism they oppose. For these reasons, as well as for reasons I will further elaborate, I think the concept of anthropomorphism has far outlived its usefulness and that we ought to eliminate it from our vocabulary altogether. Having said that, Derrida raises a concern about anthropomorphism that is ethically and not just epistemologically crucial to address. On the one hand, Derrida shares my criticisms of the kind of skepticism that deploys “anthropomorphism” as a sort of cudgel with which to silence or suppress non-human otherness or those who would affirm kinship with non-human others. On the other hand, however, Derrida articulates a reticence concerning the “anthropomorphization” of animals. Derrida’s reticence here is not rooted in the worry that we

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433 The Structure of Behavior, p. 198.
might be committing some sort of fallacy of induction when we anthropomorphize animals, but rather in the worry that such anthropomorphism may involve the imposition of a human-centered perspective that would suppress animal alterities just as much as any suspension or repudiation of anthropomorphism. Thus, in attempting to elaborate a phenomenology of encountering the gaze of an animal Other, and specifically in reflecting on his lived experience of feeling shame when seen naked by his cat, Derrida writes:

Things would be too simple altogether, the anthropo-theomorphic reappropriation would already have begun, there would even be the risk that domestication has already come into effect, if I were to give in to my own melancholy. If, in order to hear it in myself, I were to set about overinterpreting what the cat might thus be saying to me, in its own way, what it might be suggesting or simply signifying in a language of mute traces, that is to say without words. If, in a word, I assigned to it the words it has no need of…But in forbidding myself thus to assign, interpret or project, must I for all that give in to the other violence or asinanity, that which would consist in suspending one’s compassion and in depriving the animal of every power of manifestation, of the desire to manifest anything to me at all, and even to manifest to me in some way its experience of my language, of my words and of my nudity?436

Though I do think (and will continue to argue) that we should abandon the very notion of “anthropomorphism” and will therefore insist that we change the manner in which we articulate the concern that Derrida raises here, nevertheless this concern is one that I absolutely share and is one that must be heeded by anyone who is committed to “doing justice” to alterity. Derrida’s concern, of course, is to honor rather than violently suppress or erase otherness, and doing so requires precisely the sort of “middle ground,” “both/and” stance toward anthropomorphism that he suggests here: that is, on the one hand, it is necessary to reject any traditional refusal of anthropomorphism that would otherize animal others to such an extent that they would not even be able count or show up for us as “others” at all, yet on the other hand it is equally necessary to be critically vigilant about the fact that, in ascribing “human” features to them, we might just as well suppress their otherness by imposing “all-too-human” categories and prejudices upon them. Like any good phenomenologist, Derrida’s concern here is to negotiate the best way “to let beings show

436 The Animal That Therefore I am, p. 18.
themselves”; such a concern should be at the forefront of any phenomenologist’s attention. As we know all too well, abstractions and conceptual frameworks often get in the way of “knowing what we see,” and so phenomenology always involves this supremely difficult and indeed infinite effort to cultivate ways of thinking that let phenomena show themselves, ways of thinking that elucidate rather than distort the “things themselves.” Likewise, the concern here is to let animal others show themselves to us as they are on their own terms rather than allow antecedent, entrenched abstractions and humanist prejudices or even simply one’s own inescapable, situated “human” standpoint in the world either reductively colonize or oppositionally exile them. I will have more to say in the following chapter about the problems – epistemological and otherwise – that arise once we take seriously (as we must) the “human” standpoint from which we ineluctably experience and interpret the world. For now, however, I simply think it is important to appreciate that Derrida’s view is unquestionably correct, and I wish to add here the point that we will never be able to devise any kind of rational calculus or set of axioms from which to deduce appropriate perceptual attitudes toward animals. That is, given the irreducible ambiguities of lived experience, we will never be able to know for sure the extent to which a particular way of seeing or listening to an animal affirms and lets be seen or heard rather than distorts or suppresses in some way that animal’s subjectivity, and of course no subjectivity – whether that of a cat or of another human – will ever be able to come to full, transparent presence for us. However, justice – in every valence of the term – nevertheless demands our attention to otherness, and thus so too does it demand our critical vigilance – indeed, our anguish – regarding the perpetual danger that we may not be appropriately or sufficiently attentive to it; it demands that we ceaselessly seek to develop ways of seeing, listening, speaking, and thinking that may best let others show themselves, that may best
let others be seen and heard, and to that end it also demands that we ceaselessly put into question, or ceaselessly attempt to think anew, what seeing, listening, speaking, and thinking are.

So, we must reject traditional skepticism concerning attributions of “human” qualities to non-humans, yet we must also be careful not to endorse the reactionary counter-thesis – a reckless, “anything-goes” license to make such attributions – that would be just as mired in anthropocentric biases, or that would at the very least always risk imposing a human-centered standpoint, precisely because it lacks any critical distance from its own biases or standpoint. We should be critically reticent about attributions of “human” qualities to non-humans not because we have determined in advance that such qualities are exclusively or exceptionally human or inherently unattributable to non-humans, but rather because we ought to resist an imposition of “human” schemas of experience and intelligibility upon non-human others that in fact does just as much violence to their otherness as do traditional sceptical suspensions or a priori repudiations of anthropomorphism. An unrestrained license to ascribe “human” qualities to animals just as surely silences animals by forcing them to speak to us in our voice rather than in their own; contrary to the fundamental epistemological (as well as ethical) principle of phenomenology, it refuses to allow animals to show themselves of their own accord or to “let them be.” An “anything-goes,” thoughtless or uncritical license to ascribe supposedly human characteristics to non-human beings negates or levels-down the alterities of non-human beings just as much as any fallacious skeptical or anti-realist refusal to make such ascriptions.

To be clear, if and when “transferences” of “human” qualities to non-humans are problematic, they are not so for the traditionally accepted reason that all “transferences” of human qualities to non-humans are logically fallacious, for indeed such “anthropomorphisms” are not, as we have seen, fundamentally “transferences” or “projections” (at least not reflective or inferential
transferences or projections) at all (and it is that notion that is precisely fallacious); rather, they are problematic only inasmuch as they are implicitly motivated by the very same anthropocentric commitments that motivate typical critics of “anthropomorphism” (or those Frans de Waal accuses of “anthropodenialism,” which I will mention again soon). Both of these standpoints are motivated by the common anthropocentric assumption that only “human” qualities (and their derivatives) are meaningful or important, or that a form of life is valuable – worthy of our attention and appreciation – only insofar as it is analogous to human life. Many who ascribe human qualities to non-humans may have well-meaning, strategic reasons for doing so – they may consider themselves to be allies in the war against anthropocentrism or speciesism – and of course it may be true in many cases that such ascriptions are correct, yet we must also always be vigilant that in our readiness to ascribe such qualities to non-humans we do not reinscribe the very anthropocentrism we wish to thereby combat, namely the prejudice that a form of life is meaningful only to the extent that it resembles our own, or only to the extent that it may be represented or rendered comprehensible from within our all-too-human conceptual frameworks and experiential Umwelts. To impart certain qualities to animals because we tacitly assume such qualities constitute the only basis for respecting, appreciating, or engaging meaningfully with them is just as chauvinistic as the refusal to impart such qualities to them altogether because we assume only humans may possess those qualities. If we philosophers really do care about “the True” and “the Good,” we must always strive to be maximally receptive to alterity, and any maximal, authentic confrontation with alterity should inspire humility and wonder, not a revanchist humanism or reactionary retreat into the erroneous, inherently fallacious abstract construct of skeptical, solipsistic, or speciesist insularity.
If we must continue to speak of anthropomorphism, then we should say that it is problematic not because it may be a naïve psychological bias or some kind of inductive fallacy, but rather because it may presuppose or inscribe an anthropocentric standpoint that would deny non-human alterity just as surely and violently as ordinary skepticism. As Derrida suggests, the only responsible way for us to relate to our non-human cohabitants is one that does not negate their alterity either by assimilating them to familiar human categories and features or by denying them any kinship at all with our manner of being and refusing to recognize familiar human features in them when those features are really there to be recognized. Thus, Derrida writes of his “…avowed desire to escape the alternative of a projection that appropriates and an interruption that excludes…”\(^{437}\) On the one hand, it is important that we honor the alterités of animals; this means that we should carefully attend to the significant differences between human and non-human forms of life and that we should not think that the conscious lives of animals are meaningful or “real” or “forms of consciousness worthy of the name” only insofar as they are akin to ours. On the other hand, if we push the alterities of animals too far, then no meaningful relationships with them are possible. This would be to exile them entirely from the scope of possible human understanding and community, and such an extreme “othering” of animals amounts to the very ontological ‘human/animal’ dualism – which is ultimately a repetition of Cartesian mind/body dualism – that Merleau-Ponty refutes. If we must speak of “anthropomorphism,” then we need to navigate between a kind of anthropomorphism that would fail to honor the alterities of animals and a wholesale repudiation of anthropomorphism that would encourage us refuse them alterity altogether.

\(^{437}\) Ibid., p. 18.
We must take Derrida’s concerns regarding anthropomorphism to heart, yet I also think it is necessary to recognize that, in most cases, suspensions of “anthropomorphism” are far more problematic than otherwise, for it is impossible to deny that, historically, the principle that we ought to suspend or forgo “anthropomorphism” has been deployed mainly in order safeguard a human exceptionalist worldview and marginalize non-human others rather than advance a commitment to the “objective” consideration of empirical evidence or anything remotely resembling a genuine “respect for difference.” We know that not all forms of skepticism are rationally equal. Those who deny anthropogenic global warming, for example, are not paragons of critical thinking. There is an essential difference between healthy skepticism and an unhinged, a priori, categorical refusal to accord truth or epistemic plausibility to certain claims; the latter is when skepticism devolves into denialism, and what we find is that most skeptical attitudes concerning animal consciousness reveal exactly a denialist refusal to affirm certain qualities in them rather than anything like a responsible, reticent suspension of judgment or a consistent, “hard-nosed” commitment to empirical evidence. Most forms of skepticism concerning animal minds – including especially those that manifest as concerns about “merely” anthropomorphizing animals – are rooted not in epistemic humility but in anthropocentric hubris, not in a genuine respect for alterity but in a tacit determination to suppress it, not in a responsive or responsible appreciation of different others but in the effort to restrict certain qualities to human familiars. The notion of an “anthropomorphism fallacy” is itself fallacious for a number of reasons we have already seen, yet not the least of these is that its function is less to enjoin a respect for difference or alterity, less to help instill habits of thought and perception that would better let alterity show itself, and far more to reinforce a human-centered status quo, or far more to sustain the ways in which humans have detached themselves from non-human forms of life and from nature; its
function is to smother in the cradle the forms of empathy, love, wonder, and curiosity that would challenge or even threaten to overturn the hegemony of a human-centered perspective or *episteme*.

This is why Frans de Waal argues that the assumptions that usually underpin and motivate dismissals of attributions of various qualities or capacities to animals as mere “anthropomorphisms” are more problematic and unfounded than such attributions themselves:

The anthropomorphism argument is rooted in human exceptionalism. It reflects the desire to set humans apart from and deny our animality… I myself, however, consider the rejection of similarity between humans and other animals to be a greater problem than the assumption of it. I have dubbed this rejection *anthropodenial*.438

In most cases, when ascriptions of certain characteristics to animals are dismissed as “anthropomorphic projections” it is because those characteristics have already been determined to be exclusively or exceptionally human. In most cases, the charge that attributions of certain mental states and qualities to animals are “mere” anthropomorphisms has less to do with upholding a commitment to the “rigorous,” “rational” assessment of evidence and more to do bulwarking our arbitrary, far from rational notion of our own human specialness or supremacy. Rather than help resist or curtail anthropocentric biases, the categorical prohibition of anthropomorphism – what de Waal calls “anthropodenialism” – that one finds at the basis of most skeptical attitudes toward attributions of human qualities to non-humans is most often, on the contrary, deployed in order to reinforce and further entrench anthropocentric biases.

When we deny that animals possess certain “human” qualities, and even often when we well-meaningly investigate to see whether they possess them, there are always a number of problematic assumptions at play, a number of important questions that are decidedly not being asked: what, essentially, are these characteristics? How do we know what they are and how do we

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even know that *we* have them in the first place? Why ought we assume from the start that animals lack them? And why ought we assume that it is important to know whether or not animals have them?

First, there is the assumption that we can claim to know – and perhaps can only claim to know – that humans possess such qualities or capacities. But do we? How do we know this? In what is this knowledge rooted? As Merleau-Ponty demonstrates, we are only able to know that we have a certain quality because we have first been exposed to it in others. So, perhaps any quality we attribute to “humanity” has already been borrowed or derived from our exposure to the “animality” we disavow in ourselves. This is, in fact, the view Merleau-Ponty comes to adopt, and I will return to it in the following chapter. For now, however, we should simply recall that the concept of an “anthropomorphic projection” is the concept of a particular type of analogical judgment or inference. The assumption that my original perception of an Other – regardless of whether that Other is “human” or “non-human” – involves a projection of my own qualities into the Other is inherently solipsistic. In this sense of the term, a “projection” is entirely unidirectional, for it is an attribution of a quality to an Other that I make independently of that Other, something I add to the appearance of an Other: an Other appears to me, I observe its movements, and then I impart some quality (of myself) to it on the basis of some comparison I draw between its movements and my own. This assumes that the subject or self who “projects” qualities into others does so from a standpoint not already constituted by those others, which is precisely the assumption Merleau-Ponty argues we must reject. The view that I, as an individual human self, only come to know others by inferring their existence is obviously solipsistic because it assumes I am originally isolated from others, that I first and directly know only my own interiority and only later go out into the world to discover (through empirical observation and
inductive reasoning) other interiorities. The notion, however, that we originally know non-human interiorities in such a manner (if we can be said to know any at all) is therefore equally solipsistic; it is, as I will suggest below, simply solipsism at a different level, for this account simply substitutes the individual human self for “humanity” as such (that is, rather than regard the “Self” as isolated from and at best only ever able to infer the existence of “Others,” this account regards “Humanity” as fundamentally isolated from and only able to infer the existence of “Other Others”), and in the end it depends upon the same dualistic commitments as classical solipsism. Regardless of whether or not one regards “anthropomorphistic projections” as ever inductively justified, the notion that our perceptions of mental qualities in non-human others fundamentally involve “projections” of our own human qualities into them assumes that we, as human beings, are fundamentally isolated from non-human alterities, that our “humanity” is fundamentally separate from “animality,” and though we will further see Merleau-Ponty’s critique of this notion in the next chapter, it should already be apparent that this sort of human/animal separatism is untenable, or that in fact any supposed dualistic separation of human beings from non-human beings is ultimately a repetition of Cartesian dualism, for embodied beings can never be dualistically separated from one another.

Moreover, if the only qualities I ever perceived in Others were those I first projected into them, not only does this assume my fundamental isolation from Others, it also means that I would never really be acquainted with “Others” at all: an Other that is nothing but a composite of qualities I project into it is an Other that is nothing more than a construct of my own making, which of course is not an “Other” at all. The idea that the qualities we perceive in others begin as “projections” thus assumes solipsism and negates the very possibility of any genuine presentation of alterity. If any “projections” in the traditional sense of the term are possible, they must be
founded by a primordial overlapping of living bodies or behaviors, imbrications of corporeal schemata that precede any reflective comparisons or identifications we might draw between ourselves and others. Now, as we have seen, we cannot deny that what is true concerning our original perceptual relationships with human others is also true concerning our original perceptual relationships with non-human others, since humans and non-humans alike are living, behaving bodies. Thus, before I reflectively take cognizance of qualities I possess internally and then go out into the world to see whether such qualities may be predicated of others on the basis of external evidence, I must have already directly perceived such qualities in others and derived an understanding of them from direct perceptions of them in others. It is thus that the idea that my perceptions of qualities in non-humans might just primarily be “projections” of my own qualities into them, and even the approach of those who wish to justify ascriptions of human qualities to non-humans analogically or inductively by beginning from observing certain qualities in oneself and then going out into the world to see whether any non-humans have them too, is already an abstraction. If my primary knowledge of mental qualities in other humans does not come about through analogical inference or any kind of egoistic projection, then neither can the same be said concerning my primary knowledge of mental qualities in non-humans.

To think that we clearly possess some quality or capacity is to assume that we even know, transparently or unproblematically, what that quality or capacity is in the first place. But do we? We have already seen that we never have utterly transparent access to any “internal” qualities, so to proceed to either experimentally verify or reject the presence of such qualities in animals on the basis of the assumption that those qualities are ever absolutely clear in meaning, or on the basis of the assumption that we ever have unproblematic access to those qualities even in ourselves, is already to commit a fallacy worse than any supposedly fallacious “anthropomorphic
projection.” Furthermore, the assumption that we originally have transparent access to our own “human” qualities independently of our intercorporeal relationships with animals assumes the very human/animal separatism I just mentioned.

So, when scientists, for instance, attempt to either identify or reject the presence of “human” qualities in non-humans, they typically do so according to the assumption that such qualities may be unproblematically and clearly defined, when in fact that is never the case. At any rate, there are always profound (and profoundly difficult) ontological questions that have to be answered whenever we take to define some mental quality or faculty (whether “reason” or “emotion,” whether “self-consciousness” or “language,” and so on), yet these are hardly ever asked or pursued with any rigor in the sciences that study non-human forms of consciousness and cognition; they are almost certainly never asked by those who easily dismiss claims about non-human minds as mere “anthropomorphic projections.”

Of course, this is not to suggest that we are never justified in ascribing “human” qualities to non-humans; rather, the point is that we should never presume to have unproblematic access to such qualities, and that we certainly should never presume to have in our possession any sharp definition of such qualities that would entitle to us affirm with certitude that we have them whereas animals do not. My contention here is that we should never presume to have access to some essence of any quality we esteem in ourselves and might proceed doubt in other beings. This brings me back to the point I made in the previous chapter that, if we must define things, then we should do so in as maximally broad a manner as possible, since to define them otherwise is to assume falsely that they admit of a sharp, essential, or unproblematic definition in the first place; to do so otherwise usually does little to sharpen our understanding of the concept or phenomenon in question yet does much to advance a predetermined exclusionary agenda. Thus, when it comes
to defining those distinctly “human” qualities we would deny to animals, in most cases we find that they are defined in various narrow ways not because such narrow definitions actually capture their “essence” or circumscribe with absolute clarity and precision their meaning (which is never possible) but rather solely in order to restrict those qualities to ourselves.

This, again, is the argument that Frans de Waal makes. Skeptics of “anthropomorphism” – those who doubt or deny attributions of “human” qualities to non-humans – nearly always assume definitions of the qualities in question that are more problematic than attributions of them to non-humans are ever purported to be. When we ask a skeptic to define such a quality – one that he/she thinks can be clearly ascribed to us but that cannot as readily be ascribed to an animal – we typically find either that such a definition is broad enough to warrant its attribution to non-humans or that it is arbitrarily narrow, that it is defined narrowly only so as to exclude animals from the scope of its application. It thus becomes obvious that most skeptical attitudes toward attributions of human characteristics to non-humans are in fact motivated by an anthropocentric conceptual framework or episteme, one in which a priori only humans may be claimed to possess certain characteristics. Whenever a quality is defined broadly enough so as to include animals, a skeptic will argue it is too broad and provide a narrower alternative. However, whenever a reasonable empirical counterexample is presented, a committed skeptic will, rather than admit he/she is wrong, revise his/her definition to be even narrower so as to neutralize the counterexample. Of course, such a revision is entirely ad hoc: it is made simply to dismiss counter-evidence in order to preserve a thesis one never had the intention of giving up in the first place. The skeptic’s game is revealed as soon as we ask him/her to admit the sort of evidence he/she would countenance as demonstrating the presence of a certain quality in an animal, because ultimately the answer (whether admitted explicitly or not) is: none; ultimately, the committed skeptic will always set the
bar high enough so that an animal will never pass it. Whenever we observe an *ad hoc* shifting of
goal posts – as we so often do when we consider discourses concerning animal consciousness and
cognition – we must recognize that what we are dealing with is not a conclusion derived from
empirical evidence but rather a conclusion bootstrapped in advance of empirical evidence.

Thus, attempting to show that certain qualities typically considered exclusively human
are also to be found in non-humans (and are therefore not exclusively human after all) has its place
and strategic utility in certain contexts, but at the same time there is a sense in which doing so is
agreeing to play a game one has lost as soon as one agrees to play it, for not only is it to concede
that we even know, clearly or unproblematically, what it is for *us* to have such characteristics in
the first place, but it is also to concede that it is important that animals have them, that such
characteristics are normatively significant because they are characteristics we humans
(supposedly) distinctly possess. To concede either of these points is already to concede too much.
This is not to deny that there are a great many mental qualities or capacities that are important if
certain beings do in fact have them; however, it *is* to deny that certain mental qualities or
capacities are important merely because they are those that we humans distinctively have. There is a
long list of qualities and capacities that have traditionally been supposed to be singularly human, yet the singularly “human” status of such qualities and capacities is nearly always empirically falsified: despite our best efforts to define them narrowly enough so that they may remain exclusively human, in most cases any quality or capacity considered to be exclusively human is eventually discovered be exhibited by certain non-humans. Naturally, such discoveries are important for undermining the construct of human “specialness.” However, lest philosophy be the handmaiden of science, philosophical questions are never in principle those that can be answered empirically. There will, perhaps, never be an uncontroversial definition of “philosophy,” but
nonetheless I do not think it is controversial to say that if empirical evidence can ever settle an issue, then that issue is not philosophical. So, it is not the business of the philosopher to demonstrate empirically that certain animals possess or lack certain characteristics; rather it is the business of the philosopher to examine critically the concepts and presuppositions that underlie claims that animals either possess or lack certain characteristics. It is the business of the philosopher to ask precisely the sorts of questions that any empirical investigation into an animal’s consciousness or cognition presupposes yet are seldom asked by those who actually conduct such investigations.

So, to be clear, my intention here is not to refute anthropocentric delineations of humanity in opposition to animality – or anthropocentric efforts to restrict certain qualities to humans – by appealing to “empirical” counter-evidence (in the traditional sense of the term). This is not unimportant, of course. It is obviously telling that most of the qualities we have ever tried to restrict to humans have also nearly always turned out to be possessed by certain non-humans, and this naturally helps undermine any anthropocentric perspective that depends upon the identification of some exclusively human quality or set of qualities. Here, I could take an inventory of all of the qualities that have ever been considered exclusively human and then canvass all of the scientific studies that show that they are also exhibited by non-humans. Such an exercise is important for undermining our hubristic certitude of our own specialness and is not without important philosophical implications, but the exercise itself would not be an exercise in philosophy: it would be the scientist’s game of selecting some human quality, assuming some operational definition of it, and then going out into the world to see whether an animal has it. This

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439 What I mean here is that my approach is not to demonstrate that animals possess certain mental qualities according to the standard methods of the empirical sciences. I do not mean to suggest that I am abandoning all appeals to “experience” broadly conceived. I consider my approach to be thoroughly phenomenological, and we know that phenomenology is not equivalent to “empiricism” (in the classical sense of the term).
is not the game I intend to play. My intention is not to play the game of attempting to show
empirically that every quality we reserve for humans is also to be found in certain animals but to
challenge, and ultimately reject, the assumptions that shape this game in the first place: again, why
should we assume humans have such qualities in the first place? If I go out and try to see whether
another animal has some quality that I ascribe to myself, why should I even assume that I have
such a quality in the first place? What is it that allows me to do so? As Merleau-Ponty
demonstrates, I can only ever know that I have a quality if I have first been acquainted with it in
others and only if those others have affirmed it in me, so it is misdirected to begin from the
standpoint that I have some quality and then wonder or attempt to determine whether others have
it as well: I have it only if there are others that do too, only if I am already immersed with others
who exhibit such qualities and who affirm them in me. Others literally teach and make me what I
am. So why should it not be the case that non-human others teach me what my own “human”
qualities are just as much as other humans do? As we will further see, Merleau-Ponty argues that
this is indeed the case, that any ideas I have of my own “human” qualities are always already
shaped by other-than-human expressions of those qualities. As I will mention below when I turn to
consider the nature of love, it is not the case that I know, first and foremost, that I am capable of
love and that, when I take an animal to exhibit “love,” I am simply “projecting” love into that
animal; rather, the manner in which that animal expresses “love” is always already a formative
component of my own sense of what “love” as such is, whether in myself or in any other being.

Second, what are these qualities anyway, and what justifies the manner in which we
define them? It is a fool’s errand to attempt to find some feature that absolutely separates humans
from all other forms of life, but the decision to define “the human” in terms of any particular
quality seems arbitrary. Some suggest that humans are the only animals aware of their own
mortality. This is probably false, and as Derrida and others have argued, we surely should question whether we humans are even “aware” of our mortality in the way that we traditionally suppose that we are. But why not define humans as the only animals who, say, use concrete to build shelter or as the only animals who wear blue jeans? Why not define humans as the only animals who have developed the technology capable of engineering their own extinction? Why not define humans as the only animals who are capable of seriously entertaining the notion that arrangements of planets and stars at the time of a person’s birth have a tangible causal effect on that person’s psychological characteristics, or that skin pigmentation is a relevant indication of moral worth? The point here is that when we attempt to isolate some quality that constitutes our “humanity,” we tend to like to select a quality to which we attach some positive value. This is why efforts to find some exclusively human quality are never purely ontological or empirical endeavors but are always loaded: they tend to ignore those qualities that have just as much, if not more, of a claim to being distinctively if not exclusively human either because it is known that they are bad qualities or because they are qualities that seem trivial, qualities that do not really seem to satisfy our more “existential,” melodramatic sense of “what it means to be human.” But insofar as we take any supposedly distinctive qualities to make us “better” than those who lack them, we are not simply assuming something that is probably easily falsified, we are also committing the kind of fallacy endemic to every sort of chauvinism: the fallacy that consists in thinking that some characteristic (e.g., white skin, a penis, the ability to understand Pi) is super important because it happens to be a characteristic that one distinctively possesses.

It would be willfully obtuse not to recognize that the effort to find some quality that exclusively defines a particular group of entities is never truly value-neutral or morally innocuous; it is never just pure science or ontology: the primary reason one seeks such a quality is always so
as to use it as leverage for elevating oneself to some position of privilege and supremacy at the expense of others who would be correlatively denigrated, subordinated, and marginalized; in short, and to put the point bluntly, it is nearly always an instrument of oppression or exploitation. Categorization is never just a neutral ontological or scientific enterprise but is always an ethical and political apparatus. If someone wishes to investigate what all and only giraffes have in common – what “makes a giraffe a giraffe” – we hardly think anything of it. Yet if someone wishes to study what all and only Jews have in common – if someone wishes to find some essence of “Jewry” – or if someone wishes to discover what quality or set of qualities define black people or women, we would naturally raise an eyebrow (to say the least). If a scientist or philosopher declares an interest in investigating the general differences between humans and other animals, we typically think nothing of it. But if the same scientist or philosopher wishes to investigate differences between white people and people of color, we would, to say the least, be rather suspicious of such a project, and I am willing to wager such a person would be denounced and ostracized if not expelled from the academy altogether for racism (as he/she ought to be). But is the latter project relevantly different from the former? Are these sets of questions really relevantly different from one another? It seems arbitrary to regard them as such.

The reply, naturally, will be that “race” is a socially constructed category whereas “species” is not. This, however, is clearly false. Of course, “human” is a biological category or species-concept, but it would be disingenuous to pretend that it is just that. The ways in which we understand “what it means to be human,” and especially efforts to define “humanness” in terms of certain qualities or capacities that humans exclusively possess, reflect largely culturally constructed, historically situated, and ethically and politically loaded assumptions and practices and do not merely consist of reading off empirical characteristics from some transparently,
objectively present-to-hand and accessible, ahistorical “human nature.” For example, ever since at least Aristotle, humans have classically been defined as “the rational animals,” and it hardly needs to be demonstrated precisely how problematic, how simultaneously underdetermined and overdetermined, the concept of “rationality” is, how “rationality” resists any clear or sharp definition and is always defined in ways that are often socially constructed and politically motivated. In particular, and to use just one example, feminist philosophers rightly argue that the traditional Western concept and veneration of “reason” cannot be disentangled from the history of patriarchy, that is, from its genealogy of being defined in opposition to, and privileged to the denigration of, emotion or affect and from the cultural alignment of emotion or affect with “femininity”: traditionally, as we know, reason has always been defined so as to exclude, and has been venerated at the expense of, emotion or affectivity (or indeed anything considered to be corporeal in nature), and not only is such an account of reason simply wrong descriptively or ontologically (since reason is never isolated from emotion or affectivity and is, like everything “mental,” thoroughly embodied), but it has always been about marginalizing and subjugating women and about perpetuating and consolidating male power and privilege; it has always been about denigrating or marginalizing ways of thinking, knowing, and being that are culturally coded as “feminine.” Even if one thinks that the concept of “rationality” is salvageable and pleads for a better, truer understanding of it as entwined with bodily experience, agency, and affectivity, that too is not going to be an ethically or politically neutral definition, nor is it going to be one that will twist itself free of any entanglements with culture or history (as nothing ever will).

So, the basic point here is that the kinds of qualities that get selected in order to support human exceptionalism, as well as the ways in which those qualities are even understood or defined in the first place, are sufficient to prove that how we define “humanity” is never just about DNA
or evolutionary heritage. Moreover, it is even more obvious that the category of “the animal” is never a neutral, purely descriptive category; indeed, it is not even a “scientific” category at all. One may, of course, simply define an “animal” as a “living being,” and though surely the concept of “life” is itself not a purely descriptive or value-neutral category, such a broad definition of “animal” might be correct, yet it is also devoid of much meaning. Such a definition, naturally, applies to humans, so if one attempts to distinguish humans from “animals,” then the sense of “animal” one has in mind is not merely “living being.” Setting aside the metaphysical question concerning whether specific species are “natural kinds” or universals, the term “animal” is clearly far from being anything like a “natural kind.” Unless “animal” is strictly coextensive with “living being,” there is no such thing as “an animal.” There are only particular kinds of living beings, only animals. The attempt to group all non-human beings into a single homogenous (or homogenizing) classification, the attempt to deposit the whole, prodigious menagerie of non-human life on Earth (from dogs to termites, from elephants to jellyfish), into some grand, monolithic category in which they would all somehow meaningfully belong together and that would itself be rigorously distinguished from one particular species of animal called “human,” has obviously very little to do with any consideration of empirical facts and evidence, and is precisely what Derrida rightly regards as an “asininity.”

Thus, the term “animal” is an inherently ethical and political category; “animal” is no more a “natural kind” or purely descriptive concept than, say, “barbarian” or “savage,” and the distinction between “human” and “animal” is no more purely descriptive or empirical, and no more ahistorical and apolitical and non-socially constructed, than the distinction between “the
civilized” and “the barbaric/savage” (with which it is indeed often aligned).\textsuperscript{440} It follows that the analogy previously considered between, on the one hand, the distinction between “the human” and “the animal” and, on the other hand, the distinction between, say, “white people” and “people of color,” is not flawed in the ways most would object, and it is urgently necessary to heed it. Besides merely designating something that is “alive,” the term “animal” does not refer to anything that is purely “naturally” real or to anything that is merely descriptive or empirical in content any more so than our racial or gender categories. In short, pretending that “human” is merely a biological category is like pretending that “whiteness” is merely about levels of skin melanin; correlatively, pretending that “animality” is simply some sort of natural kind or descriptive category is like pretending that “blackness,” “femininity,” “woman”, “disabled,” “savage,” or “madness” are as well. And insofar as “the human” is defined relative to “the animal,” everything said concerning the latter applies equally to the former. Merleau-Ponty asserts that “our idea of Nature is impregnated with artifice,”\textsuperscript{441} yet surely the same can be said of our traditional ideas of “humanity” and “animality,” and it is crucially important never to pretend otherwise.

The larger point I have been attempting to make here is that ultimately, or at its core, anthropocentrism is not an empirical claim or theory, and that is precisely why one usually finds that those who are committed to it defend it against empirical counterexamples in ways that render it unfalsifiable. Anthropocentrism is an assortment of overlapping ontological, epistemic, and normative commitments concerning the relationship between human and non-human beings, and this is why, in the end, it is misdirected to attempt to refute it empirically. Since, ultimately, an

\textsuperscript{440} As I will mention in the concluding chapter, the fact that every oppressive otherization of human beings historically coincides with efforts to “animalize” them or to code them as being closer to “animality” than to humanity indicates the extent to which these categories have never been purely “natural,” descriptive, or merely ontological but have always already been ethical and political.

\textsuperscript{441} \textit{Nature}, p. 86.
anthropocentric framework rests upon a certain set of ontological and axiological assumptions (which are, as such, irreducible to any merely empirical facts), it is not truly possible to refute such a framework empirically; we should be able to refute it without having to take a detour through “science” or empirical investigation, a detour from which we might never in fact return or which at least risks not getting us to where we need to go. Thus, as strategically useful as it may often be to demonstrate empirically that animals possess “human” qualities, in order to refute anthropocentrism it is necessary and sufficient to refute its underlying metaphysical and normative presuppositions. Indeed, any attempt to refute human exceptionalism “scientifically” (that is, inductively) by showing that certain animals really do have certain “human” qualities based on observed similarities between them and us reproduces the same Cartesian, analogical logic of the exceptionalist: on the one hand, the exceptionalist says there are certain qualities that are exclusively human because they are absolutely dissimilar to any observed or observable non-human qualities; on the other hand, the non/anti-exceptionalist replies that these supposedly dissimilar or special qualities we esteem in ourselves are in fact similar to those we observe in certain other animals, that supposedly exclusive human qualities are similar enough to those we perceive in certain animals to warrant ascribing such qualities to those animals (and therefore to warrant not considering such qualities to be “exclusively human” after all). However, in both cases the operative assumption is that claims about the minds of animals rely upon their observable similarities (or dissimilarities) with humans. Not only does this assume the false construct of a central, isolated human standpoint or standard of reference, but it also assumes the epistemological commitments, or the general account of intersubjectivity, we have already seen we must reject.

442 Merleau-Ponty’s critique of this notion will be further explored in the following chapter.
So, in all of our considerations of non-human life, the fundamental problem is never truly anthropomorphism but anthropocentrism. If we “anthropomorphize” animals only because we assign a special importance to “anthropomorphic” characteristics, then we in fact assume and deploy the very same chauvinism that motivates anyone who categorically dismisses anthropomorphism: we assume that certain qualities are special or important simply because they are qualities we saliently possess, and that is the essence of all forms of chauvinism. For example, mathematics and literature are (often) surely wonderful things, but say we think the ability to do geometry or to produce poetry is important and impressive in a way that categorically ranks us as superior to all other forms of life or that makes us “special” in an evaluative and not merely descriptive sense of the term; or at any rate, say we develop tests to see whether other animals are able to understand abstract mathematical principles or to write sonnets and that we use such tests in order to gauge the “complexity” and value of their subjective and cognitive lives: in the final analysis (and setting aside for the moment the fact that anyone who clings to such things as among the highest marks of cognitive exceptionalism have surely never adequately marveled at a spider’s web, an ant’s colony, or a beaver’s dam), is this not to suppose that something is supremely important merely because it is something that we humans are able to do, or merely because it involves the exercise of supposedly distinctive human cognitive capacities? And is that not to suppose arbitrarily the supreme value of one’s own distinctive identity or of the characteristics that constitute one’s own specific subject-position in the world? In what way is the supposition that aptitudes for geometry and poetry are supremely important in the ontological and ethical order of things – presumably because they are things of which we are distinctly and perhaps uniquely capable – relevantly different from the supposition I might accept that white skin and a penis are similarly important because they are things that I, as a while male, happen to have? These
suppositions are not, in fact, relevantly different at all. We should also not overlook the implicit ableism and classism that motivates one to rank others according their aptitudes for mathematics or poetry (or for art in general): of course, one may reply that it is easy to accuse those specific examples of such ideological prejudices but that there are others that would not run afoul of them and that would indeed constitute a more “neutral” or “objective” standard of measure. However, I do not think that any such examples exist: any “ability” or “capacity” that we use as the standard according to which we evaluate another’s mental life or interiority, and the sorts of things to which we ascribe supreme epistemic and even aesthetic value, are unavoidably inflected through an ideological prism, and since, in a hierarchically ordered world, that ideological prism tends to reflect the interests of those in dominant social or political positions of power, it is usually one that serves rather than subverts the interests of whoever occupies such positions of power.

This is not to say that we should not value mathematics or literature or any other such things (though of course we should not value them – or anything else – uncritically). As I have already remarked, these are often wonderful things indeed. My contention, rather, concerns employing such things as standards according to which we rank other minds or forms of life (whether ontologically or ethically). Why privilege the knowledge or prowess exemplified by the mathematician, scientist, or poet and not that of the carpenter or plumber? Why not privilege certain indigenous peoples’ ways of conceptualizing and coping with the world? Why not privilege emotional knowledge? Why not privilege the ‘know-how’ of nurturing a child or an elder? Why not privilege the ‘know-how’ of a “disabled” person’s survival and perseverance in an unaccommodating society? The obvious answers, naturally, are classism,
racism/ethnocentrism/colonialism, tacit sexism, and ableism, respectively.\textsuperscript{443} Moreover, why ought we to value supremely, or regard as marks of exceptionalism, the kind of cognitive power or knowledge exhibited by mathematics, literature, painting, musical composition, science, recursive syntax, conceptual abstraction, predicative judgment, or even philosophy and not that which is exhibited by, say, the nose of a dog, the discriminating eyes of an owl, the expressive movements of a cat’s tail, the dances of bees, the songs of whales, the construction of ant colonies, the weaving of a spider’s web, the architecture of a beaver’s dam, the sensitivities and exploratory, prehensile intentionality of an elephant’s trunk or of an octopus’ tentacles? The obvious answer is yet another tacit chauvinism, namely speciesism or human-exceptionalism.

So, are we to say that there is nothing that is distinctively human? Not necessarily. But “distinctive” does not mean “exclusive,” nor does it (or exclusive) mean “mark of superiority” or “special” in any loaded, normative sense of the term. These equivocations or conceptual slippages, however, are the basis of all forms of human exceptionalism. All forms of human exceptionalism depend upon isolating some quality (or set of qualities) that supposedly distinguishes humans from all non-humans and then concluding from that the rightful superiority or privileged status of humans. Setting aside the likely falsehood of the premises here, the conclusion inferred from them is a non-sequitur that depends upon sliding from “distinctive” to “exclusive” (or “special”) and from “exclusive” (or “special”) to “ontologically or morally superior.” Every chauvinistic worldview – whether anthropocentric or otherwise – is rooted in this sort of fallacy of equivocation (if indeed one can attribute any kind of “reasoning” to the formulation of a chauvinistic worldview at all, which in many cases is admittedly doubtful). That is, all forms of

\textsuperscript{443} Of course, I am not suggesting that typically marginalized forms of knowledge, such as the ones I have just mentioned, should be fetishized or tokenized, for that is just as much an inscription of hegemony and bigotry as their marginalization.
chauvinism are logically analogous: they are all based upon the supposition that some property is supremely important simply because it is a property that one (distinctively if not uniquely) has, or simply because it is one that is saliently exhibited by the group (presumably, the already arbitrarily privileged and dominant group) to which one belongs; and in the end, all defenses of anthropocentrism or human-exceptionalism come down to precisely that. In the end, despite all of the “nuanced” arguments and impressive mental contortions that have been provided and performed in its defense, an anthropocentric or human-exceptionalist worldview is foundationally, irredeemably chauvinistic (indeed ableist in ways that inevitably “animalize” even other humans).

To evaluate non-human animals according to the extent to which they are able to perform characteristically human activities is always to impose an arbitrary, question-begging, often tacitly culturally constructed and hegemonic standard of interpretation and normative assessment upon entities and phenomena in the course of doing what one passes off as “science” or “objective” research.

This brings me to an important I alluded to earlier: not only do anthropocentric prejudices motivate most skeptical dismissals of attributions of human qualities to animals, so too do they often motivate well-meaning tests aimed at determining the veracity of such attributions, or so too do they, in general, motivate many of the investigations into non-human subjectivity and cognition that scientists typically undertake. Perhaps we may wish to test whether or not a dog can grasp arithmetical concepts. It would surely be interesting if they could, but we ought to ask ourselves why this is something we think it is important to know in the first place. Often, the most poignant or profound philosophical question one can pose is, “so what?” That is, should we determine that dogs cannot grasp arithmetic, so what? Are we to conclude that they are somehow less “intelligent” and thus less “important” or “inferior” to us (an inference that is not only speciesist
but also ableist)? Not only are such value-judgments logical non-sequiturs, it is arbitrary in the first place to presuppose human aptitudes and skills as yardsticks by which to evaluate the perceptual or cognitive abilities of non-humans. As Merleau-Ponty writes:

…In spite of what mechanistic biology might suggest, the world we live in is not made up only of things and space: some of these parcels of matter, which we call living beings, proceed to trace in their environment, by the way they act or behave, their very own vision of things. We will only see this if we lend our attention to the spectacle of the animal world, if we are prepared to live alongside the world of animals instead of rashly denying it any kind of interiority…He [Kohler] rightly observed that the originality of the animal world will remain hidden to us for as long as we continue (as in many classical experiments) to set it tasks that are not its own.444

For example, in testing whether or not a dog can do simple arithmetic, is that not equivalent to a dog testing whether or not humans can identify their own urine by scent? There are, perhaps, many things humans can do that many non-humans cannot do, but by the same token there are a great number of things that many non-humans can do that we humans cannot do, and it is fundamentally fallacious – indeed, a category error – to measure or rank the mental or cognitive nature of another being on the basis of one’s own salient mental or cognitive qualities and capacities. Yet, even today so many of the experiments to which we subject animals in order to determine, say, their “intelligence” are inflected through anthropocentric biases or designed in ways that reflect tacitly human-centered schemas and values; they often aim to evaluate animals on the basis of their aptitudes for learning or exhibiting perceptual or cognitive capacities that humans distinctively possess or privilege in their own specific manner of coping with the world, and thus not only do they often fallaciously assume a human standpoint to be the default, universal, “objective” standard relative to which all other forms of existence ought to be derivatively compared and measured (and thus regard their own human standpoint as not a “standpoint” at all), but they also already begin from a position that will never be able to truly reveal the “being” of the animals

444 The World of Perception, p. 75.
subjected to such experimentation, a position that will never be able to “let animals show themselves.” The task Merleau-Ponty calls for us to undertake here is admittedly a supremely difficult one. It is indeed supremely difficult for us to bracket our humanist biases in our considerations of non-human forms of life so that we may authentically appreciate and let those forms of life show us “their own visions of things.” But such a task is no more difficult than the task of phenomenology in general, which of course is the task of letting phenomena show themselves. Of course, non-human subjectivities will never be intelligible to us transparently or exhaustively (for nothing is ever intelligible in such a way), yet that does not mean they are not intelligible at all. And though we will always have to work assiduously to develop ever better ways of understanding and relating to non-human others – though we will always tirelessly have to subject our own manner of understanding and relating to non-human others to interrogation – that means that the task of “knowing” non-human others (like the task of knowing any others) is an infinite one, not an impossible one, and of course it is already false to suppose that we do not already “know” non-human others, for we always already know them through the entanglements of our flesh.

There are many studies of animal cognition that are clearly shaped by anthropocentric presuppositions, yet one that perhaps best serves to illustrate this point is the vaunted “mirror test.” The mirror test is one of the most popular tests used to investigate animal minds, and it is also one that is clearly informed by anthropocentric biases, so I think it is worthwhile to examine it briefly. The mirror test is designed to gauge whether or not an animal is capable of self-consciousness. The idea is that if an animal can recognize its own image in a mirror (rather than merely regard it as the image of another animal), then that animal is reflectively aware of itself as a distinct being or “self”; the animal has some sense of itself as an “I” or a “me.” The mirror test involves painting
a dot somewhere on an animal’s body and then placing the animal in front of a mirror. If the animal proceeds to show that it notices that the dot it sees in its mirror image is indeed a dot painted on its own body (if, for example, the animal attempts to brush or rub the dot on its body away), then the animal has successfully identified itself with its image in a mirror and thus demonstrates thematic self-awareness.

We should be clear about what the mirror test does and does not demonstrate. As I just mentioned, it demonstrates thematic or reflective self-awareness. However, it is important to note that self-awareness as such is necessarily gradated; it is not an “all-or-nothing” capacity or phenomenon, such that we can draw a sharp line between those animals that can and those that cannot pass the mirror test and claim that all of the animals on the former side of that line are self-aware and that all of the others on the other side have no “self-awareness” at all. So, although exhibiting thematic self-awareness is surely sufficient for exhibiting “selfhood,” subjectivity, or interiority (that is to say, if a being passes the mirror test, it is surely the case that “someone is home”), it would be wrong to think that doing is necessary for exhibiting some measure of “selfhood,” subjectivity, or interiority. As we have seen, all forms of life or subjectivity are necessarily, in some manner, self-reflexive: to be perceptually oriented toward a milieu and toward other beings at all is already to be reflexively (even if not reflectively) aware of oneself. Corporeal reflexivity or auto-affection is the fundamental characteristic of a living body, and it just is the basic form or expression of what we call “interiority.” The point, then, is that an entity may be either reflectively or reflexively (that is, pre-reflectively or unreflectively) “self-aware” (and it may be self-aware in either of these ways to variable degrees), yet this is a distinction that often tends to get elided. It follows, then, that the mirror test only demonstrates that an entity exhibits some measure of thematic self-awareness and that, more importantly, failing the mirror
test does not demonstrate that an entity lacks “self-awareness” altogether (moreover, as I am about to suggest, failing the mirror test does not even demonstrate that an animal lacks thematic self-awareness either, though many people seem to assume that it does). Any sentient, behaving body is, in some manner, “aware of itself” in virtue of the corporeal reflexivity or affectivity that makes it a sentient, behaving body in the first place. In short, passing the mirror test is surely sufficient to demonstrate “interiority,” yet it is not necessary for demonstrating interiority (or rather failing the mirror test is not sufficient for demonstrating an absence of interiority), since, as we have seen, all living, behaving bodies are necessarily “interiorities” or “subjectivities.”

There are several species of animals that unquestionably pass the mirror test (and a variety of others that seem to pass it, though the studies that purport to demonstrate that they do remain subject to debate within the scientific community), and it is surely always quite remarkable to discover that an animal is aware of itself in a manner similar to human self-awareness. Though, as I am about to make clear, the significance of the mirror test is usually greatly overstated, I do not wish to deny entirely the value of learning that another being is reflectively aware of itself, for learning this powerfully exposes us to the presence of other others in the world and thereby helps decenter our place in it.

So, which animals pass the mirror test? The great apes (chimpanzees, gorillas, bonobos, and orangutans), Asian elephants, bottlenose dolphins, orca whales, and magpies incontestably pass it. Perhaps more intriguing are those animals that appear to pass it yet require further research to demonstrate for sure that they do. A recent study indicates that pigeons possibly pass the mirror test, and another study may indicate that giant manta rays do as well. Even more remarkably

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(given how much we reflexively tend to diminish the cognitive faculties of fish and insects), a recent study seems to show that the cleaner wrasse (a species of small fish) recognizes its own reflection, and another study seems to show that ants also recognize their own reflections. Notably, pigs and monkeys have not yet passed the traditional mirror test, but recent studies indicate that they are able to use mirrors in order to locate food hidden from direct view, and so they, at the very least, demonstrate an understanding of how reflections work.

As I mentioned above, the mirror test only demonstrates one type or grade of self-awareness. Passing the mirror test is, at least in most cases, surely sufficient to demonstrate thematic self-awareness, but it is not necessary for demonstrating self-awareness as such, as there is a sense in which all living bodies are “aware of themselves” simply in virtue of being living bodies. However, I wish to suggest, contrary to certain prevailing assumptions, that there are good

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reasons to suppose that passing the mirror test is also not even necessary for demonstrating 

*thematic* self-awareness. Most people understand that passing the mirror test proves that an animal is thematically aware of itself, yet it seems that many people incorrectly infer that *failing* to pass the mirror test proves that an animal is *not* thematically aware of itself. Of course, the latter claim does not directly follow logically from the former; or rather, it does so only if one already assumes that the capacity to recognize oneself in one’s own mirror image constitutes not merely a sufficient but also a *necessary* criterion for possessing “thematic self-awareness,” and I think this is an assumption many people tacitly share. Many seem to assume that if an animal fails the mirror test, it is not thematically self-aware or is, at any rate, only aware of itself in a way that is “less robust” or “less sophisticated” than the thematic self-awareness humans have. However, this assumption seems to be false. Naturally, there are ordinary empirical counter-examples one could provide. For example, cats have not passed the mirror test, yet many studies show (and every cat owner knows) that cats know their own names and sometimes deliberately refuse to respond to them when summoned. Similarly, as I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, my childhood dog, Sammy, seemed to have quite a thorough or “robust” awareness of himself, as evidenced by his evasive behavior or unusual refusal to respond to calls of his name when he realized he was about to have a bath, yet dogs also have not passed the mirror test (indeed, one can regularly observe dogs, especially puppies, react to their images in a mirror as if another dog is present).

The more important point here, however, is that the mirror test itself – the very construction of it and not *just* the common assumption that it provides a necessary criterion for determining whether an animal has thematic self-awareness – reflects a particular anthropocentric bias: it privileges *vision* over other perceptual modalities of engaging the world, and indeed those who venerate the mirror test – those who regard it as the “gold standard,” so to speak, of evidence
of thematic self-awareness in animals – hardly take cognizance of the fact that in doing so they implicitly and fallaciously regard as a universal, default measure of the subjectivities of other beings a perceptual modality and aptitude that saliently structures their own particular form of subjectivity. It is decidedly always a fallacy to universalize one’s own particularity, to reify as a universal, default standard of measure or comparative assessment one’s own specific standpoint in the world or to reify one’s own standpoint as, indeed, standpointless, yet this is exactly what we do insofar we take the “mirror test” to provide some sort of universally applicable if not necessary measure of thematic self-awareness in all non-human beings. The mirror test is surely one way to measure thematic self-awareness in certain beings who primarily rely upon vision in order to navigate and make sense of their world, but many beings do not rely upon vision to the extent that human beings do, and it is rash or simply invalid to suppose that such beings lack thematic self-recognition simply because they lack the capacity for visual self-recognition. Why privilege vision? Why not, say, privilege hearing or smell? Bats, for example, primarily engage the world through sound, and dogs primarily engage the world through their noses, and their respective auditory and olfactory sensitivities are powerful in ways that we humans can hardly imagine, powerful in ways that are many orders of magnitude greater than our own capacities for hearing or smelling. So, why should we assume that auscultation and olfaction may not also provide genuine modes of “thematic self-awareness”? Why should we not think that bats hear themselves and that dogs smell themselves to a similar same extent that we see ourselves?

Let us briefly consider dogs. Even those of us who have shared our lives with dogs tend to forget the fact that they primarily inhabit the world through their sense of smell, that they quite literally think with their noses. Scientific assessments of canine olfaction differ rather widely, but the general consensus is that a dog’s sense of smell is so intensely more acute than ours that we
can hardly begin to imagine what it must be like to inhabit the world with and through noses such as theirs. The following passage from an article on dogs’ sense of smell articulates the general, current scientific understanding of it:

Dogs’ sense smell overpowers our own by orders of magnitude – it’s 10,000 to 100,000 times as acute, scientists say…they possess up to an estimated 300 million olfactory receptors in their noses, compared to about six million in us. And the part of a dog’s brain that is devoted to analyzing smells is, proportionally speaking, 40 times greater than ours.450

Dogs cannot recognize themselves in a mirror, but they can certainly recognize the scent of their own urine. Why should that not be considered a form of self-recognition on par with identifying oneself with one’s image in a mirror? Why should we think that recognizing oneself in one’s own urine is not a genuine, “thematic” mode of self-recognition? It seems arbitrary or chauvinistic not to do so. We might imagine an inverted world in which dogs are the dominant sapient species and humans are kept as their domesticated pets. In such a world, perhaps a dog scientist might design a test so as to gauge whether or not a human can recognize him/herself in his/her own urine. After observing that humans repeatedly fail such a test, the dog scientist concludes that humans clearly must not be aware of themselves to the same degree that dogs are. Such a conclusion is no different from the one that we draw if we suppose that dogs lack our own degree of self-awareness simply because they cannot see themselves in a mirror. To claim that my dog, Dexter, who can smell himself in his own urine, is not aware of himself just as much as we are because he cannot see himself in a mirror is to privilege vision over olfaction simply because vision is a sense upon which we primarily rely; it is nothing more than an anthropocentric bias.

Moreover, a dog’s sense of smell should, at the very least, humble us and our conception of knowledge. We ought to appreciate all of the phenomenal aspects of the world that are

foreclosed to us, all of the things about the world we will never be able to perceive or know, because we do not have a dog’s nose. Indeed, consider, for example, Heidegger’s apparent hubris in denying that dogs may be attuned to the world in the manner of “Dasein” without ever considering the ways in which the world might present itself or be known through their noses, or without ever considering the significant ways in which the world may not be disclosed to us because we lack a dog’s sense of smell. Heidegger notoriously argues that “apes do not hands.” I am not going to examine his argument for this claim here, but suffice it to say Heidegger does not, of course, literally mean that apes do not have hands but rather that they (and that all animals) lack access to predicative, apophantic judgment or to what he calls the “as such,” that is, that they lack the ability to understand concepts or to apply concepts to particulars. However, perhaps a canine philosopher could say, with much the same justification (or perhaps even with better justification), that “humans do not have noses.” At any rate, if we truly consider how stunningly sensitive a dog’s sense of smell is – if we consider the fact that a dog’s sense of smell may be up to 100,000 times more sensitive than ours – we should be struck by (or perhaps catch a whiff of) all of the things about the world a dog might experience and know that we never will.

And even though we will never be able to know the world in the manner of a dog, perhaps we should no longer exclude olfaction from our theories of knowledge. Olfaction has, of course, historically been quite marginalized in Western epistemology; indeed, it is hardly ever even acknowledged as a possible organ of knowledge. Nietzsche was perhaps the only philosopher to have appreciated it:

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This nose…of which not one philosopher has yet spoken in reverence or gratitude, is nevertheless actually the most delicate instrument we have at our command: it can register minimal differences in movement which even the spectroscope fails to register.\textsuperscript{452}

Nietzsche raises a profound point here, one that surely warrants more attention than I can give to it. Though surely our noses will never be as sharp as a dog’s, they may be capable of more than we assume, and indeed they may already be integrated into our experience and knowledge of the world in ways we typically fail to appreciate, in ways that are suppressed by a philosophical tradition that generally valorizes disengaged contemplation and denigrates corporeality or affectivity. Perhaps our noses are capable of far more than we commonly suppose, and perhaps, therefore, we might be able to train them to be attuned to the world in ways they currently are not. Indeed, perhaps our noses have lost their perceptual and epistemic potency precisely because we have been enculturated not to use them. Cat Warren, for example, observes that, despite its rather poor reputation among philosophers, smell used to play an important role in medical diagnosis:

…For most Westerners, it [smell] is a deeply underappreciated sense compared to vision. It wasn’t always so. Smell used to be a critical tool for physicians. Hundreds of years before we started exclaiming over the miracle of dogs being able to detect diabetes or lung cancer, doctors were using their noses to do the same thing. “Evaluating effluvia” was considered a basic diagnostic skill: Sweat on a rubella patient smelled like “freshly plucked feathers”; life-threatening diabetic ketoacidosis made a patient’s breath smell like “rotting apples”; a certain bacterial condition made the skin smell like “over-ripe Camembert.” Now we leave that job to lab tests and litmus paper.\textsuperscript{453}

Though we likely will never develop the olfactory capabilities of a dog, and though we likely will never rely upon our sense of smell to the same extent that we rely upon vision, Warren implicitly draws our attention here to the ways in which history and culture inexorably shape those things we are most prone to “naturalize,” including even our bodily senses and perceptual faculties. Of course, every form of flesh has its limits and cannot do or become just anything, but we also tend to forget precisely how labile it is, that it is always already shaped and inscribed by history and


culture, and our collective loss (at least in the West) of the ability to deploy our sense of smell in medical diagnosis is but one particular example of this. That we no longer really use our noses to “know” the world reflects not simply some inherent natural limitation of our bodies but, to an important extent, an enculturated, historically situated attrition of knowledge. One philosophical lesson here, then, is that an epistemology that tacitly privileges vision and that marginalizes or does not even acknowledge the epistemic power or relevance of scent is not only tacitly anthropocentric but also tacitly culturally and historically constructed even though it may presume otherwise. Another philosophical lesson here is that the tacit exclusions of such an epistemology render it deeply impoverished, and our understanding of knowledge and experience would be far better or richer were we to accord as much epistemic importance to the other senses as we have traditionally accorded to vision. Our epistemology would certainly be better if we considered and appreciated, even if from a great, respectful distance, the ways in which dogs’ noses and all different kinds of animal bodies know the world, if we allowed other-than-human modes of knowing to humble, decenter, challenge, and inspire our own.

So, to return briefly to the mirror test: bats and dogs may not pass the mirror test, but that is because the mirror test privileges a sensory modality that is not the one that bats and dogs primarily depend upon in navigating their environments. The basic point here is not that the mirror test is utterly useless but that it is designed in accordance with a human-centered experiential and epistemic schema that we often hardly notice as operative in its design, and that universalizing or essentializing such a schema, or that demanding that all non-human beings conform to such a schema in order to be considered capable of a certain perceptual or cognitive feat, is not only simply fallacious but is also bound to suppress and illicitly marginalize a great number of non-human styles of knowing and being; it is certainly bound to keep us from authentically “knowing”
a great many animals, or is bound to prevent a great many animals from “showing themselves.” In short, though surely human beings are not alone in typically depending upon vision, the mirror test reflects an “ocular-centrism” or scopophilia that is specifically human. Human beings tend to rely upon vision in navigating the world, and they do so to such an extent that they often take it for granted and construct theories of knowledge that tacitly privilege it to the exclusion of other modes of perceptual engagement with the world. Yet, we ought to let these other perceptual modes of engagement with the world enrich and transform our understanding of “knowledge.” At any rate, the ocular-centrism of the mirror test, or any ocular-centric definition of “thematic self-awareness,” is simply an anthropocentric bias, and since it is one that infects one of the most popular methods of investigating animal consciousness, we may reasonably wonder about the extent to which similar biases infect many of the other ways in which we think about and investigate animal consciousness. Not just philosophy – not just lucid phenomenology and (as I will argue) ethics – but even sound science requires a vigilance against anthropocentrism.

We have just seen that the mirror test illustrates the extent to which anthropocentric biases may tacitly infiltrate our scientific and epistemic practices not only to our own detriment but also especially to the detriment of those non-human beings we scientifically study or seek to “know.” We have also seen in general the ways in which anthropocentrism insidiously shapes our attitudes toward non-human others in general, often encouraging us to doubt the lived experiences we have with them, often pressuring us to suspend our attributions of various mental characteristics to them, often leading us to suppose that what we take to be a real feature of a non-human being’s interiority – or even leading us in some cases to suppose that a non-human being’s interiority as such – is nothing more than a construction of our own imaginations, nothing more than the result of a sentimental flight of fancy, or nothing more but a “projection” or faulty
analogy. Not only is such skepticism logically flawed, but it perpetrates profound epistemic violence against not only non-human others but also against ourselves as embodied knowers, for not only does it typically suppress rather than honor or “let appear” non-human alterities, it also causes us to doubt, suppress, or indeed attempt to excise from ourselves those sensibilities – those knowing organs and affects of our bodies – through which non-human alterities come to presence for us in lived experience. Though it should already be clear that the most common form of skepticism toward attributions of mental characteristics or capacities to animals – that even the very construct of an “anthropomorphic projection” or of an “anthropomorphism fallacy” itself – is rooted in bad epistemology (which is itself rooted in bad metaphysics), I now finally wish to clarify and critique the classical Western epistemological framework that tacitly motivates such skepticism, the epistemological framework that always tacitly motivates the suspicion that an attribution of a human quality to an animal – especially the attribution of a human emotion to an animal – is possibly just an “anthropomorphic projection”; it is the epistemological framework that always tacitly motivates the notion that “objectivity” demands we withhold any attributions of mental qualities to animals that might be informed by our lived, interpersonal, corporeal engagements with them and that we instead restrict our claims about them to the manner in which they may appear to us at “arms-length,” say under a microscope, on an operating table, or on the other side of a cage or pane of glass; it is the epistemological framework that is readily prepared to dismiss “anthropomorphism” – in particular, ascriptions of human emotions or affects to animals – as contrary to “rationality” or “objectivity” because it precisely defines “objectivity” as divorced from (inter)subjectivity and consequently restricts “knowledge” to knowledge of objects. This is, of course, the classical epistemological framework of the Enlightenment, and despite the fact that tides have certainly changed for the better (as this framework has been repudiated not only by
many philosophers but also by many scientists today who study animal cognition – scientists such as Marc Bekoff, Frans de Waal, and Bernd Heinrich – and who embrace “anthropomorphism” in their research), it remains deeply embedded in Western culture and certainly continues to inform the sciences. This framework, however, is wrong in every valence of the term, and it is important to take some time to expose it as such.

Skeptical and reductionistic attitudes toward animal subjectivities clearly tend to be rooted in the classical epistemology of the Enlightenment, that is, in an ideal of knowledge that would overcome the limitations and supposed distortions of subjectivity. Such an ideal of knowledge presupposes a particular notion of “objectivity”: it posits objectivity in diametric opposition to subjectivity and thus excludes from objectivity anything that may be credited to the standpoint – the perspectival, lived embodied existence – of the knower. Thus, this epistemological framework especially excludes emotion or affectivity from its conception of knowledge; it is a framework that regards the knower’s possible intersubjective, “personal,” emotional or affective ties to the “object” of knowledge to be at best irrelevant and at worst impediments to knowledge precisely because it conceptualizes any genuine object of knowledge as, in fact, merely an object, or at any rate as a truth or reality that must be absolutely independent of all “subjective” appearances.

Of course, knowledge of “objective” reality is the very crux of philosophy and science, but the issue is to make proper sense of what “objective” reality is or of what “objectivity” means. We know that every subject occupies his/her own perspective on the world and that the world outstrips any of the particular ways in which it might appear to any particular subject. Things may only present themselves to me and to others from one particular perspective at a time, and I know that no such single perspective or manner of presentation exhausts the reality of the thing in
question; I know that the “thing itself” is never reducible to any single manner in which it may appear to subjectivity. Now, since the “objective world” transcends any particular perspective, classical philosophy and science conclude that it is absolutely independent of perspective; since the “objective world” or the “thing itself” is beyond any particular appearance, classical philosophy and science conclude that it is absolutely outside all appearances; thus, in order to acquire knowledge or “objective truth” it is necessary – at least as a regulative ideal – to shed one’s subjectivity so as to penetrate beyond the veil of “mere appearances,” to extricate oneself as much as possible from the “encumbrances” of one’s bodily, perceptual situation in the world. However, such a conclusion does not follow. For example, from the fact that a table has the particular shape that it does independently of any particular perspective one may take on it, it does not follow that the table’s true, “objective” shape is wholly non-perspectival. Try to represent the shape of a table in a non-perspectival manner: to do so is obviously impossible, and indeed it is impossible because it is precisely perspective that is our very access to the shape of anything in the first place and is that without which the very concept of “shape” would be unintelligible; perspective is thus not something that we must or even can transcend in order to get at “the truth” of an object’s shape, and according to phenomenology this is the case with respect to any matter we may consider. A table certainly has an objective shape, but its objective shape is an ensemble (or “horizon”) of overlapping possible appearances, and it is folly to suppose that one would be able to “know” a table independently of all possible appearances. So, the truth or being of something may never be exhausted by any particular manner of appearance, but it does not follow that it is absolutely beyond all appearances, and a standpoint or perceptual orientation toward the world is, as we have seen, not at all an “obstacle” to knowledge but is rather a necessary condition of it. The invalid inference I have just described is at the basis of the concepts of knowledge and
objectivity that we inherit from the Enlightenment; it is the basis of the notion that truth or reality is entirely external to all perceptual, perspectival appearances and involvements. Once “objectivity” is projected in opposition to subjectivity, then anything that may be credited to the situation or perspective of the knower is excluded from the category of “objective knowledge” and cast into dustbin of the “merely” subjective.

In short, Enlightenment epistemology is founded upon an antithesis of subject(ivity) and object(ivity) that phenomenology reveals to be a false abstraction, an abstraction that tacitly depends upon yet suppresses the enmeshment of the two in lived, embodied experience. However much the light of the Enlightenment may have revealed to us, illumination always casts something else into obscurity and always has its own source in obscurity, though, blinded as we often are by the light, this is something we are prone to overlook. It is precisely the task of phenomenology to remind us of the worldly, perceptual ground or horizon of truth that scientific and philosophical analysis presuppose but often lead us to forget; its difficult and indeed paradoxical task is to thematize the pre-thematic sources of thematic knowledge, to bring to light what must always recede into opacity, and indeed to bring reason back down to the earth that always already nourishes it. The point is not to deny objectivity or to reduce the objective to the subjective, but rather to show that the radical split between objectivity and subjectivity should never have been made in the first place, that the polarization of objectivity and subjectivity – and the attendant (false) dilemma of absolutism and relativism – is an abstraction that presupposes yet distorts lived experience, and that it is precisely lived experience to which we must return in order to realize what we might call a “grounded” objectivity or an objectivity “worthy of the name.” Traditionally, philosophy and science regard perception as a barrier to the “True world” and forget that it is precisely perception that always already gives us a world, that it is perception or pre-philosophical,
pre-scientific experience that always already subtends and enables every philosophical or
scientific concept or article of knowledge. Again, such a phenomenological critique of classical
epistemology is not a reversion to subjectivism or relativism; it is not to say that “truth is
subjective” or that objectivity is an illusion but is to say that lived experience is our primordial
openness to truth. Thus, lived experience is not something we need to overcome or circumvent in
order to acquire truth, for it precisely is our immediate contact with the world that lets truth come
to presence in the first place. Phenomenology, then, does not repudiate “objectivity” as such but
only repudiates the misguided idea of objectivity to which philosophy and the sciences have
traditionally been committed. Here, perception is not “presumed to be true” but is rather defined as
our “access to the truth.”\textsuperscript{454} The point is not to invert the traditional hierarchical opposition
between reality and appearance or between objectivity and subjectivity, but to show that lived
experience is below this opposition, that the perceived world is, as we saw earlier, “beneath the
level of the verified true and false”\textsuperscript{455} and is, as such, the always presupposed, pre-philosophical or
pre-scientific source of philosophical and scientific knowledge.

The epistemological framework and construction of “objectivity” I have just described
remains entrenched throughout much of Western culture, philosophy, and science, and it
especially seems to be operative behind the scenes of what Frans de Waal characterizes as
“anthropodenialism,” that is, behind the scenes of a general skepticism toward attributions of
“human” mental features to animals, behind the scenes even of the very concept of an
“anthropomorphism fallacy” itself. Though scientists today are far more willing to ascribe
emotions and personalities to animals, such ascriptions are still often received with suspicion if not
outright hostility; they are often readily discarded as “unscientific” and thus (given an also widely
\textsuperscript{454} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{Phenomenology of Perception}, p. xxx.
embraced scientific definition of “rationality”) as “irrational,” since they tend to be rooted in a scientist’s merely anecdotal personal experience of an animal and since anecdotal personal experiences are not “replicable”; nor are the experienced mental qualities in question conceived as “observable” in the manner of conventional scientific, empirical evidence, that is, evidence that is verifiable (or falsifiable) from a third-person and not “merely” first-person or second-person perspective. Science – like contemporary analytic epistemology – largely remains wedded to an epistemological framework that privileges propositional, subject-object knowledge, a framework in which, again, “objectivity” is conceived as removed from subjectivity and in which proper epistemic relationships are therefore relationships between subjects and objects. Such a framework posits “S knows that P” as the fundamental, paradigmatic case of “knowledge,” where “P” is some proposition about an objective, mind-independent state of affairs and “S” is a knower shorn of any specific markers of identity or embodied existence. Since the “state of affairs” in question is “mind-independent,” the assumption is that surely nothing concerning “S’s” subjectivity is relevant to whether or not S “knows that P”; such knowledge has nothing at all to do with the sex, gender, race, class, personal desires or affects, culture, or historical context – in general, nothing at all to do with the embodiment – of the knower. Such an abstract form of knowledge, then, surely has nothing to do with any intersubjective relationship that might obtain between knower and known: how “S” feels about P, or whether or not S has some personal relationship with the content of P, has nothing to do with whether or not S knows that P. This is why, if one sets out to understand an “animal,” it is often considered “unscientific” if not downright fallacious to regard an animal as little more than an object. Scientific inquiry remains largely committed to the objectification of its object of inquiry (regardless of whether or not its object of inquiry truly is “just” an object). Thus, “transferring” qualities such as emotions and personalities to animals is
inappropriate; to do so is to regard one’s “object” of study as not indeed an object at all.

“Objective” facts are taken to be divorced from “subjective appearances,” and since in order to regard something as more than merely an object it is necessary to enter into some sort of “personal,” experiential relationship with it, to regard an animal as anything more than just an object – to regard an animal otherwise than from an utterly detached, third-person perspective – is to let one’s subjectivity “get in the way” of the sound, rigorous acquisition and assessment of “objective,” quantifiable and replicable data or “facts.”

The skeptical and reductionistic attitudes toward animals I have been critiquing here tend to reflect a general suspicion that to regard animals as more than “objects” is to let one’s subjectivity inform one’s research into them, and this itself reflects a commitment to a classical epistemological framework that conceptualizes subjectivity as, at best, irrelevant to knowledge and that therefore conceptualizes knowing as, ideally, disengaged spectatorship or contemplation. I have already explained Merleau-Ponty’s critique of the concept of “anthropomorphic projection” and of the skepticism it typically supports, but it is important to indicate that those who dismiss attributions of human qualities to non-humans as mere “projections” or as “anthropomorphism fallacies” usually do not just mean that such attributions are faulty analogies; they usually mean, whether explicitly or implicitly, that such attributions are faulty or “irrational” because they are emotionally motivated. Resistance to “anthropomorphism” tends to stem from the suspicion that attributions of human qualities to non-humans might be infested with “irrational,” wayward emotions and sentiments that stand in the way of the sober acquisition and assessment of empirical evidence or “hard facts.” One example that perhaps best illustrates this point is the extent to which Jane Goodall was criticized and even ridiculed for giving names and ascribing personalities to the chimpanzees she studied. As Goodall recounts it:
When I began my study of wild chimpanzees in 1960… it was not permissible, at least not in ethological circles, to talk about an animal’s mind. Only humans had minds. Nor was it quite proper to take about animal personality… The editorial comments on the first paper that I wrote for publication demanded that every “he” or “she” be replaced with “it,” and every “who” be replaced with “which.”

This resistance to attributing interiorities (“worthy of the name”) to animals, or this pressure to objectify or “de-personalize” animals in one’s endeavors to “know” them, clearly reflects not only deep-seated anthropocentrism but a commitment to an epistemological framework that considers emotional contact or any kind of intimacy between knower and known to be an impediment to genuine "knowledge," for it conceptualizes all proper epistemic relationships as subject-object relationships and conceptualizes "objectivity" as the negation or absolute transcendence of subjectivity. According to such a framework, in order to “know” something one must achieve as much distance from it as possible, and this is precisely the framework scientists usually assume when they cry foul about "anthropomorphism" or adopt reductionistic, objectifying attitudes toward the animals they study. As I will soon elaborate, I do not think that such a framework correctly describes or prescribes what knowledge of anything entails, but one might allow that it is appropriate when the object of knowledge in question is, indeed, an object; however, such a framework is utterly irrational and inappropriate – its application is in fact a category mistake – when it is applied to knowing not “things” or “objects” but living beings or subjectivities, the kinds of entities or phenomena that can only be known "by acquaintance." Knowledge of a living being or Other requires engagement and intimacy, not detachment and distance, yet such affective or relational knowing is anathema to the dominant construction of knowledge and objectivity that governs many scientific approaches to investigating animal consciousness as well as the general agenda of contemporary epistemology; it is the construction of knowledge and objectivity that is

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nearly always at play when someone bemoans "anthropomorphism" or thinks that emotional attachments "get in the way" or "cloud" one's understanding of an animal.

This classical Western epistemological framework is a false abstraction; it reifies the knower as a disembodied spectator, separates “reason” from emotion or affectivity, and denies intersubjective relationships as legitimate sources of knowledge. To be conscious at all is already to be caught up in skeins of carnal, sensuous relations with others and with a world, yet these very conditions of consciousness and cognition – carnality and affectivity – have precisely been suppressed by a long philosophical tradition that divorces them from knowledge, logos, and “objectivity,” a philosophical tradition whose ideals of pure ideality and universality and of disengaged contemplation were thus always built upon tacit, repressed exclusions that, as such, precisely demonstrate the impossibility and spuriousness of such ideals. Our primary relations with the world are thoroughly, irrecusably carnal and affective, so the notion that “knowledge,” “rationality,” or “objectivity” can or ought to transcend them in fact makes knowledge, rationality, or objectivity impossible. As Nietzsche (rhetorically) asks, “…to…turn off all the emotions without exception, assuming we could: well? Would that not mean to castrate the intellect?” Setting aside for now the androcentrism of Nietzsche's castration anxiety, his basic point is an important one that challenges traditional philosophical constructions of knowledge. Emotional or affective bonds with things and with a world are not contrary to “rationality” or “knowledge” but constitutive of it. Our fundamental relationships with the world are simply not subject-object relationships, for any supposed opposition between a “subject” and an “object” is already an abstraction from the enmeshment of subjectivity and flesh in lived experience that makes such a

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distinction intelligible and that enables any “objectifying” stance toward the world in the first place.

Moreover, without any emotional, corporeal ties to a world (and to others) nothing would even show up for us meaningful or “worth knowing.” For Merleau-Ponty, “…the relation between a thought and its object, between the cogito and the cogitatum, contains neither the whole nor even the essential of our commerce with the world…” Thus, any epistemological framework that privileges detachment from things and beings fails to acknowledge the affective, bodily bonds we always already have with them that make knowing them at all possible. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty affirms that any capacity we might have to represent the world to ourselves in any sort of way – hence even the capacity to articulate the world propositionally or in language – presupposes and is parasitic upon our affective, bodily, antepredicative rapport with it:

The structures of…affectivity are constitutive with the same right as the others, for the simple reasons that they are already the structures of knowledge being those of language. We must no longer ask why we have affections in addition to “representative sensations,” since the representative sensation…is affection, being a presence to the world through the body and to the body through the world, being flesh, and language is also.

In short, affective, corporeal relations with a world and with others are prior to, and the condition of, any “cognitive” relations between a subject and an object, between an “internal” representation and an “external” thing. Before we ever take to observe or contemplate things and especially other living bodies at a distance from them, we are already caught up in webs of corporeal, affective relations with them that defy any rigid demarcation between subject and object. My living body’s corporeal schema is already, primordially an “Einfühlung” with things, others, and the world; as an “esthesiological structure,” it signifies “a relation of being and not of knowledge.”

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458 The Visible and the Invisible, p. 35.
459 Ibid., p. 239.
460 Merleau-Ponty, Nature, p. 210. Of course, Merleau-Ponty is being somewhat hyperbolic here in saying that the esthesiological (affective) relationship between body and world is not a relation of “knowledge,” for it is clear from
In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty (following Husserl) argues for a distinction between “operative intentionality” and “act-intentionality”: the latter is “that of our judgments and of those occasions when we voluntarily take up a position,” while the former, which grounds the latter, is “that which produces the natural and antepredicative unity of the world and of our life, being apparent in our desires, our evaluations and in the landscape we see, more clearly than in objective knowledge, and furnishing the text which our knowledge tries to translate.” In other words, “act-intentionality” is reflective, representational, object-directed intentionality; it refers to our “cognitive” orientation toward things, that is, to the manner in which we relate to things when we consider them abstractly as “things” to be known, described, modeled, categorized, or manipulated. On the other hand, “operative-intentionality” is the bodily intentionality – the immediate, lived perceptual openness to a world – that makes “act-intentionality” possible, the manner in which objects are presented to us before we ever take to represent them or to attend to them in a reflective, “cognitive,” or traditionally epistemic way; it is “a deeper intentionality beneath the intentionality of representations.” Thus, we see that traditional Western epistemology precisely marginalizes or suppresses the “operative,” pre-cognitive intentionalities through which the world is first, always already given to us – the ways in which we “know” the world with and through our bodies and their affective attachments to things – and instead models “knowledge” on “act-intentionality,” that is, on our later representational, object-directed stances toward things. It is thus that “truth” comes to be regarded only as a

the larger context of his philosophy that he means it is not a relation of representational or propositional knowledge, but of course there is, for him, a sense in which we do indeed “know” the world through our living bodies’ affective relations with it. Merleau-Ponty simply means that we do not know the world through our lived bodies or affects in a manner in which traditional epistemology can accommodate because such lived, bodily, affective relations with the world are not strict subject-object relationships.

461 Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. xviii; see also ibid., p. 418.
462 ibid., p 121n5. In the terms of analytic philosophy, this distinction is roughly equivalent to the distinction between propositional knowledge and knowledge by acquaintance.
property of *propositions*, that “knowledge” comes to be defined only as knowledge *that* certain propositions are true or only as knowledge of *objects*, and that we begin to worry about how our propositions about the world, or about how our internal representations of the world, may ever be claimed to correspond to it.

I may, for instance, think to myself to have a piece of cheesecake in the refrigerator; in that case, I formulate a representation of the cheesecake in my mind’s eye: I am directed toward the cheesecake as an object; I internally *represent* the cheesecake to myself. But the *manner* in which the cheesecake is first presented to me – how I might feel about it, all of the affective or emotional associations it might carry for me, how hungry I am or how much I crave it, etc. – along with my body’s immediate understanding of where the cheesecake is located relative to itself, or rather along with my body’s general familiarity with the space in which the cheesecake resides, and indeed along with even just my body’s pre-reflective inhabitation of space in general and my perceptual receptivity of things before they ever become objects of thought, is precisely my operative-intentional comportment toward the cheesecake. In short, for Merleau-Ponty operative-intentionality is how I am (corporeally) situated in, and open to, the world before I ever take to “objectify” it or consider it in the detached manner of a scientist or epistemologist, prior therefore even to the very distinction between subject and object itself, and certainly prior to any questions concerning whether “attributions” of qualities to “objects” – or whether propositions about “objects” – involve any illicit “subjective” transference of qualities “in me” to them.

Now, it is surely the case that Merleau-Ponty moves away from discussions of “intentionality” (operative or otherwise) as he turns to consider more rigorously the nature of Being as such, since for him the concept of intentionality is inherently tied to the traditional
“‘consciousness’-‘object’ distinction,” and since Being is necessarily below or beyond the distinction between consciousness and object. Nonetheless, even with a turn toward investigating the nature of Being, Merleau-Ponty never ceases to elaborate the ways in which Being is disclosed through what he once called our “operative-intentional” comportments toward the world, toward things, and toward others; in his later writings, this concept only comes to be replaced by that of “flesh” or intercorporeity.

The lived/living body is neither an internal, mental representation of things nor itself merely an external thing in the world among others, and it therefore founds the very distinction between representation and thing, thought and object in the first place; the flesh of the living body – or the rather the compact between the flesh of the living body and the flesh of the world – antecedes and makes possible any representation or predicative knowledge of the world, or enables the meanings and phenomena we take for granted in all of our reflective, epistemic investigations of the world to come presence for us. As Ricoeur puts it, “when asked how it is possible for a meaning to exist without being conscious, the phenomenologist replies: its mode of being is that of the body, which is neither ego nor thing of the world.” Of course, Merleau-Ponty never denies that I can formulate and contemplate representations of things, but this is only a later, derivative reflective accomplishment and is thus in no way the primary (let alone essential) characteristic of consciousness or of the intentional relationship between consciousness and object/world. In lived experience, when I intend an object, I intend the object (e.g., the cheesecake), not an inner, mental representation of it that would stand between myself and the

463 Merleau-Ponty, The Visible and the Invisible, p. 200. This why Merleau-Ponty criticizes his earlier phenomenological work, claiming that the problems he had endeavored to solve were in fact “insoluble” because he began from this distinction between consciousness and object.
464 I mean here the flesh of the living body, not that of “the world,” which I discuss further in the next chapter. The “flesh of the world” is distinct from, though nevertheless disclosed through, the flesh of the living body.
object itself. Lived experience is not a screen of representations interposed between subject and world but is rather a dialectical – a reciprocal or quite literally conversational – rapport or exchange of meaning between subject and world through the flesh of both before one ever marks a distinction between representation and object, interiority and exteriority in the first place:

Although naïve consciousness never confuses the thing with the manner in which it has of appearing to us, and precisely because it does not make this confusion, it is the thing itself which naïve consciousness thinks it is reaching, and not some inner double, some subjective reproduction. It does not imagine that the body or that mental “representations” function as a screen between itself and reality.⁴⁶⁶

“Naïve” consciousness is never “naïve” in the way in which philosophers typically imagine it is when they pejoratively accuse it of “naïve realism,” the thesis that the objective being of a thing is reducible to how it appears directly to consciousness. Phenomenology rejects the opposition between appearance and reality, but that does not mean reality collapses into mere appearances. In lived experience, we know that the things we perceive are never exhausted by our perceptions of them, but it does not follow that such things are absolutely independent of perception or that our perceptions do not really reach them: things are an ensemble of overlapping manners of appearance. When I see something, I see the thing itself, even though the thing itself will always be more than what I may ever perceive of it. So, for all of the reasons just elaborated, Merleau-Ponty argues that “the possession of a representation is not coextensive with the life of consciousness,” that “…representative consciousness is only one of the forms of consciousness….”⁴⁶⁷ Therefore, any epistemological framework that privileges representational or propositional knowledge or that regards subject-object relations as our primary epistemic relations with the world is an abstraction that presupposes yet suppresses so much concerning what (and how) we know; it is a framework that suppresses the corporeal, affective conditions of

⁴⁶⁶ Merleau-Ponty, The Structure of Behavior, p. 186.
⁴⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 173.
any instance of knowledge, a framework that pretends (and that can only pretend) to deny
edowned, lived experience as the ultimate source of anything known or knowable.

Classical Western epistemology therefore commits a particular fallacy of reification, for
it abstracts fundamental conditions of knowledge from its conception of knowledge and then
privileges the resulting conception as the basic or essential, most paradigmatic form of
knowledge: it strips away everything that has to do with “S’s” identity and bodily standpoint in
the world and affective ties to the content of “P,” removes the larger phenomenal context in
which “P” presents itself in the first place, and concludes that “knowledge” is reducible to the
bare formula “S knows that P.” Of course, classical epistemology then sets as its task to analyze
the necessary and jointly sufficient conditions of such knowledge, yet since such knowledge is
conceptualized as purely propositional and object-directed (or third-personal), anything having to
do with lived, embodied experience – anything having to do with the identity of the knower, or
anything having to do with the knower’s experiential acquaintance with or affective attunements
to his/her “object” of knowledge – drops out of the picture; such factors are discarded as at best
irrelevant, though in fact they are foundational. As I discussed in chapter one, Whitehead refers
to this kind of fallacy as the “fallacy of misplaced concreteness,” and it is one that he diagnoses
throughout the sciences (especially physics):

…Substance and quality, as well as simple location, are the most natural ideas for the human mind…The
only question is, How concretely are we thinking when we consider nature under these
conceptions?...[We] shall find that they are in truth only to be justified as being elaborate logical
constructions of a high degree of abstraction...we get at the ideas by the rough and ready method of
suppressing what appear to be irrelevant details. But when we attempt to justify this suppression of
irrelevance, we find that, though there are entities left corresponding to the entities we talk about, yet
these entities are of a high degree of abstraction.468

To clarify what Whitehead has in mind here, it might be better to consider the ways in which abstractions tend to become reified in mathematics (for example, in geometry proofs). Consider first the concepts of “ideal” lines and points. An ideal line is a line with only length and no breadth, and an ideal point is a point with no magnitude at all, a location in space with no length or breadth; the former is purely “one-dimensional,” and the latter is purely “zero-dimensional.” Of course, it is impossible to perceive or draw ideal lines and points, yet mathematicians and scientists talk about them anyway. The point here is that “ideal” lines and points can only be abstracted from experienced or perceptible lines and points and that it is fallacious to think that such idealities in any sense “come first” or are ontologically fundamental. Ideal points and lines are founded upon our perceptions of things that occupy a particular position (or “point”) in space and that present themselves as delineated or distanced from other things. Such idealities are only abstractions and not primary or deeper realities. When we perform a proof in geometry, for example, we never think to include as part of our proof the color of the ink or chalk we use to draw the figure; the color does not seem to be relevant to the property we have demonstrated, and whenever we perform the same proof we always get the same result regardless of the color of the figure; thus, we abstract the color from the demonstration and conclude that we have accessed a truth prior to, and independent of, perception (or, more specifically, coloration). We conclude that color is in no way essential to the truth of the proof, but this is false. A truly colorless figure could never appear in the first place, and a figure that is not a possible object of consciousness (perceptual or otherwise) is inconceivable. It is meaningless to talk about the true properties of an inconceivable figure, for an utterly inconceivable figure has no conceivable properties at all (one might as well attempt to deduce the properties of a square circle). A figure that could never offer itself to perception (that is, an “ideal” figure) is in fact not a “figure” at all.
Likewise, an ideal line is a line without color and without breadth, but a line without color and without breadth would not be differentiated from anything, and so it would not be anything: as we have seen, a fundamental phenomenological insight is that nothing can be or appear except against and amid a pre-given background or horizon. Thus, a truly colorless “figure” is not something that could ever be figured in the first place. Likewise an ideal point is a point without magnitude, but a point without magnitude would not be differentiated from anything in space, and so it would not occupy any position in space (by definition, a point without magnitude would not take up any space, and so it would not have a position in space at all, which is to say it would not even be a “point”). Perception, then, is always already the condition of the possibility of the truths we acquire through mathematical or geometrical abstraction, though these abstractions, once acquired, bear a sense of necessity – a sense of timeless, a priori or trans-perspectival validity – and thus tend to conceal their perceptual, worldly conditions of possibility and intelligibility.

As I have suggested, a similar fallacy is committed by the classical epistemological framework that continues to inform not only epistemology but also our epistemic practices outside of academic philosophy, in particular our scientific approaches to understanding non-human forms of consciousness. When I was an undergraduate, I took an upper-level epistemology survey course the same semester that I took my first course on phenomenology, and both courses were even held on the same day. I recall that at the beginning of the first meeting of my epistemology course, my professor asked us to provide examples of things we thought we “knew” and to attempt to explain why or in what sense we thought we knew them. This quickly led to a discussion concerning the difference between knowing, say, “that George W. Bush is the President of the United States” and “knowing George W. Bush,” which is to say
the difference between *propositional* knowledge and knowledge by *acquaintance* (a difference that is marked in many other languages that have different verbs to refer to them). We also briefly discussed the difference between propositional knowledge (“knowing-that P”) and *skill*-knowledge, or “knowing-how to do P” (e.g., knowing how to ride a bicycle), which might be considered a form of knowledge by acquaintance. I then recall my professor drawing a big slash on the board separating propositional knowledge from the other two categories of knowledge and proclaiming that contemporary epistemology only takes an interest in the former, and that therefore various theories of the former were what we were going to study for the rest of the semester. Suffice it to say, this course contrasted quite radically with the course in phenomenology I had later that day, and this cemented for me the general difference between conventional analytic epistemology and phenomenological approaches to knowledge. Phenomenology interrupts our proposed conceptions or analyses of knowledge at the very moment my former professor drew that large slash across the blackboard separating propositional knowledge from knowledge by acquaintance or experiential knowledge, for it recognizes that the latter is the always presupposed source of the former, and moreover it simply draws our attention to the fact that the latter is a source of certain very special and important forms of knowledge in their own right that the former cannot capture or accommodate, namely knowing what it is like to exist in the world as a living, conscious being and knowing other living, conscious beings.

So, conventional epistemology takes “S knows that P” as its definition and paradigmatic case of knowledge. But why is, say, “S knows that the cat is on the mat” more important than “S *knows the cat*” (or “S *knows cats*”)? Indeed, having an acquaintance with cats in lived experience is a necessary condition for anyone ever being in a position to know any propositions about cats.
Moreover, the assumption in privileging “S knows that P” over “S knows P” is that subjectivity or affectivity is irrelevant to the sort of knowledge in question, but that is simply false. Subjectivity or affectivity is surely relevant to interpersonal or intersubjective knowledge, which is the kind of knowledge that precisely comes to be suppressed in the sort of epistemological framework I am critiquing here, yet we also ought not to overlook the fact that it is also relevant to propositional knowledge as well; indeed, as I just mentioned, propositional knowledge is precisely parasitic upon what we call “knowledge by acquaintance,” for object-directed intentionality – which is the basis for the formulation of any proposition – is parasitic upon what we call operative intentionality. There is always a broader context of meaning, a Gestalt, a lived situation, or a web of corporeal, affective relations with things and others that makes any instance of propositional knowledge possible. Assume that S “knows that the cat is on the mat.” Well, what puts S in a position to know this? Does S know the cat? How did S ever come know what a cat is in the first place? Did lived experience have nothing to do with that? How does S feel about cats? Even if S is indifferent to cats, that is itself an affective attitude toward them; indeed, every attitude one takes toward something is constitutively affective in some manner, and this already proves that affectivity is in fact essential to the acquisition of knowledge regardless of the extent to which we might repress it. How S feels about cats is also not utterly irrelevant here if we think that some standard of “reliability” and that external (e.g., psychological as well as environmental) factors play some role in justification. Suppose that S has an irrational, even psychotic paranoia about cats: he is deathly terrified of them and is convinced all of the cats in the world are “out to get him.” Naturally, for this reason, not only does he not own a cat, he has made sure to live nowhere near any cats, in an area known not to have many strays and in an apartment building that bans them. In his paranoia, however, he has
been known to look over his shoulder and glimpse a cat following him, only to realize it was just his imagination. So, he arrives home and sees a cat lying on his bed. Are we now prepared to say that S “knows” that there is a cat on the bed? Maybe there is a cat on his bed. But maybe S is also hallucinating a cat, as he is wont to do as a result of his paranoid, delusional fear and hatred of cats. Even the most “hard-nosed” analytic epistemologist will admit that the facts of this case surely undercut the claim that “S is justified in believing that P,” hence the claim that “S knows that P.” Indeed, the example I just provided is no different from often invoked examples involving inebriation in discussions concerning the nature of epistemic justification: under ordinary perceptual circumstances, we are justified in believing what we see, but inebriation undercuts otherwise reliable perceptual or cognitive faculties and thus undercuts any claim to being justified in believing (hence any claim to knowing) what is seen under the effects of it. My point here is that although conventional “analytic” epistemology tends to privilege propositional knowledge in such a way that suppresses or at least downplays our lived, affective, emotional, thoroughly bodily relations with the world and with supposed “objects” of knowledge, it is easily shown, even on traditional analytic epistemology’s own terms, that there is so much prior to or below the level of “propositions” – so much prior to or below our “cognitive,” reflective, representational, object-directed stances toward the world – that structure knowledge and knowing, and to regard such things in any other way is, at the very least, to commit a reification fallacy.

Subtracting (or abstracting) S’s embodiment and lived experience from his/her knowledge and concluding that knowledge is independent of embodied, lived experience is analogous to the example of reification I discussed above in which one abstracts the perceptual qualities of a geometric figure from geometric truth or knowledge. A necessary condition of any
kind of knowledge is that the knower be a living – hence embodied – being and therefore have
some sort of conscious and affective relationship with the world and with whatever it is that he
or she may come to know. Thus, what is necessary for knowledge – what is necessary even for
propositional knowledge – is also everything that comes along with embodiment or lived
experience. Yet traditional, Enlightenment epistemology abstracts all of this from its conception
of knowledge; it presents the knower as some sort of spirit freely floating in an abstract space of
existence, or in some abstract internal space of representation, at a distance from its “object” of
knowledge. The focus is always on “S knows that P” in such a way that “S” and “P” come to be
shorn entirely of flesh or any context of lived experience; nothing about S’s personal history,
identity, social situation, or body is considered to be relevant. S is thus conceptualized as utterly
disembodied: S has no race, no sex, no gender, no class, no history, no culture, no affective
dispositions or attachments, no species, no particular body at all. And whatever “P” references is
completely divorced from the broader experiential context or situation in which it presents itself
to S, as if anything can have meaning outside of a specific context of presentation.

If something else may be said to be “scandalous” in the history of philosophy, it is that
such a “bloodless abstraction”\(^\text{469}\) – that the schema “S knows that P” divested entirely of
subjectivity and context – ever ascended to become the paradigm case of knowledge and to set
the agenda for much of epistemology. It has certainly set the agenda for the sciences as well,
including the ways in which the sciences proceed to “know” animals; and it is also always the
agenda that tacitly informs skepticism toward “anthropomorphism,” since skeptical attitudes
toward anthropomorphism clearly tend to be rooted in the worry that one may have been “led

astray” by one’s emotional or affective attachments to an animal, that human emotions or subjectivity may have “gotten in the way” of “objective,” “rational” observation and judgment. Not only are ascriptions of human characteristics to animals suspected of being merely hasty analogical inferences (when in fact they are not fundamentally analogical inferences at all), there is usually the assumption that such hasty inferences are emotionally motivated. Anthropomorphic “projections” are nearly always conceptualized as emotionally motivated projections or impositions; this is why regarding an animal Other as a genuine Other – as a “Thou” rather than as an “It,” to use Martin Buber’s way of putting it – is so often considered anathema to sound “science”; it is considered to be so because the epistemological assumptions I have just described continue to hold sway in the sciences, because the sciences typically do not regard emotional or affective, intersubjective attachments as relevant to scientific knowledge and even regard such attachments as obstacles to it. The only possible objects of scientific knowledge are brute objects, so surely subjectivity cannot (or ought not to) have anything to do with the acquisition of such knowledge. As we have already seen, however, this whole epistemological framework is philosophically bankrupt, and indeed it has pernicious consequences in the world, both for science itself and for those living beings about whom science presumes to produce knowledge: it prevents science from knowing all kinds of important and wonderful things indeed, it leads science to mistake its own highly abstract models of reality for reality as such, and in reducing living beings and even nature as a whole to mere objects for human contemplation, manipulation, and mastery, it traffics in and reinforces toxic and oppressive attitudes that are at the basis of so much terrible and unwarranted suffering in the world.
Concerns that emotions or affects may cloud rational judgment, obfuscate objective truth and reality, or obstruct our access to genuine knowledge are clearly tied to false, abstract concepts of rationality, objectivity, and knowledge. The assumption that access to truth or knowledge requires an ideal, disengaged, God’s eye “view from nowhere” is one that, ironically and self-defeatingly, does not itself reflect such a viewpoint at all. The ideal of a standpoint-less standpoint is inherently absurd on logical and phenomenological grounds and has therefore always itself been far from standpoint-less. Moreover, such an ideal cannot accommodate our knowledge of others precisely because its paradigmatic, definitional case of knowledge is propositional knowledge or knowledge of objects (“S knows that P” knowledge). This epistemological framework reifies the third-person perspective as the primary mode of knowledge and thereby marginalizes or excludes knowledge by acquaintance, including knowledge that can only be acquired through a second-person perspective (that is, knowledge of others); even if it recognizes the latter as a form or source of knowledge, it does not take much (if any) interest in it and privileges propositional or subject-object knowledge, and in doing so it wrongly assumes that propositional knowledge can be divorced or abstracted from our lived, embodied experiences of things and others prior reflective, predicative thought and inference. The second-person perspective or, more broadly, knowledge by acquaintance is precisely how we come to know others. Though, as I have argued, no forms of knowledge ever truly transcend embodied, lived experience, knowing others is thoroughly corporeal, affective, and relational, and such knowledge is precisely what traditional epistemology suppresses or marginalizes. In traditional epistemology, emotions and interpersonal experiences and relationships are at best irrelevant, and at worst obstacles, to acquiring “objective” knowledge. Traditional epistemology begins with a dualistic opposition between subject and object and proceeds to define knowledge
as a subject’s knowledge of an object. Thus, it is committed to a conception of objectivity that leaves us with the rather absurd notion that the best or only way to know something is to be as removed from it as possible; of course, such detachment is not only a fictive abstraction but also an exclusion of other ways of knowing; in particular, it is an exclusion of intersubjectivity as a source or domain of knowledge in its own right.

So, I hope to have shown that what can most charitably be described as an anxiety over anthropomorphism is rooted in this classical, Western epistemological framework that represses our affective ties to others and to the world, that represses embodied, intersubjective experience, which is the always presupposed condition of “seeing,” reasoning, believing, and knowing; it is rooted in a false understanding of knowledge, reason, and objectivity (which we inherit mainly from the Enlightenment) according to which knowledge, reason, and objectivity are divorced from subjectivity, or according to which genuine knowledge is always knowledge of objects, always knowledge of “things” set over and against a disinterested knower. Once such a definition of knowledge is in place, it follows that proper knowledge requires that everything “subjective” – everything belonging to the subjectivity of the knower – be suspended or stripped away: emotions, affects, personal relations, sex, gender, race, culture, history, species, and so on. Not only is such a concept of knowledge a false abstraction, it also excludes many important forms of knowledge or ways of knowing, especially knowledge of others (or intersubjective knowledge).

Even if it were possible to know certain things by suppressing one’s own subjectivity or emotions and adopting a detached stance toward them, such a stance would be utterly inappropriate – it would be irrational or, again, a category mistake - if it were taken toward things that are not mere “things,” that is, toward living beings or others. Merleau-Ponty explicitly
acknowledges the connection between this classical epistemological construction of objectivity and common reductionistic or skeptical attitudes toward animal minds, and he argues that if the sciences are truly to understand animals at all they will have to relinquish their commitment to such a construction of “objectivity”:

...To become truly scientific, psychology must not reject wholesale our human experience of the animal on the grounds that such experience is anthropomorphic, nor should it, in order to become truly scientific, restrict its questions about the animal to those physics asks about an atom or an acid. Measurable relationships, we find, have no monopoly on truth, and our notion of what is objective must be completely redefined.470

As Merleau-Ponty suggests, the general resistance to “anthropomorphism” in the sciences is grounded in a notion of “objectivity” that is inconsistent with genuinely knowing a living being. The sciences tend to take reductionistic attitudes toward animals, or tend to take skeptical attitudes toward ascriptions of “human” mental characteristics to animals, because they privilege or regard as “objective” only “data” or “facts” that may be strictly quantifiable or replicable and consequently exclude phenomena that can only be known through direct, affective, interpersonal engagement with a being. One cannot truly “know” a living being from a disengaged, disinterested or emotionally flattened perspective toward it. Such an objectifying stance toward a being is simply wrong when the being in question is not indeed an object, and since animals are precisely not objects it is irrational to suppose that one would truly be able to “know” them by objectifying them. Thus, Jane Goodall was not guilty of some sort of irrational indulgence when she named and sought to enter into personal relationships with her chimps; it was those who demanded she do otherwise – those who demanded she observe her chimps from a detached point of view and only refer to them using impersonal pronouns – who were precisely imposing an irrational position upon her investigations of chimp subjectivity and society.

Even if scientific standards of knowledge were not inherently problematic abstractions (and they often are), the application of such standards of knowledge to intersubjective experience is a category error, and it is one that we commit every time we decide to “study” an animal from the vantage point of a disengaged spectator and think that such a vantage point actually discloses anything about the true being or interiority of the animal. It is the category mistake we commit every time we criticize a researcher for “anthropomorphizing” his or her animal subjects of study, for the implication here, of course, is that the researcher in question has illicitly let his/her emotions motivate his/her judgments, that the researcher has formed scientifically illegitimate personal relationships with his/her animals of study, as if emotional, personal ties to a living, thinking and feeling Other have no place in knowing that Other, or as if intersubjectivity has nothing to do with one subject knowing another subject. Whenever someone is charged with committing an “anthropomorphism fallacy,” such a charge usually means that someone has committed an unscientific and irrational indulgence, that there is something fundamentally unscientific and thus (given a scientistic account of rationality, which is often uncritically presupposed) rationally illicit or objectionable about being emotionally invested in the animal one is studying, that there is something wrong with letting such an emotional investment inform one’s beliefs and knowledge-claims concerning the animal. The assumption at play here is that one has allowed oneself to get “too close” to the animal one is studying, as if the best way to know a living entity is to be as far removed from it as possible.

Of course, as I mentioned in the previous chapter, the notion than any living body is a mere machine – a husk devoid of interiority – is a vestige and necessary consequence of Cartesian dualism. Yet, the notion that animals are “just bodies” and therefore “just machines” is a vestige not only of Cartesian dualism but also of the epistemological framework that has
implicitly governed science since the Enlightenment, the framework according to which subjectivity has no legitimate role to play in the acquisition of knowledge. If an object of knowledge is taken to be anything more than an object, it must be because the subject of knowledge (the knower) imparted such a status to it (or “projected” such a status into it); indeed, it can only be because the knower let his/her subjectivity interfere with “rigorous observation,” it can only be because the knower let emotion obstruct “objectivity” or “soften hard judgment.” I think it is clear, then, that anxiety over anthropomorphism is rooted in an epistemological framework that divests objectivity of subjectivity and that therefore takes knowledge of mere objects – third-personal, propositional knowledge, “S knows that P” knowledge – to be the essential, paradigmatic case of knowledge as such. This anxiety over anthropomorphism is part of a more general anxiety, inherited from Enlightenment epistemology, concerning the interference of subjectivity or affectivity in the production of knowledge.

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471 If this concern about “hard” things becoming “softened” conjures up associations beyond those having purely to do with the functioning of one’s intellectual faculties, this is no accident, for the suppression of emotion, affect, or in general (inter)subjectivity in traditional epistemology has always reflected tacit masculinist biases, or a privilege accorded to attitudes and ways of thinking conventionally constructed or coded (at least in the West) as male or masculine. Thus, I wish acknowledge that my critique of traditional epistemology here is indebted to the work of many feminist philosophers, not just to phenomenology. As feminist epistemologists, philosophers of science, and ethicists have argued, the notion that knowledge and objectivity require the divestment of subjectivity or emotion, or the notion that all epistemic relations are subject-object relations, is in fact little more than a masculinist prejudice that has been reified as a necessary, universal, impartial, and above all genderless definition of knowledge and objectivity. Traditionally, for example, reason is separated from and valorized at the expense emotion, yet reason comes to be implicitly aligned with “masculinity” whereas emotion comes to be stereotyped as “feminine.” The reason/emotion binary and hierarchy has always coincided with the male/female, man/woman binary and hierarchy (and moreover, it has also clearly always coincided with the “human/animal” binary and hierarchy). This is why Derrida, for example, often characterizes traditional Western metaphysics and epistemology as not simply “logocentric” but also as “phallogocentric”; it is also why there is much at stake in dismantling phallogocentric metaphysics and all of the binaries and hierarchies it engenders. Restricting legitimate forms of knowledge or knowing to practices, attitudes, ways of thinking, or orientations toward the world typically coded as masculine has had very little to do with the actual desire to acquire of knowledge and very much to do with the desire to exclude women from the acquisition or possession of knowledge, or very much to do with denigrating practices, attitudes, ways of thinking, or orientations toward the world culturally coded as feminine. Thus, the framework of classical epistemology is not simply a wrong description of knowledge, nor is it deployed solely in order to advance or reinforce an anthropocentric worldview (as I am suggesting here), but has also always been a patriarchal and misogynistic construct.
Emotions and intercorporeal relationships are integral to all forms of knowledge of the world, but there are certain things that truly can only be known through lived, embodied and emotional engagement; in particular, it is only possible to know others through emotional engagements with them. Emotions are essential to any lucid (or “rational”) connection to the world, but they are especially essential to our connections with others. It is absurd to think that the way to truly, optimally, or most “rationally” know an Other is to be as emotionally disengaged from that Other as possible, for in fact one cannot possibly have any epistemic relationship with an Other (qua Other) at all without any emotional, affective contact with that Other. To think that our emotions are irrelevant to knowing animals is to determine in advance that animals are mere objects. To think that the proper way to know an entity is to be as emotionally removed from it as possible is already to decide that such an entity is not an “Other” at all. Thus, the idea that one has “gotten too close” to an animal if one imparts certain human characteristics to it, or the idea that one has let one’s emotions “get in the way” whenever one attributes certain mental states or capacities (especially emotional ones) to an animal, is an idea that decides in advance that an animal is not an entity that one can properly “know” through emotional intimacy or engagement, and thus decides in advance that an animal is not a genuine Other or is just as object. And as we saw earlier, it is impossible to view an animal in such a way without reinscribing Cartesian metaphysics, for such a view necessarily separates subjectivity from behavior or the living body. If an animal is a genuine Other, not only is it appropriate to seek to know it emotionally or personally, but doing so is in fact necessary for really knowing it at all. And if one does not regard an animal as a genuine Other, then one reinstates the very Cartesian dualism one otherwise would likely reject, for such an attitude entails the willful suppression of the subjectivity or alterity that is inherent to being a living body. To think that we
cannot know animals emotionally, or at any rate to think that knowing animals emotionally is epistemically or logically inferior to knowing them as one would know a mere object, is to decide in advance that animals really are mere objects and is, moreover, to assume an epistemology that wrongly privileges knowledge of objects over other forms of knowledge and that wrongly divorces subjectivity from knowledge or “objectivity”; it is to assume an epistemology that accepts and reifies a false, abstract opposition between “the subjective” and the “objective,” between emotion/affect and logos, and that impoverishes or excises our power to know others.

One of most important lessons of phenomenology is that there is so much more to knowing than knowing objects, so much more to knowledge than propositional knowledge. Oppositional subject-object relations are at best derivative abstractions, not primary conditions of existence and knowledge. As Martin Buber puts it, “the life of human beings is not passed in the sphere of transitive verbs alone. It does not exist in virtue of activities alone which have some thing for their object.” The living body’s operative-intentional relationships with others and its milieu may not always be what Buber describes as “I-Thou” relationships, but they are certainly not mere “I-It” relationships, for they precede and make possible any sort of detached, objectifying standpoint. In any case, it is impossible to know an Other if one does not, in fact, regard an Other as an Other (or as a “Thou”). As we have seen, classical epistemology and the sciences privilege “I-It” relations at the expense of “I-Thou” relations, though the latter are indeed, as Buber argues, the foundation of the former, and though the latter are the only kinds of epistemic relationships wherein alterity may present itself. Husserl notably marks a similar

distinction between what he refers to as “the naturalistic attitude” and the “personalistic attitude”:

All men and animals we consider in this [the naturalistic attitude] are, if we pursue theoretical interests, anthropological or, more generally, zoological Objects… But it is quite otherwise as regards the personalistic attitude, the attitude we are always in when we live with one another, talk to one another, shake hands with one another in greeting, or are related to one another in love or aversion, in disposition and action, in discourse and discussion. Likewise we are in this attitude when we consider the things surrounding us not as “Objective” nature, the way it is for natural science. We thus have to do here with an entirely natural and not an artificial attitude, which would have to be achieved and preserved only by special means. In the natural life of the Ego we do not always – indeed not even predominately – consider the world in a naturalistic way, as if we were doing physics or zoology…”\(^{473}\)

Husserl’s distinction here between the “naturalistic attitude” and the “personalistic attitude” corresponds to Buber’s distinction between “I-It” and “I-Thou” relations, respectively, for the naturalistic attitude is that wherein we regard the world or others from a detached, objectifying standpoint, whereas the personalistic attitude is that wherein we are directly, corporeally and indeed, as Husserl mentions here, *emotionally* engaged others and with a world in everyday, prescientific experience. Husserl also clarifies that he, like Buber (and Merleau-Ponty), does not consider these two different attitudes to be on an equal footing, but maintains that the “personalistic” attitude is in fact prior to, and the condition of, any objectifying, “naturalistic” attitudes we might adopt toward things. Thus, “upon closer scrutiny,” Husserl writes, “it will even appear that there are not here two attitudes with equal rights and of the same order…but that the naturalistic attitude is in fact subordinated to the personalistic, and that the former only acquires by means of an abstraction or, rather, by means of a kind of self-forgetfulness of the personal Ego, a certain autonomy…”\(^{474}\) Husserl, then, simply provides an alternative vocabulary for articulating the points I have just discussed, namely that any epistemology that privileges propositional, subject-object knowledge over knowledge by acquaintance commits a fallacy of


\(^{474}\) Ibid., p. 193.
reification and also marginalizes or excludes from its scope any genuine knowledge of living beings or others.

If animals are “others,” then the “I-It” perspective we take toward them in the sciences is utterly inappropriate for really knowing them or for letting them show themselves. The only way to know that an Other has certain feelings or mental characteristics – indeed, the only way to know that an Other is an “Other” at all – is to be engaged with that other. Our emotions or embodied affects are integral to all forms of knowledge, but a detached, impartial stance toward an “object” of knowledge is especially wrong – indeed, not just ethically wrong, but logically wrong – when that “object” of knowledge is in fact not an object at all, but is a living being or an Other. The only way to know an Other is through emotional intimacy and vulnerability, not disengaged observation. To excise emotion or intimate, intersubjective relatedness from “rationality” or “knowledge” is to reduce all knowledge to knowledge of objects, even when the “objects” of knowledge are not in fact merely “objects” at all. This excision of emotion from knowledge or “objectivity” is a decision to adopt a detached, objectifying standpoint toward knowable, perceptible reality, and it is thus often a decision to objectify others (whether they be human or non-human); this is also, then, a decision to excise self from Other, knower from known; it is to excise subjectivity or genuine otherness from any body of knowledge because within such a schema the only bodies conceptualized as knowable are inert, vivisected, dead, or nonliving bodies.

To excise subjectivity from knowing is at once to excise intersubjectivity from knowing; it is not only to deny the role that intersubjectivity plays in the production of knowledge and (as I will discuss in the following chapter) in the constitution of objectivity as such, but also to deny intersubjectivity – concrete relations with others – as a domain of knowledge in its own right
irreducible (and in no way inferior) to that which is classically understood as the domain of “objective,” “scientific” knowledge. The objectifying gaze with which we regard an animal is one that we choose to adopt; it is neither an immediate or necessary given nor an axiomatic condition or default standard of “knowledge” or “objectivity.” The objectifying gaze of a scientist is a specific attitude that he/she adopts toward the world, but it is not the only one that is possible, nor is it even one that is epistemically fundamental, and therefore it far from merits the privilege we typically, uncritically accord it. Whatever articles of knowledge are derived from viewing animals in such a manner – or, as Adorno and Horkheimer put it, whatever “formulae and results…”[behaviorists] wring without restraint from defenseless animals in their abominable physiological laboratories – do not purely consist of value-neutral, ready-made “facts” or “data” read off of animal bodies but consist of features that largely (if not entirely) derive from an antecedently adopted (and ideologically motivated) imposition of a particular epistemological schema, one in which the only “things” that are knowable are “things,” one in which the only phenomena that present themselves are those that do so at “arms-length,” distanced as much as possible from the subjectivity or affectivity of the knower. Such “facts” or articles of knowledge are not complete fictions or illusions, but they also ought never to be “naturalized” as ready-made, value-neutral or apolitical truths, and still less ought they to be regarded as ideal or exhaustive insights into the being of an animal; they are also constructs, and violent ones. The basic point here, then, is that we will never truly “know” a living body if all we do is “dissect” it either literally with a scalpel or figuratively with abstract, reductionistic schemas of knowledge. Scientists and philosophers who approach animals with the epistemological abstractions I have described here kill or dissect those animals – destroy or dissemble the phenomena those animals

really present – from the first moment they subject them to their scrutiny. One simply cannot
know an “Other” in the ways in which one knows an object. One cannot know “an Other” qua
Other if one decides in advances to regard that other as a “thing” or as an “it.” In order to know
an Other, one must first decide to regard that Other as an Other. One must extend to an Other a
certain hermeneutic charitability, or what James Hart calls a “gracious act of attention,”476
wherein one affirms that Other’s otherness in order for that Other’s otherness to show itself at
all.

Though Husserl affirms that the personalistic attitude is the primary, default attitude
according to which we relate to the world that logically founds any “naturalistic” (i.e., scientific,
reductive, or objectifying) attitudes toward things, he acknowledges that scientists accustomed to
the latter wear “the blinders of habit” whose “restrictions…[they] can no longer break
through.”477 For Husserl (as for Merleau-Ponty), scientific objectification or reductionism is,
again, a particular reification fallacy, or the inflection of a derivative model or representation as
fundamental, primally present reality. Fundamental, primally present reality is the reality we live
before we ever take to model or re-present it, before we project it as an object over and against
our gaze, and certainly before we ever take to dissect it under a microscope (whether literally or
figuratively) and explain it partes extra partes. This is especially true when it comes to how we
regard animals: the notion that an animal is reducible to whatever we may forcibly extract from it
within a laboratory setting and from the perspective of a disengaged spectator is the very same
reification fallacy that leads to us to think of any living entity as an “object” or as a mere
“mechanism.” As Merleau-Ponty argues (following Husserl and echoing Buber), when we

476 The Person and the Common Life: Studies in A Husserlian Social Ethics (Dordrecht, Netherlands:
477 Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, Second Book. p. 193.
encounter a living entity in the world, we can choose to adopt one of two perspectives toward it: we can either disengage ourselves from it and position it in opposition to ourselves, or we can let ourselves encounter it as an Other; we can distance ourselves from it and regard it as just a husk of matter, or we can let ourselves enter into affective relations with it; we can suppress its interiority and consider it as just a “fragment of extension,” or we make ourselves receptive and thus vulnerable to it as another interiority, as another living, feeling, vulnerable, sense-making being that, as such, necessarily exceeds our full understanding or resists our mastery of it; we can objectify it or regard it as a mere thing (say, as a “machine”), or we can actually regard it as living entity, as a body dynamically oriented toward and involved in the world, as a style of being or as an agency of meaning:

If for the endocrinologist, “the crest of the cock is not other than the manometer of hormones,” as if the cock were made to be seen by an endocrinologist, it is because the endocrinologist does not consider it according to the truth proper to it. There are two ways to consider the animal, as there are two ways to consider an inscription on an old stone: we can wonder how this inscription was traced, but we can also seek to know what it means. Likewise we can either analyze the processes of the animal under a microscope, or see a totality in the animal.479

Here, Merleau-Ponty succinctly articulates the critique of reductionism that he develops across many of his writings and that I discussed in the previous chapter. One cannot understand an animal reductively any more than one can understand the meaning of a sentence in terms of the physics or physiology responsible for its inscription on a page. A vivisected body is never a lived/living body, and animals in cages and laboratories or under microscopes are likewise, whether literally or figuratively, living bodies that have been vivisected, that is, objectified and shorn from any context that would permit one to encounter them, or that would permit them to show themselves, as they truly are, or that would open up possibilities for achieving authentic, intersubjective knowledge of them. In just the same way that a human being is not reducible the

manner in which he/she may appear to the gaze of a surgeon, medical examiner, behaviorist, or neoliberal economist, so too is it the case that no animal is reducible to the manner in which it may appear to a scientist or zoologist (under typical experimental circumstances or according to a reductionistic epistemic or explanatory framework). To think otherwise is, like every fallacy of reification, to “mistake the map for the terrain,” that is, to substitute our lived experiences of another life with some model or representation or artificial containment of that life; it is to drain the life out of our lived experiences of a living being *as a living being* and out of the living being in question (sometimes literally). “The organism is not just a telephone switchboard,” and thus “…we must not confuse the *Bauplan* that the scientist elaborates with *Wirklichkeit*…”

As we have seen, Merleau-Ponty consistently critiques approaching animals with antecedent scientific and philosophical abstractions. Scientists often “take the plan of the animal into consideration only when the structure of the animal is assimilated to the structure of a machine,” but to do so is to approach animal behavior with an epistemically (as well as metaphysically) unsound and phenomenologically irresponsible prejudice. I wish to indicate here that, in the passage cited above, Merleau-Ponty does not only criticize scientific reductionism but also implicitly challenges what we might call the scientific or anthropocentric “gaze,” the typical standpoint according to which we observe animals and the sort of privilege we arbitrarily assume for ourselves in adopting such a standpoint. Such a standpoint precisely levels-down or forecloses any presentation of alterity. As Merleau-Ponty remarks, in taking a reductive attitude toward, say, the “crest of a cock,” one often uncritically regards it “as if it were made to be seen by an endocrinologist.” I think Merleau-Ponty’s point here applies to many of the ways in which

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480 Ibid., p. 145.
481 Ibid., p. 169.
482 Ibid., p. 168.
we typically regard animals (especially in the sciences). We typically regard animals as if they were made to be observed by us and for our own purposes, as if the particular epistemic framework through which we usually explain, conceptualize, and observe them is not in fact a particular framework at all – not a framework grounded in a specific standpoint, constituted by a specific (and usually problematic) set of assumptions and values – but a default, necessary, universal, utterly neutral and “objective” transmitter and arbiter of meaning and truth. However, the human gaze of a scientist is no more neutral or “objective” than the male gaze, the white gaze, or any otherwise privileged gaze or standpoint one might uncritically assume in one’s epistemic practices or in one’s relations with others; yet like all privileged gazes, the human gaze is one whose privilege (or even one whose status as a particular “gaze” at all) is precisely what is most invisible to it, such that it comes regard itself as a default, universal measure of meaning, truth, value, and knowledge. Thus, as I suggested earlier, the classical epistemological framework through which we commonly “observe,” study, and conceptualize animals is also inherently ideological; insofar as it reduces animals to objects, casts doubt upon our ascriptions of rich interiorities to animals, or in general discourages us from forming intersubjective, affective bonds with animals, it is a framework designed and deployed in order to entrench anthropocentrism or human privilege.

As we have seen, a mechanistic or merely physiological explanation of animal behavior does not reveal the true meaning or being of the animal. And as we have also seen, the conception of the animal as a mere machine is hardly ever a conclusion drawn on the basis of observable evidence but is rather usually a conclusion bootstrapped on the basis of metaphysical commitments and abstractions that we bring to animals in advance of observable evidence. We can (as I have been doing here, and as Merleau-Ponty does) logically critique the epistemological
and metaphysical assumptions that motivate reductive and skeptical attitudes toward animals, but, as I have been suggesting throughout this chapter, we also need to recognize that anthropocentrism in all of its various guises is not so much a reasoned position as it is an ideology and apparatus of privilege and domination (analogous to white supremacy or patriarchy); we rationalize it as a natural or metaphysical truth when it is in fact nothing more than a framework constructed and imposed in order to legitimate and maximize a contingent set of interests at the expense of the interests of certain others. The decision to define an animal solely in terms of whatever is revealed about it under a microscope or in a laboratory, and the assumed privilege with which that decision is made, are unwarranted and violent (both conceptually and ethically), and we must ceaselessly critique them as such; they obscure rather than elucidate the phenomena of animal life and rationalize (rather than genuinely justify) our continued exploitation and consumption of animal bodies. The objectifying gaze of the scientist or epistemologist is indeed – like the white gaze or the male gaze – a form violence. Anthropocentrism or human privilege is circular in a way that is vicious both logically and otherwise: we approach or regard the animal only as an object for a human gaze, and consequently we see the animal as nothing but another kind of object or piece of furniture in the world in opposition to ourselves as the very subjects of such a gaze. Animal bodies are regarded as objects or machines in opposition to minded human bodies because they are regarded as such by a human mind that takes for granted rather than justifies the Archimedean centrality of its own manner of being and cognitive/epistemic standpoint. In short, if and when non-human animals do not appear to us as “subjects” in their own right, they do not do so not because they really are not “subjects” but because we have decided to view them from an objectifying standpoint; it is because we assume (falsely) that the fundamental kind of relation is a cognitive,
subject-object relation and because, moreover, we royally assume the subject-position of every such subject-object relation. If all we set out to discover about an animal is what we can observe and analyze at the other end of a microscope or glass enclosure – that is, if we only ever seek to understand an animal as an object or mechanism – then that is all that an animal will ever be for us. It is in this way that human beings bootstrap and perpetuate their epistemic as well as material authority over the rest of the natural world. I hope it is clear that such an anthropocentric standpoint is as arbitrary as the once supposed divine right of kings, and this is no accident because, ultimately, the former is just as “theological in its infrastructure”\textsuperscript{483} as the latter.

Before I proceed to offer my concluding remarks for this discussion concerning the “problem of animal minds,” I wish to address briefly Thomas Nagel’s famous essay, “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?”\textsuperscript{484} Though I am reserving my full response to Nagel for the next chapter, his consideration of bat-consciousness is obviously relevant to everything I have argued up to this point; indeed, Nagel’s argument in this essay poses a serious challenge to much of what I have been arguing here. Fortunately, however, I think that phenomenology in general, and that Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy in particular, are able to answer this challenge.

The provocative title of Nagel’s essay is somewhat misleading, as his primary concern is not the nature of bat consciousness but the nature of consciousness \textit{in general}. Nagel appeals to bat consciousness in order to contribute to the debate that primarily occupies analytic philosophy of mind, namely the debate concerning the reducibility (or irreducibility) of consciousness to physical or causal explanation and description. Nagel’s position is that experience is essentially

\textsuperscript{483} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{Nature}, p. 88. In context, Merleau-Ponty is referring to various reductionistic conceptions of nature as “theological” constructs, but I think the same can be said of equally reductionistic conceptions of animals and of the conception of “humanity” that accompanies them.

\textsuperscript{484} Published in Thomas Nagel, \textit{Mortal Questions}, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012). All subsequent references to this essay will be to its publication in this volume.
defined by its qualitative or subjective character, and that the qualitative or subjective character of experience resists reductionistic or materialistic explanation and analysis. Now, I am not going to articulate Nagel’s *entire* argument for the latter claim, for what is most germane to the topic at hand is his position concerning the radical inaccessibility of an animal’s mind or interiority.

For Nagel, experience is defined by what analytic philosophers often call “qualia,” which refer to the directly felt or “lived-through,” qualitative (sensory or perceptual) aspects of experience, that is, to “what it is like” to have a particular experience or to be in a particular mental state (i.e., the painfulness of feeling pain, the bitterness of tasting something bitter, the blueness of seeing blue, and so on). The idea is that in order to have experience at all, it is necessary that there be *something that it is like* to have that experience (that in order to experience pain or to be in a “pain-state,” for example, it is necessary that such an experience or state feel a certain way, that such an experience or state be *painful*). In general, then, if an entity is conscious or “minded” in any way, there must be something *that it is like to* be such an entity, something that it is like to experience the world as that entity. As Nagel puts it, “fundamentally an organism has conscious mental states if and only if there is something that it is like to be that organism – something it is like for the organism.”

Importantly, for Nagel this qualitative or subjective dimension of experience is only available internally to the being who has it, or is only given from the first-person point of view. This is essentially why Nagel argues that consciousness cannot be reducible to materialistic description or explanation, since to describe or explain consciousness in such a way is to do so from an “objective,” external, third-personal perspective, and such a perspective will never capture those first-personal, internal, “felt”

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485 Mortal Questions, p. 166.
qualities of experience without which there would, in fact, be no such thing as “experience” at all
(for example, one may state all of the causal mechanisms that produce pain in the body, but none of
these will actually explain or capture its “painfulness”; likewise, one will never be able to
derive the “redness” of red from causes and effects that are not themselves “red”).

Given the skepticism that traditionally prevails in discussions concerning non-human
minds, Nagel remarkably begins from the assumption that there is, indeed, something that it is
like to be a bat:

I assume we all believe that bats have experience. After all, they are mammals, and there is no more doubt
that they have experience than that mice or pigeons or whales have experience…Even without the benefit
of philosophical reflection, anyone who has spent some time in an enclosed space with an excited bat
knows what it is to encounter a fundamentally alien form of life.\footnote{Ibid., p. 168.}

Nagel simply posits that it is obvious that bats have subjectivity and thus does not take it to be
necessary to demonstrate argumentatively that they do so. However, Nagel also posits that it is
impossible for us to know what it is like to be a bat, that a bat’s interiority is absolutely
inaccessible to us: whenever I attempt to imagine what it is like to be a bat, I inexorably only
imagine what it would be like for \textit{me} to be a bat, but of course that is not what it is like to be a
bat at all; it is not what it is like “for a bat to be a bat.”\footnote{Ibid., p. 169.}

It should already be clear how Merleau-Ponty would critique Nagel here; indeed, in each
of the previous chapters I have shown how Merleau-Ponty dismantles the dualism that implicitly
informs and frames Nagel’s argument in this essay, so I am not going to recapitulate those
arguments here. In short, the damming problem for Nagel’s account is that the opposition he
assumes between the “subjective” and “objective” points of view is not only, as Merleau-Ponty
proves, a false abstraction, but is also one that would make not only knowledge of a \textit{bat’s} mind
impossible but also knowledge of any mind impossible. Nagel does not consider himself be a strict Cartesian (since he does not conceive the mind as an immaterial substance), yet the opposition he assumes between interiority and exteriority is thoroughly Cartesian and, like any form of Cartesianism, it ultimately leaves us with solipsism. Nagel broaches this problem but does not acknowledge or address it adequately. He does acknowledge the logical connection between the classical mind/body problem and the classical problem of other minds, yet in the end he maintains the radical inaccessibility of a bat’s interiority. Nagel’s case for the radical inaccessibility of a bat’s interiority, however, depends upon a dichotomy between “the subjective” and “the objective” that renders any interiority inaccessible. There is a rather surprising moment in this essay, however, in which Nagel seems to recognize that his ontological commitments result in solipsism and suggests that, in order to account for the possibility of knowing other minds (whether human or non-human), one would have to rethink or transform radically the categories according to which philosophers traditionally understand reality:

This question also lies at the heart of the problem of other minds, whose close connection with the mind-body problem is often overlooked. If one understood how subjective experience could have an objective nature, one would understand the existence of subjects other than oneself…If our idea of the physical ever expands to include mental phenomena, it will have to assign them an objective character – whether or not this is done by analyzing them in terms of other phenomena already regarded as physical. It seems to me more likely, however, that mental-physical relations will eventually be expressed in a theory whose fundamental terms cannot be placed clearly in either category.

We see here that Nagel glimpses the necessity of exactly the sort of ontology that Merleau-Ponty provides, yet unfortunately it is one that Nagel himself is unable to provide. As we have seen, Merleau-Ponty precisely develops an ontology beyond the traditional categories of “the mental” and “the physical,” hence beyond the traditional alternatives of dualism and reductive materialism. Nagel, however, remains impaled upon the horns of this (false) dilemma; in the end,

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488 See the passage cited below. 489 Ibid., p. 178-179.
he is unable to abandon the dichotomy between interiority and exteriority, and this dichotomy
derails his argument into solipsism.

Not only is such solipsism unacceptable on its own terms, it is also inconsistent with the
very point of departure of Nagel’s argument in this essay. Nagel assumes that there is something
that it is like to be a bat, yet he also claims that what it is like to be a bat – that a bat’s
subjectivity – is absolutely inaccessible to us. If we examine these two claims closely, however,
we find that they are inconsistent. After all, why is Nagel so sure that bats are conscious? I
clearly agree with him that they are, but what accounts for this intuition? It is surely the case that
I can never fully know “what it is like” to be a bat, but if I am able to intuit that there is
something that it is like to be a bat in the first place, then it cannot be the utterly inscrutable
mystery or undisclosable secret that Nagel makes it out to be. As we have seen, such an intuition
cannot be founded on inductive inference, and if there truly were a divorce between “the
objective” and “the subjective” we would neither have such an intuition nor ever be prompted to
draw such an inference in the first place. As Merleau-Ponty demonstrates, the opposition Nagel
assumes between “the subjective” and “the objective” – between interiority and exteriority, or
between first-personal and third-personal modes of presentation – and which frames his entire
discussion of the problem of knowing “what it is like to be a bat” is a product of reflection – a
derivative abstraction – and is thus not at all an epistemically or ontologically basic given. Nagel
recognizes that the supposedly irreconcilable opposition between “subjective” and “objective”
points of view or phenomena poses not only the problem of how it is possible to know a bat’s
mind but also the problem of how it is possible to know any mind, yet he never once pauses to
wonder, then, why he is so sure that other humans (let alone bats) are conscious. As we have
seen, however, these problems remain insoluble, and the intuitions that motivate Nagel’s entire
argument in this essay remain inexplicable, so long as one begins from a dichotomy between the subjective and the objective.

However, I do wish to appreciate the refreshing epistemic humility – the hermeneutic charity and even the lack of anthropocentrism – that Nagel exhibits in his consideration of bat consciousness: he takes it for granted that we know that bats have subjectivity yet, at the same time, acknowledges the *alterity* of bat-subjectivity in insisting that we cannot know what it is like to be a bat. As I just mentioned, I think Nagel pushes this alterity too far, for he pushes it to the pitch of dualism (which is always a potential pitfall in any philosophical treatment of alterity); he pushes the alterity of a bat so far, and in general drives such a deep wedge between subjectivity and the extra-subjective world, that he makes any perceptual intimation (or appresentation) of a bat’s subjectivity impossible. Nevertheless, not only does he assert that bats are conscious, he also urges that the radical otherness of a bat or of any other “alien” kind of being should never entitle us to assume that they are devoid of inner lives as complex or valuable as our own. As Nagel writes, “the fact that we cannot expect ever to accommodate in our language a detailed description of Martian or bat phenomenology should not lead us to dismiss as meaningless the claim that bats and Martians have experiences fully comparable in richness of detail to our own.”490 Nagel’s resistance to common skeptical, anti-realist, and anthropocentric attitudes toward other forms of life certainly goes against the grain of much of philosophy (it certainly goes against the grain of the views I have been critiquing in this chapter), and for that I think he ought to be applauded.

Lastly, I have another reply (for now) to the view Nagel articulates in this essay. Nagel asserts that we cannot know what it is like to be bat, and *of course* there is something right about

490 Ibid., p. 170.
that. I certainly cannot know completely (from inside a bat’s own perspective) what it is like to be a bat. Indeed, I cannot know what it is like to be any other kind of mind exhaustively or without remainder: that is simply what alterity entails, and we must always take alterity seriously. Not only is it logically impossible to inhabit entirely a bat’s subjectivity, but any presumption that one could do so would simply fail to acknowledge or respect a bat’s otherness. The presumption that one can fully inhabit any other being’s subjectivity fails to respect that being’s otherness. However, we also know that, at the same time, another being’s subjectivity cannot be so alien that it is utterly inaccessible, for in that case it would never even show up for us at all. Again, though we do need to honor the transcendence of any other being’s subjectivity, we also cannot conceptualize that transcendence in such a manner that reinstates dualism or some kind of supernaturalist conception of subjectivity. As we have seen, the aporia of alterity is that an Other’s otherness must be inaccessible yet also accessible, that an Other’s subjectivity can never be known without remainder yet must also be, at least to some extent, perceptible and knowable. In general, one of the most important lessons phenomenology teaches us is that lived experience provides, and demands to be understood according to, a “both/and” logic rather than a strictly dualistic or disjunctive “either/or” logic (we will recall that the former is what Merleau-Ponty means when he speaks of “ambiguity”). That is, rather than think that an Other’s interiority is either accessible or inaccessible, it must be the case that an Other’s interiority is both accessible and inaccessible. The latter is not a strict, formal contradiction, for of course it really means that an Other’s interiority is neither absolutely (or exhaustively) accessible nor absolutely inaccessible. An Other’s subjectivity must be accessible to me yet must also irremediably exceed me.
So, I surely cannot know completely what it is like to be a bat, but I also cannot know completely what it like to be another human being. Moreover, not only cannot I not know completely what it is like to be a human being who lacks my various social privileges. Privilege inherently imposes experiential and epistemic limitations. As a white, cisheterosexual man, I cannot know what it is like to be a person of color in a white supremacist society, I cannot know what it is like be queer in a cisheteronormative society, and I cannot know what it is like to woman in a patriarchal society. That is to say, I cannot know any of these things completely or from “the inside out,” but surely it does not follow – and no one actually thinks – that I cannot know such things at all, that I am so utterly cut off from such perspectives or standpoints that they must be incomprehensible to me and that I can never hope to enter into bonds of empathy or solidarity with them; of course, that is not true at all, and though justice demands that I always take great caution in seeking to understand the perspectives of marginalized others – that I always register the epistemic limitations imposed upon me by my own privileged identity or standpoint in the world – so too does it demand that I seek to understand them, so too does it demand that I do not, in defeatist or quietist resignation, retreat ever further inward into my own identity or circle of privilege. And as I will further discuss in the following chapter, no standpoint or form of subjectivity in the world is every utterly isolated from or opposed to any other. Any opposition between terms – or any atomistic isolation of terms – is their mutual exclusion from one another (and vice versa), yet different forms of life are never opposed to (or isolated from) one another, for all forms of life are also forms of flesh. There are differences – often quite deep, significant differences – between different forms of embodied life, but in virtue of their embodiment such differences are never oppositional or strictly exclusionary. However radically different certain others may be,
genuine difference – difference “worthy of the name” – is never contrary to *community*, but is its realization.

So, on the one hand, I am compelled to admit that there is much about a bat’s experience of the world that will forever elude me. Yet, on the other hand, when Nagel claims that I cannot “know” what it is like to be a bat, my impulse is to say “well, hold on a minute, not so fast; let me *try.*” In other words, does not Nagel, or do no we, assume too hastily that we cannot know what it is like to be bat? Of course, one cannot know *completely* what it is like to be a bat, but if that is one’s standard for being able to know another’s subjectivity at all, then one would never be able to know any subjectivity except one’s own. So, though on the one hand we do need to respect a bat’s alterity, on the other hand I wish to ask the question: how much of an effort have we really made to know how a bat might experience its world? Have any of us truly attempted to get to know a bat? Is not the assumption that we cannot know in *any conceivable way* what-it-is-like to be a bat rather lazy or thoughtless? Flesh, of course, has limits, but it also creative and malleable; it is what Nietzsche calls a “plastic power.”

I cannot flap my arms and expect to take flight, but we also know that blind people, for example, can develop the use of a kind of echolocation. And as I discussed earlier, though we may never be able to smell the world like a dog, perhaps we can hone our noses to be more attuned to the world than we assume, and thus perhaps, in a way, we can participate in a canine style of existence.

So, can I know what it is like to be a bat? Can I know what it is like to use echolocation as a bat? No, not *completely*. But maybe I can know more than I might initially be inclined to assume. After all, how much of an effort have I really made? I have in mind here Deleuze’s argument (which he derives from his reading of Spinoza) that what matters is not what a body *is*.

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but only what a body *can do* and that, moreover, we do not even really know what our bodies can do:

Spinoza offers philosophers a new model: the body... “we do not know what the body can do…” This declaration of ignorance is a provocation. We speak of consciousness and its decrees, of the will and its effects, of the thousand ways of moving the body, of dominating the body and the passions – *but we do not even know what a body can do.* Lacking this knowledge, we engage in idle talk.\(^{492}\)

My suggestion is that when we reflexively claim that we cannot know what it is like to be a bat (or any other kind of embodied subjectivity), we are engaging in precisely the sort of idle talk Deleuze mentions here. A living body *is* what a living *can do*, and no living body can ever know what it can do (hence what it *is*) if it does not test its limits, if it does explore the further potencies or affects of which it may be capable, the further horizons of experience that may lie open before it, the perceptual, agential, or creative possibilities that may be latent in its flesh, simply waiting to be awakened by new relations with the world and with other forms of flesh. As Deleuze puts it, “we do not even know of what affections we are capable, nor the extent of our power... And we will certainly never know this, if we do not concretely try to become active.”\(^{493}\)

I think that Deleuze’s conception of the body here is absolutely compatible with Merleau-Ponty’s. Indeed, when Deleuze suggests that a living body is nothing else but what it can do and insists upon its inherent creativity and lability, or when Deleuze claims that the power of a body consists in the “affections, passive as well as active” of which it may be capable and that it is only in knowing the power of the body that we know “the power of which the soul is in itself capable,”\(^{494}\) this recalls Merleau-Ponty’s famous claim that “consciousness is in the first place not a matter of ‘I think that’ but of ‘I can,’”\(^{495}\) a claim that, as we saw in chapter two, informs the one he later makes that “the body is to be compared, not to a physical object, but to a work of


\(^{494}\) Ibid., p. 256.

\(^{495}\) *Phenomenology of Perception,* p. 137.
Like Deleuze, Merleau-Ponty considers the living body to be an inherently ecstatic and expressive, fluid and creative agency; it is surely not a blank canvas, yet at the same time we should never rashly assume that we know the expressive forms it may (or may not) be able to take, the styles of being it may (or may not) be able to enact, the affective bonds it may yet (or may not) be able to actualize in composition with the world and with other bodies, the ways it may yet (or may not) be able to transform itself, the ways in which it may yet (or may not) be able to "sing the world’s praises,\textsuperscript{496}\textsuperscript{497} the things it can (or cannot) do, the things it can (or cannot) know. And following Merleau-Ponty, the only point I wish to add here is that, given the profound extent to which our living bodies are already entangled with other living bodies in complex webs of intercorporeal interdependencies – given the fact that all forms of flesh are fundamentally intertwined, given the fact that our human bodies are already caught up in skeins of relations with \textit{non-human} as well as with other human bodies and that it is only through such relations that we know our own human bodies or selves at all – there is good reason to think that we, or that our bodies, are capable of being and knowing so much more than we might uncritically think, so much more than certain conceptual frameworks and abstractions would have us think, so much more than what we conventionally think of as “human”; indeed, as we will soon see, there is good reason to think that, paradoxically, what is “human” is itself already \textit{more-than-human}.

Let us finally consider the affective, intercorporeal relations with other living bodies (non-human as well as human) of which we are always already capable and in which we are always already implicated, the relations with other living bodies that always already inform our very concepts of the mental characteristics we often (fallaciously) worry about “projecting” into others, the intersubjective relations and phenomena that in fact come before any questions or

\textsuperscript{496} Ibid., p., 150; see also ibid., 151.
\textsuperscript{497} Ibid., p. 187.
worries about “anthropomorphism.” The lizard who warms its flesh in the radiant sun, the worm who writhes in mud recently moistened by rainwater, the dog who eagerly awaits and excitedly greets her human companion, the dogs who repeatedly return to and often refuse to leave the graves of their deceased “masters,” the cat who sits and meows by his empty food dish and water bowl, the cat who sits on my chest and purrs when I’m depressed or sick in the afternoon yet hunts and taunts its prey in the evening, the elephants who hover around a deceased member of their herd and shed tears, the birds who sing and dance and adopt elaborate ornamentations to attract potential mates, the raven who hides its cache of food from others who would pilfer it, the crows who remember and warn their fellow crows of the humans who have slighted or wronged them, the deer wailing in pain on the side of a highway, the rats who, in numerous experiments, prioritize liberating their captive companions in order to share treats with them rather than hoard those treats for themselves, the honey badger who repeatedly invents new ways to escape its cage, the parrot who incessantly plucks out its hairs because it cannot escape its cage, the mother whale who cries – and who can hardly stop crying – for her child who has been kidnapped from her and who lashes out against her human captors…do these not echo my own joys and delectations, my own anticipations and excitements, my own hungers and thirsts, my own griefs and loyalties, my own pains and pleasures, my own vanities and attractions, my own subterfuges and self-interested motives, my own grudges and precautions, my own oppressive (psychological or social if not physical) confinements and desires for rebellion and liberation, my own boredoms and anxieties, my own capacities for love and rage, for solidarity and selfishness, for tenderness and cruelty, for sublime happiness and inconsolable sadness? Do they not speak to me of the various raptures and passions to which my flesh daily submits, the manifold ecstasies or overtures of which it is capable – along with all of the vulnerabilities to which it is exposed – and
precisely in virtue of which it has a world? To accept that this is the case is not to embrace uncritically “anthropomorphism” but to repudiate *solipsism*, that is, to reject the very notion that there has ever been anything like an isolated, autonomous, internally translucent, rigidly demarcated “human” standpoint relative to which I may compare or contrast and presume to judge the rest of the living universe, a notion that is logically the same as the equally false notion that I, as an individual (human) subject, have ever occupied a standpoint in the world that was not already inscribed in and by the standpoints of (human) others; it is to repudiate the notion that any “standpoint” in the world is ever not already infested and entwined with other standpoints, for every standpoint is the standpoint of a *living body*, and no living body exists – no living body even knows itself as such – apart from other bodies who help mold its fleshy agency, other bodies who must continually teach it its powers and limitations.

Indeed, anything we conceptualize as “mental” is already enfleshed, or rather already abstracted from the flesh we share with others insofar as we “conceptualize” it. My understanding of what it is to “have” a mind or even *to be* at all – my understanding of colors and sounds, of tastes and smells, of pains and pleasures, of hungers and thirsts, of joys and sorrows, of virtues and vices, of beliefs and intentions, of space and time, of anything “mental” or phenomenal whatsoever – is already embedded within, or carved out of, a carnality I share with every living being, a carnal world with which all living beings are engaged in skeins within skeins of bodily, affective relations. Thus, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, “the ontic, the “*Erlebnisse*” [lived experiences], “sensations,” “judgements”…all the bric-a-brac of those *positive* psychic so-called realities…is in reality abstractly carved out from the ontological tissue, from the “body of the mind”…”498 Thus, other bodies’ schemas of navigating, exploring, responding to, and

making sense of the world – regardless of whether or not they are “human” – already synergize with my own and with one another because all corporeal schemas are “made of the same stuff.” These other bodies already “haunt me at a distance” just as I “haunt them at a distance”; their gestures already mirror my own, their interiorities already “echo” my own, their voices already resound within the chords of my own phonations, their intentional orientations toward a world already surge through my own limbs, muscles, and joints, their sensations and passions already tremble and scintillate through my flesh.

All living bodies are bodies that, no matter how different from my own they may be (and such differences should never be overlooked), are, simply in virtue of being bodies, “living similars” that will “insert themselves in the circuit of my hand to my hand,” bodies that will have already inserted themselves into my body’s relation to itself. Only through this “polymorphism” or “promiscuity,” only through this sort of “coition” or “one sole Einfühlung” between human and even non-human bodies – or only through what Alphonso Lingis thus suggests we call “bestiality” – do I ever know what I am, what my body is, what my body can and cannot do, the full measure of my body’s affectivity, expressivity, and plasticity. For example, do I not learn from petting a dog or a cat that my hands are a means for caressing and not just for grasping, for giving and sharing in pleasure and not just for taking or manipulating, for abandoning myself to another and not just for egoistic possession? And this is

500 Ibid., p. 224.
501 Ibid., p. 224.
502 Ibid., p. 224.
503 Ibid., p. 225.
504 Merleau-Ponty, The Visible and the Invisible, p 221, 252.
505 Ibid., p. 84, 253.
506 Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, p. 320.
508 See below.
reciprocal: animal bodies also know me as an Other or “living similar”; they exchange their corporeal schemas with me, they sometimes make emotional overtures to me, they recognize my living body as like unto their own, and in this exchange and recognition they too learn more about what they are as living bodies, more about even how to comport themselves appropriately in the world. As Alphonso Lingis beautifully writes (in the essay to which I just referred):

The curled fingers of an infant ease into tenderness from holding the kitten but not tight, and rumble into contentment from stroking its fur with pressure and periodicity that are responded to with purring. In contact with the cockatoo – who, though he can clutch with a vice-grip around a perch while sleeping and chews up his oak perch in the course of a month, relaxes his claws on the arm of an infant and never bites the ear he affectionately nibbles at, and who extends his neck and spreads his wings to be caressed in all the softness of his down feathers – the infant discovers that her hand are not just retractile hooks for grabbing, but organs to give pleasure. In contact with the puppy mouthing and licking his legs and fingers and face, the infant discovers his lips are not just fleshy traps to hold in food and his tongue not just a lever to shift it into the throat, but organs that give, give pleasure, give the pleasure of being kissed.509

My partner’s cat (“Mr. Bojangles,” or “Bo” for short) – who spends so much time prowling around the apartment in pursuit of imaginary prey, who often tears vigorously at his scratching post and also at furniture he is not supposed to tear, who pounces upon his toys with predatorial aplomb and ferocity – arches his back and gently leans against my leg, then stretches himself vertically across my standing body; with his claws retracted and paws pointed toward my torso, he meows softly; I understand he is entreating me to hold him, I cradle him in my arms, and he begins to purr; after some time, he is ready to leave my arms, and so he mouths one of my arms or hands: he bites down on my flesh, yes, but in such a way that is adjusted to a body he knows, a body that gives him comfort and pleasure, a body he loves and whose affection he understands in the same ways it understands his, a body with whom he wishes to communicate rather than one upon which he wishes to prey or test his fangs. So, he “bites” my arm or my hand, but never in the way he would bite a toy or prey. And at night, once my partner has gone to bed, when we

are alone in my partner’s living room together and I am sitting by myself on the couch with all
the lights off (while engrossed in a television show or video game), he will often suddenly spring
himself upon my lap or shoulder from out of the darkness and announce himself to me, yet never
in the manner in which he pounces upon his toys or imaginary prey. It is thus that he learns more
about himself, more about the body that he is. It is thus that he learns his claws are not just for
killing and trapping prey, that his mouth is for more than just eating and drinking, that his legs
are for more than just walking, running, and pouncing (upon prey), that his vocal chords are for
more than what they were for when he was a kitten and used them primarily to solicit food or
warmth from his mother, more now than for hissing in fear or anger or for yowling in pain; and
yet again, reciprocally, I learn more about my own being through its composition with his,
through the ways in which our affects and bodily intentionalities interlace: I learn more about
tenderness from his purrs and from the ways he sweetly rubs himself against me, I learn more
about communication, more about desire, more about affection and love, more about fear and
pain from his meows, his hisses, and his yowls; I learn more about the “boundaries” of all of
these things, and therefore I learn more about these things themselves.

These transferences of sense between Bo and I, between our bodies, are hardly different
in nature from Merleau-Ponty’s description of an infant who, clearly without making inferences
or intellectual judgments, clearly without the need to “reason by analogy,” responds in an
appropriately playful manner to the gesture of an adult who playfully pretends to bite one of his
fingers:

A baby of fifteen months opens its mouth if I playfully take one of its fingers between my teeth and
pretend to bite it. And yet it has scarcely looked at its face in a glass, and its teeth are not in any case like
mine. The fact is that its own mouth and teeth, as it feels them from the inside, are immediately, for it, an
apparatus to bite with, and my jaw as the baby sees it from the outside, is immediately, for it, capable of
the same intentions. ‘Biting’ has immediately, for it, an intersubjective significance. It perceives its intentions in its body, and my body with its own, and thereby my intentions in its own body.\footnote{Phenomenology of Perception, p. 352.}

This is, of course, a great example of the fact that we couple with other bodies – that we immediately sense another’s bodily intentions and also learn about our own bodies through that sensing – before we ever make inferences about others or worry about falsely “projecting” qualities into them (indeed, this passage occurs in the context of Merleau-Ponty’s refutation of the idea that we fundamentally know others through analogical reasoning). However, I wish to use this example to underscore certain points beyond those Merleau-Ponty explicitly makes here. This example nicely illustrates the intercorporeity that founds any sense-of-self and any abstract concepts of mental qualities, and it also reinforces the mutuality of intercorporeal relationships, for the playfulness of the situation here is co-constituted. Surely the adult must comport him/herself in a playful manner, yet the infant, too, must do so likewise at the very same time, for otherwise the exchange of meaning in question – the play – would fail; the exchange of meaning in question would miscarry, or the situation would not be what it is, would not be an exchange of pretense or a situation of play. The adult makes the playful pretense of biting the infant’s fingers, the infant perceives the significance of the adult’s smiles and laughter – lives the adult’s intended pretense – and thus does not cry or wail or struggle to flee in fear or in anticipation of pain but opens his mouth in mimicry of his adult partner’s mouth and laughs along, and the adult, in turn, responds to the infant’s perception of pretense appropriately, and he does so without having to reason analogically about whether or not he is distressing or frightening the infant. For this interaction to be what it is, the adult and the infant must be equal, reciprocal participants in it. The exchange of sense that happens here is strictly bilateral, and moreover it is through such a bilateral exchange (or what Husserl called “pairing”) that the infant
comes to learn more about his body, namely that his mouth can be used for play or pretense and not just for eating or for real biting, and he is thus also initiated into an understanding of the very meaning of “play.”

What is true concerning this infant, however, is true concerning all of us, and not just when we are infants: we never stop “pairing” with other bodies because we never stop being bodies, and this also precisely means we never stop becoming bodies, that we never cease to develop our sense of ourselves as carnal beings in and through our carnal relationships with others, and these carnal relationships are never, in principle and in fact, just between humans. I learn just as much about myself or my embodiment from my interactions with Bo – from the overlapping of our bodily schemas and affects – as I do from any interactions I have with other humans, and reciprocally Bo learns about, or rather activates, aspects of his own being he would not learn about or activate, or aspects he would at least not learn about or activate in the same way, in interactions only with other cats or only with prey. I wish to clarify that I do not mean to equate Merleau-Ponty’s example of play between a human infant and a human adult with the examples of my interactions with Bo. I do not think the exchanges I have with Bo are exactly like those I might have with a human infant, and still less am I equating Bo himself with a human infant. For one thing, I know that Bo is not “human” (his hunting behaviors are certainly sufficient to tell me that, though of course it would be wrong to pretend that we humans are not predatory in our own ways, even in worse ways), but the point I continually wish to insist upon, and one to which I will return, is that this does not mean that there is nothing of “me” in Bo or nothing of “Bo” in me, that there is no “humanity” in a cat or no “felinity” in a human: if the intercorporeity through which we become – and are always becoming – what we are attests to anything, it is that there are no boundaries, hence no categories, that are not fluid and porous,
that there are no boundaries that are not already constituted as such in and through exposure to, and composition with, other boundaries, that there are no “categories” that are not already implicated in other categories (or that are not already what Merleau-Ponty calls “ambiguous”), no “selves” or forms of life that are not constituted by ever shifting, ever expanding and contracting distances from others. Moreover, I think many of my exchanges with Bo, such as the ones I have mentioned, are more sophisticated than those I would have with a young infant. His efforts to communicate with me in the manner in which he gently bites my arm (as well as in all of the other ways he talks to me in ways he never would with another cat), and his affirmations of me as an affectionate Other in all of his other interactions with me, are, I think, more than “just” reflexive or mimetic in the way that the infant perceives the pretense of the adult and feels the powers of his mouth. Nevertheless, my intercorporeal exchanges with Bo – and my intercorporeal exchanges with non-humans in general – are not different in kind from those I have with other humans, and they are just as deeply and pervasively constitutive of who or what I am, just as constitutive of my understanding of what it is to be the body that I am.

Merleau-Ponty writes that “between my consciousness and my body as I experience it, between this phenomenal body of mine and that of another as I see it from the outside, there exists an internal relation which causes the other to appear as the completion of the system.”

We valorize the “mirror test” as the most important test of “self-awareness” or “selfhood,” and I have already criticized the importance we typically attach to it. But as intercorporeity attests, all of us – humans and non-humans alike, including even those non-humans who do not pass the conventional mirror test – have always already “passed” a sort of “mirror test,” so to speak, because they have always already “passed through” one another’s corporeity in order to be even

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511 Ibid., p. 352.
minimally conscious at all, because we were already “mirrors” for one another before we ever looked at ourselves in literal mirrors or attempted to “project” reflections of ourselves into one another, because we have always already developed, and because we never cease developing, our sense of ourselves as distinct, bodily beings by being together with one another’s bodies and with yet other bodies. My corporeality is made up of other corporealities. “My corporal schema is a normal means for knowing other bodies and these know my body,”\textsuperscript{512} and at the foundational level of embodied life is what Merleau-Ponty calls “the Universal-lateral of the co-perception of the world”\textsuperscript{513}: the world I perceive is (as I will further elaborate in the next chapter) always one I co-perceive with others, and these others are necessarily not only human. When Merleau-Ponty capitalizes the ‘U’ in “Universal” here, he really means it: he means it to include human and non-human perceivers. This is not a reductive or totalizing gesture on Merleau-Ponty’s part, but is on the contrary his recognition of the fact that all meaning and experience is constituted by \textit{radical difference}, that there is nothing I may ever sense or perceive or understand that is not already comprised of the perspectives of all other possible perceivers, that is not already inflated to presence and intelligibility for me by relations with other perceiving bodies, and unless we regress to dualism – unless we deny perception to non-human bodies – these include relations with non-human bodies as well as with human ones. So, as Merleau-Ponty argues, the (body of the) Other is necessary to mediate (“complete the system of”) my relationship with myself and with my own body, and later, as we will see, Merleau-Ponty further argues that it cannot only be \textit{human} others that do so: not only do non-humans, as living bodies, also naturally insinuate themselves into my carnal being, but I would not be the carnal being that I am – I would not be “human” – if they had not already done so and were not always already doing so: “humanity” is

\textsuperscript{512} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{Nature}, p. 218.

\textsuperscript{513} Ibid., p. 218.
constituted through its relations with non-human others just as much as an individual human being is constituted through his/her relations with human others. Indeed, what we call a “human” being, or what we affirm as any distinctive kind of carnal being, is but a particular expression of the carnal world in which all other living, carnal beings are embedded, other carnal beings that therefore are tacitly and inexorably swept up in whatever sense comes to be reflectively attached to any particular one (whether “human” or otherwise). As I will further discuss in the following chapter, “humanity” is constituted as such in its pairings with “animality” in just the same way that, in traditional phenomenological accounts of intersubjectivity, a (human) “self” is constituted as such in its pairings with (human) “Others.” Merleau-Ponty will argue that “the animal” is “the other side” of “the human” in exactly the same sense in which “the body” is the “the other side” of “the mind.”

Throughout this chapter and the previous one I have brought up the topic of love, and it is a supremely important one, for few things are as deeply constitutive of human flourishing as love; indeed, I think few things are as deeply constitutive of the flourishing of any living being as love. I wholeheartedly agree with M.C. Dillon’s credo: “No good love, no good life.”514 It is unfortunate, then, that love is still widely neglected in philosophy. There are surely many philosophers who write about the nature of love, but my intuition is that, were we to do the painstaking analysis of gathering such data, we would find far more references to, say, “death” and “anxiety” in our canon than to love. Though I think Merleau-Ponty surely overstates the case when he proclaims that “if we consult nothing but suffering and death when we are defining subjectivity, subjective life with others and in the world will become logically impossible,”515 I think this is precisely the philosophical tradition to which he is responding, a tradition that tends

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to suppress or marginalize love, pleasure, and desire in its conception of subjectivity. Merleau-Ponty’s remark here seems to be a response to the fact that this same philosophical tradition also (falsely) understands suffering and “being-toward-death” as private or radically inward and individuating experiences. Though ultimately I am sure Merleau-Ponty would reject such understandings of suffering and “being-toward-death” rather than concede them (since, for him, all experiences – especially experiences of suffering and of one’s own mortality – are corporeal, and since everything corporeal is also already intercorporeal), his implicit point here, I think, is that love and desire (which he increasingly emphasizes in his later writings) are intercorporeal phenomena par excellence, phenomena that are most clearly unintelligible apart from (bodily) relationships with others. It is simply impossible to conceptualize love or desire in the way that Heidegger conceptualizes being-toward-death, namely as a radically individuating experience, as a “pure understanding of that ownmost possibility which is non-relational.”516 I have no doubt that Merleau-Ponty has Heidegger (and likely also Sartre) in mind here when he claims that restricting one’s attention to suffering and death makes “subjective life with others and in the world logically impossible,” because existing with others or in the world at all means being caught up in webs of intercorporeal relationships, because subjectivity is necessarily intercorporeality. Love and desire are quintessentially intercorporeal phenomena, and that is why Merleau-Ponty comes to take such a special interest in them; it is also why he suggests that all sentient flesh is defined by the ecstasy of desire and perhaps even, therefore, by “love,” too; it is why, as I am about to suggest, we might say, following Merleau-Ponty, that all living bodies – whether those of humans, dogs, cats, lizards, or earthworms – are already loving bodies, that embodied being-in-the-world is already, in a sense, “being-in-love.”

Love is a complex phenomenon and it would take me too far afield to analyze it adequately, but as I have already suggested, an attention to it may help illustrate and reinforce a number of the broader philosophical claims I wish to support. To start, it is clear that love takes many forms: there is romantic/erotic love, there is familial love (which, for example, can be subdivided in a number of ways, such as love for one’s parents, love for one’s siblings, love for one’s children, etc.), there is love among friends, there is love for a mentor (which I think is distinct from love for a friend, though it may certainly develop into that), there is the kind of love that is directed toward more “abstract” moral and political goods and ideals (such as equality, liberation, and justice), there is aesthetic love (whether concerning a beautiful painting, a lovely sunset, a moving poem or sonata, a brilliant film or television show, a well-written and thought-provoking novel, an engaging game, or a pleasurable meal), there is love for activities or occupations that give one a sense of “meaning” (which, I think, is not reducible to mere “pleasure”), there is perhaps a love of place – a feeling-at-home-in-the-world – that is not reducible to aesthetic love, there is love for a community (which may or may not be tied to a specific place), there is even (healthy) love for oneself, and there are perhaps yet more I have not named. I love my partner, Byler, I love my parents, I loved my dog Sammy just as I now love Byler’s cat, Bo, I love my friends, I have loved many of my students, I have loved many of my professors, I love social equality and justice, I love teaching, I love philosophy, I love video games and horror films, I love Debussy’s “Claire de Luna,” I love Joseph Heller’s Catch-22, I love expressionism and post-impressionism, I love Chicago (for the most part), I love cinnamon buns fresh out of the oven: we understand that there are different shades of meaning that distinguish each of these examples of love, and that some may indeed by quite drastically different from one another (for example, my love for cinnamon buns is very, very different from
my love for Byler, as one would expect and hope); and yet, we have no trouble understanding
that these are all examples of *love*, and it is not necessary to project an eternal, Platonic *eidos* of
(capital ‘L’) Love in which they would all participate: it is sufficient that, to borrow a very useful
concept from Wittgenstein, they bear a “family resemblance” to one another; it is sufficient that
the term “love” designates an ensemble of different yet overlapping phenomena, each of which
seem to have something to do with positive affective, passionate, desiderative attachments to
things, others, and a world. Aristotle speaks of the “multivocity” of Being, and we can just as
well speak of the multivocity of love. Love is a broad and complex phenomenon, but it is clearly
real and intelligible; it has boundaries (not just any affective attachment or relationship can count
as love), but like the boundaries of anything in reality – like indeed, the boundaries of our very
love/desire-polarized bodies themselves – they are open and fluid.

My parents and I are certain that Sammy loved us, but Sammy was a dog, and so the
skeptic may yet reply that we surely do not see the living body of, say, a lizard or an earthworm
as suggestive of love quite so readily, nor do we have the same grounds to do so. But why not? It
seems that the problem here has less to do with lizards and earthworms and more to do with us
and our notion of love. Perhaps we need to rethink our notion of love so that we can see it
already at work in all forms of embodied life. Perhaps we need to open ourselves more to other-
than-human modes and manifestations of love. I admit that it is easy to see love in dogs because
they express it in ways that are similar to how we humans tend to express it. However, as I have
just elaborated, there are many different forms of love in the world. Does the fleshy cold-blooded
lizard not enjoy the fact that his body is warming against a hot rock in the sun? Because he is a
body, does his fleshy-being not include the fact that he is passionately connected to the world,
entwined with other subjects and objects in complex webs of affects and desires? This is indeed just what it means to be a living body.

Heidegger defined *Dasein* as “care” (*Sorge*), and he denied that non-human animals could instantiate *Dasein*; he no doubt would deny that non-human animals “care” about things the way we humans do. Leaving aside for the moment all there is to say concerning the untenable anthropocentrism of Heidegger’s distinction between *Dasein* and non-*Dasein*, it has been widely recognized that discussions of “the body” are conspicuously sparse across his writings (which is not to suggest that the body is absent from them entirely, but the debate concerning the role that embodiment plays in Heidegger’s philosophy is not one into which I intend to wade here). Perhaps this conspicuous sparseness of considerations of embodiment in Heidegger is explained by the fact that, once we admit the radical embodiment of subjectivity, we are no longer able to admit any *divisions* (which is not to say differences) between subjectivities, such as the division (or “abyss”) Heidegger thinks obtains between *Dasein* and non-*Dasein*. Perhaps the lack of attention he pays to embodiment helps explain why Heidegger is one of those thinkers in our “canon” who seems to have very little to say about love (yet a whole lot to say about being-toward-death, boredom, and anxiety, though of course these too are possible attunements only for bodily beings, and there is good evidence to suggest various non-humans are capable of them). The point I wish to make, here, though is this: is not “care” inherent to all forms of lived embodiment? Heidegger surely denies that lizards care about things in the same way that human beings do, but I cannot see how it is tenable to maintain any radical, ontological rift between human and non-human modes of care once we admit that all modes of care, like all modes of subjectivity in general, are inherently *enfleshed*, inherently implicated in relations between one’s own flesh and the flesh of others and that of the world, because all forms of flesh – no matter
how different they are from one another – are continuous, and because once we realize that our flesh already couples with other forms of flesh, so too do we realize, as Merleau-Ponty does, that our flesh already bears the traces and inscriptions of non-human as well as human flesh, that any extension of our flesh – whether it be “care” or love or the anxiety concerning death with which Heidegger was preoccupied – is also already an extension of the flesh of others, already an extension into the flesh of others, already an extension of and into the flesh of other humans, yes, but also an extension of and into the flesh of any living, fleshy being, including that of a lizard or an earthworm.

So, is not all sentient flesh “care-ful”? Is not all sentient flesh desirously oriented toward others and a world? As I will mention in the next chapter, Merleau-Ponty was critical of teleology in the classical (or conventional) sense of the term, but I think it is reasonable to say that all living beings express a telos in a broad sense of the term, that is, a directedness toward a Good (or set of goods). A “telos” need not be some antecedent immaterial “form” or essence somehow stamped onto/into matter or that determines the development of an organism from on high; it need only refer to the fact that as soon as a living, bodily being exists there is something for that being to flourish (or to fail to flourish), that to be embodied is already to be affectively connected to the world and, of course, immersed in affective relations with other bodies, hence immersed in a world of shared pleasures and pains, benefits and harms, excellences and deficiencies, goods and bads. Perhaps this is all Aristotle really meant by “telos.” In any case, then, is not to be enfleshed already to be embedded in relations of care? Is not to be enfleshed already, in a sense, to be in love? When we see earthworms squirming in mud, does it not make the most sense to see in their squirming a form of joy, a love of the earth, a kind of passion? To do so would not be to impose a “projection” on them; or if it is to “project” something into them,
it is something that we, as Merleau-Ponty argues, have already taken (“introjected”) from them – something we have already developed a sense of in and through our carnal relations with heterogenous carnalities – in the first place. Such ascriptions of love would not be the addition of something to their behavior. To see love in a lizard basking in the sun or in the frenzied, ecstatic squirming of a worm in mud would not be to see the comportment of the lizard or the squirming of the worm and then think that there must also be a component of love there, but rather it would be to see former’s submission to the sun and the latter’s squirming in the mud as love; it would be to see that what it means to be a living body is to be invested in parts of the world and in various activities with love. This is what Merleau-Ponty means when he claims that behavior is not a mere sign or indication of mindedness – not the external signifier of an internal (and internally translucent), preformed signified (i.e., a “mental state”) – but rather its immediate, direct expression as such. As I discussed in the previous chapters, Merleau-Ponty never denies the distinction between consciousness (interiority) and behavior (exteriority) but nevertheless argues that they are necessarily, intrinsically blended into one another: consciousness cannot be divorced from the living body and its behaviors, yet it certainly cannot be reduced to it (as behaviorism, for example, maintains); they are inseparable yet distinct or non-coincident, and thus as a whole demonstrate what Merleau-Ponty often calls “ambiguity.” This ambiguity is inherent to every form of consciousness and behavior, and it is precisely this ambiguity that, as we have seen, ensures we have direct access to others while also ensuring others will always be truly other, never completely accessible, never on display in the world without remainder. This ambiguity also ensures the possibility that we may be mistaken about the inner lives of others just as much as it ensures the possibility of knowing and participating in their inner lives. Thus, “gestures are expressive in the manner of a language, but this does not signify that they would
only be identical with lived experience.”\textsuperscript{517} Consciousness must be given directly through behavior, yet it is never identical with it.

Indeed, Merleau-Ponty’s conception of the relationship between subjectivity and the body extends to his entire philosophy of language. Though I cannot further pursue his philosophy of language here (as that would require its own very extensive treatment), it is relevant to mention that, for Merleau-Ponty, the relation between signifier and signified is exactly the same as the relation between behavior (exteriority) and mind (interiority). As Merleau-Ponty writes, “the meaning is not on the phrase like the butter on the bread, like a second layer of “psychic reality” spread over the sound….”\textsuperscript{518} So, as we have seen, Merleau-Ponty argues that I no more need to infer consciousness from behavior than I need to infer meaning from some material signifier: behavior is to consciousness as signifier is to signified, and this is not simply an accidental parallel or analogy, because for Merleau-Ponty not only is language already behavior, but behavior – even the “simplest” kind – is also already language (or is, at any rate, already a “tacit language”): “An organ of the mobile senses (the eye, the hand) is already a language because it is an interrogation (movement) and response (perception as \textit{Erfüllung} [fulfillment, realization] of a project… it is a tacit language.”\textsuperscript{519} Even “an eye that inspects the landscape”\textsuperscript{520} is inherently a semiotic phenomenon – a sense-laden and sense-making act – because it is an “interrogation and response.”\textsuperscript{521} Any manner in which a body is perceptually oriented toward and engaged with a world is a responsiveness to meaning – an exploratory and creative comportment toward a situation (\textit{Gestalt}) – that is, as such, itself

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\textsuperscript{517} Child Psychology and Pedagogy: The Sorbonne Lectures 1949-1952, p. 446.
\textsuperscript{518} The Visible and the Invisible, p. 155.
\textsuperscript{519} Merleau-Ponty, Nature, p. 211.
\textsuperscript{520} Ibid., p. 226.
\textsuperscript{521} Ibid., p. 226.
\end{flushright}
inherently communicative or semiotic. And so Merleau-Ponty will even say that “the study of the appearance of animals takes on interest when we understand this appearance as a language.”

The point here, again, is that when I perceive a “mental” characteristic in a form of behavior (whether human or otherwise), my perception is not necessarily veridical, yet that does not mean that I am “inferring” the mental characteristic in question; it does not mean that I am adding something to the behavior. As we discussed concerning the nature of emotion, when I give Byler a gift for Valentine’s Day and she smiles and I perceive that she is happy, it may of course be the case that she hates the gift and is only pretending otherwise in order to protect my feelings. Yet, I do not perceive the smile (in combination with any other relevant aspects of her behavior, such as perhaps her tone of voice in reaction to the gift, or her using her hands to express surprise or excitement, etc.), then mentally draw an association between smiling and happiness, and then tack happiness on to her behavior: her happiness is immediately co-given with her behavior (similar to the manner in which the north-facing side of a building is immediately co-given with its south-facing side). I do not see her smile and then think she is happy: I see her happiness (through her smile). Naturally, Byler might be dissembling (and perhaps the building I am now viewing is in fact a two-dimensional movie-prop), but that does not negate the fact that thought or consciousness is always incarnate, thus always directly presenced with behavior as an irreducible whole, and if things are not as they appear – if Byler is indeed concealing her true feelings from me – then the truth of the matter may only reveal itself (if it ever does) through the further unfolding of lived experience, through yet another form of behavior with which it will be co-given (in the same way that the two-dimensionality of a movie prop would have to present itself to me directly through my further engagements with it). And

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522 Ibid., p. 188.
why should things be any different concerning Byler’s cat, Bo, or concerning lizards or earthworms? Surely my access to Bo’s interiority is at best very partial and in some cases I might be wrong about his thoughts, feelings, or intentions, but when I come into the apartment after having been away for nearly a week and he meows at me, approaches me, arches his back and rubs his body against my legs, then stretches his paws toward me so that I will lift him up and cradle him in my arms, and then when, once I do so, he begins to purr gutturally as I stroke his fur, I perceive him to be greeting me with warmth and love just as much, just as immediately and directly, as I perceive Byler to be doing the same when, following close behind him, she throws her arms around me, kisses me, and tells me she missed me. And when I see a lizard sunbathing or a worm writhing in recently moistened earth (apparently heading nowhere in particular), I see pleasure and joy there. Behavior is always ambiguous (in Merleau-Ponty’s technical sense of the term), yet it is always a direct – never intermediary – expression of mindedness. All gestures, behaviors, or meaningful phenomena come to us with their meanings already infused into them, and though it is typically objected that this would render their meanings transparent from the outside, it is in fact for that very reason that their meanings can never be transparent (either to us who receive them from without, or even to those who live or formulate them “from within” and communicate them to us). Subjectivity or forms of meaning can never be transparent because they are intrinsically enmeshed with corporeality, and this of lack transparency is indeed the price we pay for being able to know or communicate with others at all.

We can never be absolutely sure about the interior lives of other human beings, so of course we also can never be absolutely sure about the interior lives of non-human beings. My contention, though, is that there is no good reason for a double-standard to inform how we regard or frame interpretations of human and non-human bodily comportments and expressions (such
that, for example, we worry about “anthropomorphizing” the latter while never harboring
logically analogous worries concerning our perceptual orientations toward the former). We
surely should not homogenize human and non-human ways of, say, caring about/for or loving
things, which would be just as reductive as supposing that non-human bodies cannot care
about/for or love things at all (or in ways that are at least worthy of those labels). Lizards and
earthworms may care about or love different things from those that humans do, and they may
care about or love things differently from the ways that humans do, but I think they nevertheless
care – even love – things all the same. Why do I think this? Better put: why do I see this?
Perhaps the better question would be: why do some people not think or see this? As I mentioned
above and as anyone would agree, love is a complex phenomenon with diverse, often quite
drastically different, forms and manifestations. Love is multivocal. So why should not
indefinitely many – human as well as non-human – voices speak of it? Why should not
indefinitely many bodies or bodily comportments express it? Just the examples of human love I
provided earlier force us to realize that "love" is a category broad enough to include many
different types of love and thus, in principle, many different types of loving-beings, or many
different types of bodies capable of loving. So again, why should there not be as many ways to
love as there are to be a body? Why should there not be indefinitely many ways to express love,
even indefinitely many ways to say “I love you”? Unless one draws a line between human and
all non-human bodies and reserves the name of “love” only for certain expressions of pleasure,
affection, and desire on the former side of that line, this is the claim we are compelled to accept.

Moreover (and as I also suggested earlier), I think we are compelled to accept this claim
because we are compelled to realize that love and desire, in at least certain legitimate senses of
those words, are already operative in all forms of life. Merleau-Ponty makes precisely this point
late in his career when he begins to emphasize (in ways that seem to adumbrate what would have been a serious and surely fascinating engagement with Freud) the inherently desirous or libidinous nature of the living body:

…The body as corporal schema, the esthesiological body, the flesh, have already given us the Einfühlung [empathy] of the body with perceived being and with other bodies. That is, the body as the power of Einfühlung is already desire, libido, projection-introjection…

It is important to note that Merleau-Ponty does not use the term “projection” here in the sense in which he criticizes the concept elsewhere (as we have seen, in the contexts in which he criticizes the concept it refers to an intellectual judgment or analogical inference). Here, rather, it refers to a pre-reflective (reflexive) corporeal transference of sense to another body, and it is always to be taken together with “introjection,” or a pre-reflective (reflexive) corporeal receptivity of sense from another body. Thus, “my corporal schema is projected in the others and is also introjected…,” and “the psychological mechanisms of introjection and projection, instead of appearing as spiritual operations, must be comprised as modalities of the body’s activity.”

In other words, “projection-introjection” just means intercorporeity, or the immediate, reciprocal exchange of meanings that unfolds between living bodies in their encounters with one another and that founds any “projection” of qualities from one embodied being to another in the more common sense of the term.

Thus, “projection-introjection” is Merleau-Ponty’s appropriation of Husserl’s concept of “pairing” (and it exhibits at the level of embodied life the kind of relationality he will find operative at all levels of reality, which he calls “the chiasm”). So, for Merleau-Ponty it is obvious that there is a dimension of desire intrinsic to all intercorporeal relationships and, therefore, intrinsic to all forms of life as such (for indeed, no living body exists in isolation). In

524 Ibid. p. 225.
many of the contexts in which Merleau-Ponty discusses the libidinous dimension of
embodiment, it is true that he mainly has in mind human embodiment. Yet restricting desire,
pleasure, and love only to human bodies would clearly be inconsistent with everything he argues,
so throughout his late course on Nature not only does he explicitly affirm that many animal
behaviors cannot be interpreted narrowly in an “adaptationist” or “utilitarian” way (as directed
toward the mere satisfaction of niche needs) but must often be understood as things done simply
for the sake of pleasure,\footnote{See, for example, Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of starlings and geese in Nature, p. 192.} he also makes it a point to clarify that the (inherently affective, desire-
laden) intertwining that happens between human bodies must be affirmed between human and
non-human bodies as well:

Projection-introjection, relation of the Ineinander [intertwining]…unveils a libidinal dimension of the
corporal schema…recuperate all that he [Freud] said on this endperception of others (and of
animals)…Pleasure is open like sensing is open onto the things.\footnote{Nature, p. 218.}

To be a living body is already to be ecstatically open to and immersed in a world, already to be
embedded in webs of affective relationships: so, of course living bodies are going to be polarized
toward pleasures and sources of comfort and joy, and of course they are going to seek pleasure,
comfort, and joy in other living bodies; of course they are going to be stretched toward the world
in desire, and of course they are going to come to “love” or to “care for” those things or bodies
that reciprocate or fulfill their desires, the flesh that comes together with theirs in shared passion.
After all, all flesh is “esthesiological,” or a surface and conduit of affective sensitivities and
flows of intensity. Thus, as Merleau-Ponty says here, pleasure is just as open as other sensory
modes of engagement with the world (such as touch or vision), just as open as the ecstatic flesh
itself that “feels” it, and as we know perfectly well from ordinary experience, we are able to
participate in the pleasures of non-human bodies just as readily as we are able to see or to touch
them at all. Being-together in flesh and thus also in mind means already being-together in desire, and this is why “desire considered from the transcendental point of view” designates the “common framework of my world as carnal and of the world of the other.”528 At the most basic level of being, I never “project” anything into other beings that I have not first, always already “introjected” from them, and it is thus that any of my “ascriptions” of qualities to others (whether human or non-human) arise from the intercorporeal life I share with them, from the webs of desires and affects in which we are all already entangled and upon which all of our concepts of mental qualities – all of our concepts of desires, affects, emotions, dispositions, cognitive capacities, and so on – ultimately rest; it is thus that I, in fact, do not know what I am apart from my bodily – especially affective or desirous – relations with others or with all embodied othernesses; indeed, it is thus that, as Merleau-Ponty affirms, “human desire emerges from animal desire.”529

Merleau-Ponty’s later focus on the affective (“esthesiological”) and libidinous nature of the living body is simply an extension of his earlier account of the primacy of “operative intentionality.” Indeed, as we saw earlier, Merleau-Ponty remarks that operative intentionality is “apparent in our desires.”530 We see, then, that Merleau-Ponty never ceases to underscore our fundamental operative-intentional, esthesiological, intercorporeal entanglements with others and with a world that precede and found any reflective or representational, “objectifying” stances toward them, and affectivity and desire are modes of operative intentionality par excellence. Not only does Merleau-Ponty remark that operative-intentionality is clearly apparent in our desires, but we might say that desire – even, in a sense, love – is the fundamental mode of a living body’s

528 Ibid., p. 225.
529 Ibid., p. 225.
530 Phenomenology of Perception, p. xviii.
engagements with others and the world, the fundamental “operative-intentional” overture of flesh to flesh. To be a (living) body is to be vulnerable. Embodiment is vulnerability. Vulnerability is essential to “feeling” or “sensing” anything at all; vulnerability is feeling or sensing. And is it not the case that we are the most vulnerable when we give ourselves over to others in love? For us as human beings, it is surely the case that we are never more vulnerable than we first tell a prospective romantic partner “I love you.” As Lingis puts it, “how rarely do humans find the courage to say those fearful words I love you – fearful, because we are never so vulnerable, never open to being so easily and deeply hurt, as when we give ourselves over in love to someone.”

It is surely the case that we are never more vulnerable than when we choose to commit ourselves to a beloved other. Of course, this kind of radical vulnerability need not be restricted to romantic love. We may also be just as vulnerable when we commit ourselves with love or passion to ideals or causes or projects that we find to be worthwhile, even urgently important, to advance, especially when we are not guaranteed – as we never are – to see such ideals, causes, or projects fulfilled. For example, I am surely very vulnerable indeed in choosing to pursue a career as a professional philosopher. This, too, is a risk taken out of love: not the love that goes by the name of eros, but the one that goes by the name of philo. Nevertheless, I know I was never more vulnerable than when I first told Byler that I loved her, and when I told her that, she was not yet ready to say it back to me. Fortunately, I was confident that one day she would be ready, and so, since I meant those words, I continued joyfully to take the risk of further intimacy – to make myself even that much more vulnerable in furthering our relationship with each other – and when, a couple of months later, she finally did say those words back to me, never had I felt more overjoyed, never had I felt more actualized and affirmed, and I think this sort of actualization or

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531 “Bestiality,” in Animal Others, p. 52.
affirmation is *ontological* and not just “psychological” or “subjective,” something that strikes the chords of our *being* and not just the nerves that contingently make up our objective brains and bodies. As I just mentioned, it is undeniable that to be an embodied being is to be vulnerable, and never are we more vulnerable than when we offer ourselves to others (or to the world) in love. It follows, then, that we are never *more* the kinds of beings that we are than when we are in love, that we are never more *living bodies* than when we love. To define bodily-being as vulnerability is just as well to define it as *being-in-love*. If to exist as a body is to be vulnerable – if it is to be immersed in affect-laden, desire-rich relationships with others and with a world – and if to *love* is to surrender oneself to others or to projects in the world vulnerably, then we cannot fail but to affirm that bodily ‘being-in-the-world’ is ‘being-in-love.’

So why are we often so reluctant to ascribe love to “animal” bodies? Maybe this reluctance says more about our own incapacities to love, or more about our own lack of receptivity to forms of love that are always already all around us, hardened as we have become by our own human narcissism (or rather by the narcissism that *is* humanism). Within the sphere of human existence, we know that romantic love, for example, profoundly shapes and informs one’s understanding of love as such. We know that without (good, healthy) romantic love (whether monogamous or polyamorous, whether heterosexual or queer), one’s life and understanding of love are profoundly impoverished. But this means that a relationship with love is deeply constitutive of who/what we are; it means that being loveless is still a relationship with love, just as loneliness is a relationship with others. We know in our own case that to be in the world (with others) truly is already to be “in love,” that to be connected to the world and with others is already to be connected to them affectively or desirously. To be a living body is already to love (with and through one’s body). So, why should “love” be conceptualized as shared or
expressed only between just certain kinds of bodies? Why should not other bodies love? Why should humans reserve all the love in the world (or indeed all of anything in the world) for themselves? Why should non-human bodies be able to show me love, even to love me? Why should my concept of love only be informed by the love of other humans? Love, again, takes many forms, so why should it take the form of only, say, the tender caresses and kisses of my partner, Byler, and not also the ecstatic greeting of my childhood dog, Sammy, or not also the cheek-rubs, cuddles, and deep purrs of Byler’s cat, Bo? Again, love (in its primary or most salient valences) concerns how we vulnerably give ourselves over to others. Does Bo not do this just as much as Byler herself does? Sometimes, when we are alone together at night, Bo will fall asleep in my lap or arms (and sometimes he will even do so mostly on his back, with his stomach pointing toward the ceiling). Cats are also natural predators and, as Byler once observed, predators like cats are never more vulnerable than when they are asleep. Cats are also fiercely territorial and do not easily cede their familiar environments to others. So, is it not the case that Bo gives himself to me vulnerably when he sleeps on my lap? As I just mentioned, not only is Bo vulnerable when he sleeps, but he is the most vulnerable when he sleeps. We should pause to appreciate, then, the profound depth of vulnerability and trust that Bo expresses every time he sleeps in my arms or lap, the kind of risk he takes even in simply sharing his company and home with me. What more could we possibly want out of “love”? Does Bo not say he loves me every time he falls asleep in my lap just as surely as I do when I tell Byler that I love her as I kiss her goodnight? It seems to me that only bad, deep-seated prejudices – not logic – can explain why anyone would ever think otherwise, and perhaps all of us harbor such prejudices; if so, then we must unlearn such prejudices if we are truly to learn how to love, or if we are to learn as much as possible what love is. To be is to be a body; I am my body. And that means I am also constituted
by my affective, desirous relations with other bodies; and that means I am also constituted by my affective, desirous relations with non-human bodies, too, that in fact my very sense of “love” has never been exclusively human but already summons all of the other kinds of love that exist in the world. All of this means that I am who or what I love; it also means I am who or what I do not or cannot love. It certainly means that I have learned as much about love from Sammy and Mr. Bojangles as I have from my parents or from Byler, that I am just as much constituted by the love of non-human beings as I am by the love of fellow human beings. So, it is not necessarily, and certainly not primarily, the case that I “project” love into, say, dogs, cats, lizards, or earthworms, but rather that their ways of (desirous) living and my attachments to them teach me more about what life and love is and that without them my life and the love in it would be impoverished, even unintelligible.

While we may reflectively hesitate to ascribe an emotion like love to a non-human animal, this reflective hesitation, again, perhaps reflects more about us than about the epistemic merit of such an ascription. I think it is relevant to notice that we generally have no problem ascribing emotions like fear or anger or even anxiety to animals while we often hesitate to ascribe emotions like joy, love, or grief to them. Why is this the case? We tend to attribute negative affects to animals quite readily yet tend to withhold attributions of positive affects to them. Is this not a double-standard? In *Mind of the Raven*, Bernd Heinrich claims that ravens fall in love and carry on friendships with one another.\(^{532}\) Why are we so ready to dismiss such a claim as “unscientific” (hence as “irrational,”” since of course we often uncritically take the methods and standards of modern science to define what it means for something to be “rational”)? Do we not protest too much? Perhaps we reserve certain emotions for ourselves

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precisely because we realize, albeit sub-consciously, that it is precisely we who have difficulties with feeling and embodying them, or because these are precisely the kinds of emotions that we, at one level, esteem as constitutive of a rich and meaningful subjective life but which, at another level, we recognize as modes of being and relating in which we are deficient, modes of being and relating from which our own typical manner of being is often tensely, painfully estranged. How hard it is for us to abandon ourselves to true joy; how hard it is for us to expose ourselves to others without subterfuge; how hard it is for us to be receptive to others, to share in their happiness and sorrow; how hard it is for us to sustain and honor our friendships; how hard it is for us simply to love and to grieve. Not only is it the case, for example, that dogs love and that elephants grieve, but perhaps it is also the case, as Jeffrey Masson remarks,\textsuperscript{533} that they love and grieve in ways that are “better” or “purer” than we do, for their love and grief is not marked by the kind of ambivalence that so often contaminates our own. In recent years, many peer-reviewed scientific studies have purported to demonstrate empathy in rats, and indeed there are many apparent examples of empathy and altruism throughout the non-human world. Suffice it to say, ordinary experience suggests that rats probably have more empathy (indeed, a great deal more empathy) than the average Wall Street trader, corporate CEO, insurance company executive, or libertarian. So, if it may be said that we “project” anything into animals, perhaps it is the case that we project not so much those qualities that we possess but rather precisely those qualities that we lack. If we deny that animals can feel or think in certain ways, perhaps it is because we ourselves have difficulty doing so; perhaps such skepticism is a displacement of our own insecurities or perceived deficiencies. Indeed, our obsession with identifying some feature that makes us human beings “special” – our anxiousness to find that one quality or capacity that

absolutely distinguishes humanity from the rest of the animal world – suggests that this is the case. After all, a preoccupation with one’s own superiority or specialness almost always suggests a tacit inferiority complex. Ironically, perhaps it is precisely this neurosis that, if anything, distinguishes us from other animals. Perhaps human beings are the only animals that obsess over what it is that makes them the kind of animals that they are. Perhaps we are the only animals who need to distinguish ourselves absolutely from other animals or even from “animality” as such. Nevertheless, if we deny that non-human animals “think” or “feel” at all, or even if we suppose that non-human animals think or feel in ways that are somehow “lesser” than the ways in which we think or feel, it is clear that we are the very animals that are deficient in thinking and feeling. And if I cannot bring myself to ascribe love “worthy of the name” to a non-human animal, if I restrict myself to affirning only human forms of love, or if I am not receptive the multifarious forms of love and desire that ebb and flow, abound and erupt throughout the whole prodigious expanse of living nature, then I am precisely the one who is woefully lacking in love.

As I mentioned earlier, nothing I have said here necessarily means we should think that all non-humans love in the same ways that we humans do. But (as I also mentioned earlier), love is a broad category, broad enough surely to embrace not only dogs and cats but all other creatures who desirously inhabit the world, and indeed I do not really understand or experience love without already being immersed in a world that is full of it, immersed with many different forms of love (human and non-human alike). Even if certain human modes of love are different from certain non-human modes of love, all modes of love are (to utter what is close to a tautology and what will risk appearing to be a slide into Platonism) nevertheless modes of “Love,” and so I do not truly know “what love is” without also knowing these other modes of love, or rather I more fully know what love is the more “full” my conception of it is, the more I
integrate into my understanding of love all of the ways in which bodies may exhibit it, the more I may even give myself over to forms or expressions of love far different from those with which I am familiar. Am I not, indeed, even more vulnerable when I risk myself to love a non-human being, or when I take the risk of submitting myself in love to a non-human form of love? Timothy Treadwell, the subject of Werner Herzog’s documentary *Grizzly Man*, loved grizzly bears dearly and took the risk of sharing his love with them. Of course, we know that Timothy’s love ended tragically (as do so many of our own human love stories; indeed, as do all human love stories insofar as they end with us having to bury and mourn those we love). Timothy’s love was unrequited (as so many of our ordinary human romantic forms of love are), and in the end the bears he loved so much ate him. Although, perhaps those bears really did love Timothy at some point. All of us, after all, have or will hurt the ones we love, and rather than focus on the fact that the bears eventually attacked and ate Timothy, we might pause to consider just how long Timothy was able to live amidst them in the Alaskan wilderness, that is, we might consider the fact that they did not harm him for a very long time indeed (maybe we might say the grizzly bears’ love became “consumptive,” a danger clearly inherent to human love as well). So, I am not necessarily convinced that the bears did not, at least in some way or to some extent, love Timothy, nor am I suggesting we should risk our lives to quite the extent Timothy did. It is likely the case that Timothy’s overtures were misdirected and that, no matter how fluid and porous communal boundaries may be, he did not belong in a grizzly bear community. Nonetheless, perhaps no one has ever loved anything so profoundly and purely as Timothy loved grizzly bears because no one has ever risked their bodies for love more than Timothy did when he chose to share his love with those bears and to live among them. And Timothy was not “crazy”; he was soberly aware of the risk. Throughout the documentary, he explicitly acknowledges how
dangerous it is to interact with grizzly bears (and if he were not aware of that danger, then he would not have in fact taken a “risk” at all). I know that I know more about love from the risk that Timothy took. I also know that grizzly bears love in their own ways, even if none of them love humans. Ursine subjectivity – like all forms of subjectivity – is also embodied subjectivity, and embodied subjectivity is always desire. “What is the I of desire? Surely it is the body.”

And “animals” are bodies, too. “Animals” are “the flesh of my [desiring] flesh,” too.

Of course, as I have already argued, we do need to be wary of imposing ourselves upon our “animal” others. We do need to be cautious not to force them to speak in our own voice. We always need to check the egoism or human narcissism (i.e., the anthropocentrism) we are prone to carry into our relations with other-than-human others. We must always be vigilant against the prejudices that may shape our perceptions of non-human others. We must always be careful not to regard our non-human cohabitants as mere mirrors for our own human reflections, or as mere puppets for own ventriloquism; and yet, these same principles apply just as much to our relations with human others; and yet, non-human animals do, in their bodily comportments, simply in virtue of their embodiment, “mirror” our own (to varying degrees) and enrich our sense of what it means to be a body, enrich all that we know or experience only through our bodies; they do, in their own ways, “speak” to us in terms we can understand (to varying degrees and even if only ever imperfectly) so long as we are willing to listen, so long as we are willing to learn continually how to listen, so long as we are also willing to admit that something may be meaningful even if we cannot reduce it to our own categories, so long as we are also willing to change or suspend our own categories precisely in reply to those things that cannot be reduced to them.

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We have to acknowledge the affective relations with other bodies of which our own are capable and in which they are already situated, and we should, to as great of an extent as possible, explore the further affective relations of which our bodies may be capable, but this does not mean making the mistake of thinking that intercorporeity means a pure communion or fusion of bodies (for in principle it does not mean this), nor is any sort of reductive identification with other bodies something we should seek. Lingis writes that “the movements and intensities of our own bodies compose with the movements and intensities of toucans and wolves, jellyfish and whales,” yet immediately adds here the point I alluded to above in my discussion of my interactions with Bo, namely that “one is not aiming at an identification with the other animal. Still less is one identifying the other animal with another human.”\(^536\) A respect for alterity demands all of this. A respect for alterity demands an acknowledgement of difference that is not the negation of continuity, an affirmation of distance that is not the “contrary of proximity,”\(^537\) an idea of space that is synonymous with \emph{community}. A respect for alterity means letting others show themselves as they are, and that means letting them show their otherness as well as their carnal affinities with us, carnal affinities without which they would have nothing – no otherness at all – to show us in the first place; it means, moreover, acknowledging that indeed there is no “us” without “them,” that my carnality inherently overlaps with theirs and that their carnality is necessary for me to fully understand my own. Our similarities should never be emphasized in such a way that leads us to overlook our differences, nor should our differences be emphasized in such a way that leads us to overlook our similarities; still less should our similarities be constructed as amounting to homogeneity, and still less should our differences be constructed as oppositions. Indeed (and as I will further discuss in the next chapter), any differences worthy of

\(^{536}\) “Bestiality,” in \emph{Animal Others}, p. 43.
\(^{537}\) Merleau-Ponty, \emph{The Visible and the Invisible}, p. 135.
name entail what Merleau-Ponty calls “encroachment” or overlapping; any differences worthy of the name entail community; they entail a community in which all embodied beings constitute one another, which is also the very community to which all singular as well as plural first-person pronouns – every “I” and also every “we” or “us” or “our” – ultimately refer and from which all plural second-person pronouns – every “you (all)” or “their” or “they” or “them” – are derived. Our similarities matter and so too do our differences, yet we only ever know what our similarities and differences are in the same way that we only ever know anything, namely together.

But another crucial point here, which I also alluded to above, is that all of the cautions that we ought to observe in our relations with non-human others – all of the principles just mentioned concerning the dangers of egoism or narcissism – apply equally to our relations with human others, and only double-standards and bad metaphysics and latent speciesism lead us to think there is some kind of essential, irreparable rift between what our relations with human others demand of us and what our relations with non-human others demand of us, such that we qualify the latter in terms we would never use to qualify the former: we would not mark any such difference if we had not already marked, in a way that only dualism dictates or warrants, an essential, categorical difference between the subjectivity of a human and the subjectivity of a non-human; that is, we would not mark such a difference if we had not already separated characteristically “human” mental qualities from their embodiment, for only in doing so are we led to worry about falsely attributing such characteristics to other bodies (whether they be human or non-human): after all, if all of the “mental qualities” with which we are familiar in “our own case” are thoroughly lived and known through our bodies and through our bodily engagements with a world, why would other living bodies, whether human or non-human, not demonstrate
them to us in a like manner, since they too are living bodies, since they too are flesh-become-sentient? As Merleau-Ponty asks, “why would not the synergy exist among different organisms, if it is possible within each.” Of course, Merleau-Ponty’s question here is rhetorical. The synergy through which my or any living body is constituted as such – that is, my living body’s self-reflexivity – already embeds it in the world and thus already embeds it with other living bodies; its reflexivity, or rather its ecstasy, not only affords it access to other likewise reflexive or ecstatic bodies but, moreover, is already implicitly in touch with them in precisely the same way that it is in touch with itself. To return to a remark I cited in chapter one, “one ek-stasis is compossible with other ek-stases,” and every living body is inherently what Merleau-Ponty calls an “ek-stasis,” which is to say a being constituted in its exposure to what is outside itself, a being whose “inside” is constituted by its “outside.” Every body becomes sentient when a “spark is lit between sensing and sensible,” and the spark of the sentient body, or rather the spark that is the sentient body, will always strike and be struck by, always further ignite and be further ignited by, always burn and always burn ever brighter in compact with the sparks of other sentient bodies until it no longer burns at all.

So, to return to a point I made earlier, either we divorce subjectivity (hence alterity) from the body, or we admit that all subjectivities (hence all alterities) are presenced by living bodies and that, therefore, the cautions we ought to observe so that we do not violently impress our own egos, standpoints, or identities upon other human beings are not fundamentally different from those we ought to observe so that we do not do the same to non-human beings: we should not think that the latter is a matter of resisting or withholding “anthropomorphism” any more than

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538 Ibid., p. 142.
we should think that the former is a matter of doing so. In other words, the complexities or ambiguities that pervade our relations with our fellow humans are not different in kind from those that pervade our relations with non-humans. Only bad (dualistic) metaphysics warrants the notion that there must be something about non-human alterity that demands a *categorically* different set of responses and attitudes from me than human alterity demands. Now, this is not to say that all alterities are completely the same, for that, indeed, would not be to regard them as alterities at all. None of what I have just said should be taken to mean that we should group all *others* in the world together into a grand, monolithic category of (capital ‘O’) “Otherness” (any more than we should group all non-human beings together into a grand, monolithic category of capital ‘A’ “Animality”). There are as many different othernesses as there are living bodies that express them, and their differences matter: yet, as I mentioned above, their differences cannot matter to such an extent that they *absolutely* separate any of them from one another; we cannot think that such differences – no matter how significant – rend the world into self-enclosed worlds unto themselves; we cannot affirm such differences to such an extent that we deny the fundamental materiality without which neither they nor anything would “matter” at all. We cannot affirm differences between and among embodied beings to such an extent that denies their continuity with one another in virtue of their embodiment: this would be just as grave an error as affirming their continuity in such a manner that reductively erases their heterogeneity. Whether difference dissolves into unity or whether it collapses into oppositional or atomistic disunity, it precisely becomes *indifference* all the same. The point here, then, is that although on the one hand we should be careful not to assimilate non-human alterities to our own familiar human manner of being, on the other hand we presuppose or reinstate a dualistic, essentialist, or speciesist metaphysics if we think that human alterities are somehow removed from non-human
alterities in such a way that the principles that define appropriate relations with the former must be fundamentally different from those that define appropriate relations with the latter, because in truth no alterities are radically removed from one another precisely because the bodies through which they are presenced are never radically removed from one another: because no-body – and because no kind of body – is ever utterly isolated or ontologically amputated from any other, because being a body means already being together with other bodies.

Whether I am interpreting and tending to the needs, desires, feelings, and thoughts of my romantic partner, or whether I am interpreting and tending to the needs, desires, feelings, and thoughts of my romantic partner’s cat, Bo – whether I am comporting myself toward or managing a relationship with a human other, or whether I am comporting myself toward and managing a relationship with a non-human other – it is always simply a question of what alterity demands of me, and unless we accept a division between subjectivity and the body, we can only affirm that all living bodies are subjectivities or alterities, and that means we can only affirm that non-human bodies are just as entangled with our own living bodies as those of our fellow humans, that all subjectivities or alterities – all “minds,” all “mental states,” all sensations and affects, all modes of intentionality – are expressions of the same flesh and are therefore bound to one another, enveloped within each other, extensions of one another no matter how great the distances between them may in fact be.

The truth is that if we are concerned with respecting and affirming non-human alterity, if we are concerned with not imposing ourselves upon “animal” others, if we are concerned with not reducing animal others to ourselves, if we are concerned with not letting anthropocentric biases dominate how we perceive and relate to animal others, if are concerned with not letting our own “humanity” colonize non-human life or level non-human otherness, if we are genuinely
concerned with letting animal others show themselves to us as freely and authentically as possible, then we frame and articulate this concern badly if we do so as a concern not to “anthropomorphize” them; we articulate, understand, and enact our commitment to respect their otherness badly if we do so as a hesitancy concerning “anthropomorphism.” Do we hesitate to “anthropomorphize” humans? Of course not, because that would be absurd. We know “humans” are “human”: that is a tautology. Yet, we must remember that Descartes’ famous worry in the *Meditations* that the human bodies he sees walking down the street might just be sophisticated robots is precisely a worry about *anthropomorphism*, and as we have seen, it is a worry rooted in his dualism: since for Descartes the soul is separate from the body, and since for him “animals” could not possibly have souls (that is, since for him “soul” is coextensive with “human”), his worry is that we might be fooled by appearances to “project” a soul into a soul-less puppet, that we might err in imparting a mind to an empty husk, that we might infer (human) mental states or characteristics – especially thoughts, emotions, or volitions – based upon what is only a convincing mimicry of them, that we might, in short, attribute “humanity” to something that is not “human,” a “soul” to a body that is not “ensouled.” Descartes’ worry that we might be fooled into anthropomorphizing animate human bodies is no different from our contemporary worry that we might be fooled into anthropomorphizing non-human bodies: both worries rest upon the same ontological and epistemological presuppositions.

Of course, though many who resist anthropomorphizing non-humans do so for tacitly anthropocentric reasons (i.e., merely in order to reserve certain qualities exclusively for humans), it is true that many others who likewise urge us to resist or suspend such anthropomorphism consider themselves to be allies in the battle against anthropocentrism or speciesism, for their resistance to anthropomorphism is precisely grounded in their commitment to respect and not
erase non-human otherness. I want to be clear that I share this commitment to respect and not
erase non-human otherness. However, I also want to be clear that I think that to frame such a
commitment in terms of a resistance to anthropomorphism, or that to assume that such a
commitment requires skepticism toward or even a nearly deontological prohibition of
anthropomorphism, is indeed to assume or reinscribe the false metaphysical and epistemological
commitments – in particular, the utter solipsism – of an anthropocentric worldview. I now want
to make clear that the very concept of anthropomorphism cannot, in the final analysis, be
disentangled from anthropocentrism and from the bad metaphysics that all forms of solipsism –
whether a solipsism of the individual human self or a solipsism of the human species – assume. I
want to make clear that the very construct of “anthropomorphism” (along with all forms of
anthropocentrism, indeed along with all “centrism”) is logically analogous to that of the isolated
and disembodied cogito at the heart of Cartesian skepticism and solipsism.

Cartesian solipsism is the most traditional form of solipsism, yet anthropocentrism and
the concomitant notion of “anthropomorphism” constitute another form of solipsism all the
same.\textsuperscript{541} Cartesian solipsism is the concept of a fundamentally isolated human ego.

Anthropocentrism/“anti-anthropomorphism” assumes the concept of a fundamentally isolated
“humanness” or human species. Whereas Cartesian solipsism is solipsism at the level of an
individual human self, anthropocentrism/anti-anthropomorphism is simply solipsism at the level
of “humanity” or the human species; the latter merely conceptualizes the human species itself as
the sort of isolated, radically individualized “self” that the former conceptualizes any individual
member of that species to be: within an anthropocentric worldview or even within an

\textsuperscript{541} Thus, although Cartesian solipsism is the most traditional kind of solipsism, it is not the most commonly
accepted kind of solipsism, as there are very few Cartesian solipsists in the world, yet there are very many
anthropocentrist, or very many who warn against the “fallacy” of anthropomorphism.
epistemological framework that accepts the very notion of “anthropomorphism,” “humanity” or the anthropos is merely the cogito by another name. Why is that the case? Descartes worried that we might falsely infer “mindedness” or “humanity” where there is only a very convincing bodily imitation of it because he thought that mindedness or “humanity” were separate from embodiment and because, therefore, he conceptualized any individual (human) mind as radically, atomistically isolated from others (if any others indeed exist). It is because all of the features of my own mental life are disembodied and because I am thus, as a cogito, radically individualized insofar as I have access only to the features of my own purely internal mental life that I may be mistaken when I ascribe such features to other bodies. In other words, for Descartes, when I perceive or think about the minds of others I inescapably do so starting from a position of absolute detachment from them, and that is why my perceptions or beliefs concerning the existence of other minds like my own are always dubious (and why only the existence of a perfect, omnibenevolent God can guarantee their veracity). Descartes initially posits the idea that consciousness or “the self” is radically individuated or isolated. As a radically individuated or isolated self, I might begin to wonder whether these other bodies I see moving about the world are “selves” as well; I might proceed to compare their movements or expressions with those that I typically make when I have certain experiences or am in certain mental states, and then I might formulate inferences that they, too, have similar experiences or mental states based on those comparisons. However, any judgments I make concerning the mental lives of others or even simply concerning the existence of other mental lives will always be problematic our doubtful because the only mind to which I have access is my own: my radically individuated or isolated epistemic position in the world will always make knowledge of anything outside that position suspect or nigh impossible. It is thus that, within a Cartesian framework (setting aside arguments
in favor of a beneficent cosmic architect and overseer), judgments concerning the existence of others will always be beleaguered by the anxiety that such judgments may be wrong – that one has been deceived despite all appearances to the contrary – and that one is completely alone in the world after all.

Setting aside Merleau-Ponty’s criticisms of “projectionism” (which I discussed earlier), now consider the anxiety that various perceptions or judgments of “animal” mindedness may only be anthropomorphic “projections,” or that when I take a non-human body to exhibit certain human-like mental qualities I might simply be transferring those qualities to a body that, in reality, is devoid of them yet perhaps convincingly imitates them to some degree and thus invites such a transference. The analogy should already be clear. Whether one is simply an anthropocentrist who arbitrarily, a priori restricts certain characteristics to human beings, or whether one is not quite an anthropocentrist in such a crude manner but worries we might often be fooled into ascribing “human” mental characteristics to non-human bodies, one nonetheless assumes the very same kind of isolated epistemic standpoint as the old Cartesian solipsist: the operative assumption here is that I, as a human being, exist in a way that is radically detached from all of these other non-human beings in the world; as a member of the species Homo sapiens, I am absolutely separated from all other species of living bodies, or entirely withdrawn into an isolated Homo sapiens universe, such that any extension of my own “human” mental qualities to bodies that exist outside my Homo sapiens universe will always be dubious, or might only ever be impositions of my fanciful human imagination (perhaps as a result of watching far too many cartoons) or mere “projections” motivated by my “irrational” (but still human) emotions. So, when I see non-human bodies move about and express themselves in the world, I might look inward and consider the various mental qualities that I know for sure I possess, then I
might consider the ways in which I typically express such qualities behaviorally, then I might look again at certain non-human behaviors and compare them to those through which I exhibit my own human qualities, then I might note similarities between these non-human behaviors and my own, and then, finally, I might infer that these non-human behaviors indicate the presence of certain human qualities based upon such similarities. However, this inference is always doubtful because I and my human qualities are shut up within an entirely enclosed human reality. Thus, I can be sure that I possess certain “human” mental qualities, and (assuming I am not Descartes) I can be sure that most of the human bodies among whom I exist do so as well, but I can never be sure that a non-human body possesses such qualities: any judgment I might make that they do could just be “anthropomorphism.”

Besides the fact that, in everyday lived experience, we do not perform the complicated process of reasoning I just elaborated when we take non-human beings to demonstrate human-like characteristics, it should be clear that the skeptical worry that we might be “anthropomorphizing” animals when we ascribe human mental features to them is logically no different from the skeptical worry that I might be mistakenly “subjectifying” a human body whenever I ascribe subjectivity to one: the latter is the worry that, all outward appearances to the contrary, only one mind might exist in the world (namely, one’s own), and the former is the worry that, all appearances to the contrary, only one species (namely, one’s own human species) might have “human” mental characteristics or simply “minds” at all, and both worries are thus equally forms of solipsism. Instead of the notion that I am completely enclosed within my own individual subjectivity, the notion here is that I am completely enclosed within my own “humanity” or essential species-identity: again, anthropocentrism, or any epistemological framework that accepts “anthropomorphism” as a legitimate epistemic concept and fallacy,
simply substitutes “humanity” or the species *Homo sapiens* for the *cogito*. Rather than worry that I, as an individual human self, might be projecting mental characteristics into other human bodies, the worry here is that I, as a human being tethered to my own humanity, might be projecting (human) mental characteristics into non-human bodies. In Cartesianism, the self is radically isolated from others, but anxieties over anthropomorphism, or principles against anthropomorphism, simply introduce solipsism at another level, for they merely construct “humanity” or “*Homo sapiens*” to be “the Self” isolated from all other species of life thus constructed as “Others.” Within *either* a traditional Cartesian framework or any epistemological framework that takes anthropomorphism to be a sin against “logic,” “objectivity,” or even “respect for alterity,” the concern is that I might impart qualities of myself to entities that resemble me outwardly yet are devoid of anything that is really “me” “inwardly.” And equally in both cases, the underlying assumptions are: A) there is a divorce between interiority and exteriority, between mental characteristics and the bodily comportments through which they are expressed, B) when I take others to have mental characteristics like mine (that is, to be genuine “others”) I *fundamentally* do so as a result of some sort of analogical inference (which follows from A), and C) I am *fundamentally* divorced from any of these others to whom I might impart an interiority like my own and indeed, therefore, it is possible for me to know my own interiority or even to *have* an interiority – to know who or what I am or even *be* a “self” – apart from these presumed others in the first place (which also follows from A, and is assumed by B). We have seen, and we will continue to see, that Merleau-Ponty refutes each of these assumptions.

In short, all epistemological worries that we might mistakenly attribute mental qualities to bodies – regardless of whether or not these bodies are human – are grounded in dualism. And because we know dualism is false, so too do we know that such worries are, in fact, without
ground. None of this, of course, is to suggest that we may never be mistaken about the interior lives of non-human beings. But I hasten to underscore – and I think I must repeatedly underscore – that this does not mean that such mistakes are commissions of some crime against reasoning called “anthropomorphism.” No one thinks that repudiating Cartesian solipsism implies that we can never be wrong about what is going on inside the minds of human beings. No one, likewise, should think that repudiating anthropocentrism or even the very concept of “anthropomorphism” implies that we can never be wrong about what is going on inside the minds of non-human beings. To repudiate anthropocentrism or, at any rate, “anti-anthropomorphism” is at heart to repudiate the solipsism or dualism to which it tacitly subscribes, and no more than this. Within an anthropocentric or anti-anthropomorphism framework, we assume that we can know what a human being or mind is apart from non-human beings or minds, in just the same way that within a Cartesian framework I assume that I can know who or what I am – that I can completely know myself or my mind introspectively – apart from other human selves or minds. Neither views are true, and they are not true for the same reasons; they are, in fact, one and the same view.

Merleau-Ponty takes such a serious and sustained interest in non-human subjectivities because he knows, and both explicitly and implicitly argues, that to repudiate Cartesian dualism and solipsism is also to repudiate anthropocentric constructions or delimitations of subjectivity, that to repudiate the ontological commitments that isolate my own subjectivity from other human subjectivities is also, in the same stroke, to repudiate the ontological commitments that isolate human subjectivity from extra-human subjectivities. An anthropocentric or anti-anthropomorphism framework tacitly posits by fiat the notion that I know my own “human” qualities perfectly or transparently in isolation from non-human beings, because in either case the foundational assumption is that I, as a human being, first look inward to see what my human
mental qualities are and only afterward proceed to go out into the world to determine (analogically), on the basis of that introspection, whether or not certain non-humans possess such qualities too. But of course, on this account, any judgments I might make that non-human beings have human mental qualities will either be false a priori (according to anthropocentrism) or epistemically unsound (according to anti-anthropomorphism). Anthropocentrism or anti-anthropomorphism assumes that I already, primarily know my own “humanity” – that I already, primarily know all of those characteristics or capacities I associate with my own human interiority – in isolation from an other-than-human world, that whatever sense I attach to my “humanness” does not already channel, is not already infested with and immersed in, non-humanness, that my human subjectivity is not already embedded in relations with non-human subjectivities. We have seen, and we will continue to see, that Merleau-Ponty dismantles these assumptions. In just the same way that I can have no “sense-of-self” (and thus cannot even be a “self”) apart from human others, Merleau-Ponty argues that I precisely can have no sense of my own “humanity” apart from a world that is radically more than human.

So, to summarize and further elaborate all of the points I have just discussed, we cannot separate our minds from the minds of others any more than we can separate our bodies from the bodies of others: there is surely some separation between them, yet this separation is also already continuity, also already intimacy. As we have seen, we divorce our minds – or any of the qualities we associate with mindedness – from the minds of others through the same process of abstraction through which we divorce our minds from our bodies. But if our minds are not divorced from our living bodies – if to be a mind is to be a living body – and if our living bodies are never divorced from one another, then it follows that our minds are never divorced from one another. And non-human animals are minds, too, because they too are living bodies. Thus, since
all minds are living bodies and since all living bodies are minds, the process of abstraction through which we divorce our minds from our bodies is the very same process of abstraction through which we divorce our (“human”) minds from any kind of mind: the same process of abstraction through which we divorce our “human” minds from our “human” bodies is the same process of abstraction through which we divorce our human minds from non-human minds, our human minds from non-human bodies, our human bodies from non-human bodies, our embodied human minds (or minded human bodies) from “the common tissue” of which all living things – all animate bodies and all mental phenomena – are made. It is thus that ordinary solipsism and that speciesist delimitations of mindedness derive from the same false ontological abstraction. It is thus that solipsism and the concept of an “anthropomorphism fallacy” are in fact two aspects of one and the same fallacy. Descartes’ anxiety that he might mistakenly attribute the qualities of his own mental life to other human bodies and our own contemporary anxiety that we might mistakenly attribute qualities of our own human mental lives to non-human bodies are the same anxiety: solipsism assumes the fundamental separation of consciousness from others, and the very concept of anthropomorphism assumes the fundamental separation of human consciousness from other apparent forms of consciousness, and both of these notions assume the separation of consciousness from flesh. If non-humans are living bodies just as much as humans are, there is no a priori reason they may not exhibit “human qualities.” So, if non-human bodies exhibit human characteristics, they do so in such a way that is not essentially different from the manner in which human bodies do. And if my ascriptions of human characteristics to non-humans misfire, they do so in a manner that is no different from any manner in which I might mistakenly

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ascribe mental characteristics to fellow humans: it is not because I have committed some unique and particularly egregious fallacy called “anthropomorphism.”

I have already refuted Cartesian solipsism and the idea that attributions of mental states to animals are mere “projections,” so I will not rehearse those arguments. The point I mean to underscore here is that if we wonder whether or not various non-human bodies “have minds,” and even if we worry about whether we may be merely “projecting” certain mental characteristics into them, we assume the same separation between subjectivity and corporeality or behavior that we assume when we worry about solipsism, that is, when we wonder whether or not human bodies have minds or worry that we might be merely “projecting” mental characteristics into them (when in reality they might just be “zombies” or convincing pantomimes of human sentience). If, then, Descartes’ worry about “anthropomorphizing” animate human bodies is fallacious, we must also admit that our common worry about “anthropomorphizing” animate non-human bodies is similarly fallacious. This is, again, not to say that one may never falsely ascribe characteristics of oneself to a non-human. One may also falsely ascribe various characteristics of oneself to other humans. The point is that we can no longer say that the former mistake is a mistake of “anthropomorphism” whereas the latter is something else. The point is that these are the same mistake. Non-human bodies may exhibit specific “human” mental characteristics in many ways or to varying degrees. Human bodies may also exhibit specific “human” mental characteristics in many ways and to varying degrees. In either case, if I am to interpret them on their own terms, I must do the most I can to let them show themselves to me as they are. I must truly engage with them, yet I must also do so from an appropriate distance. And there are no axioms from which one can deduce what the appropriate proximity or distance in such cases ought to be; however, there will always be one, and the
process of negotiating and discovering it – the process of *truly knowing another* regardless of whether that other is a human or a cat, the process of welcoming others with the least egoistic impositions – will always be a complicated, delicate, difficult, vulnerable, and indeed infinite undertaking.

Human minds differ very much from many non-human minds, and many non-human minds differ very much from one another. Yet, at the same time, our minds are just as much the minds of non-human others as our bodies are theirs, too; the minds of non-human others are just as much our minds as their bodies are ours, too. The only limit that “separates” one body from another, and thus the only limit that separates one mind from another, is flesh. Such limits exist. Differences between bodies – hence differences between minds – exist. Yet these “limits” are also already – like the skin - surfaces of contact and sites passage; these differences between bodies are also already imbrications or “enjambments” of bodies, also already “miraculous prolongations” of the flesh and of the world (or of the “flesh of the world”) that all bodies share. So, again, the whole concern over “anthropomorphism” – the whole construction of “anthropomorphism” as such – assumes a fundamental separation between “human” consciousness and “animal consciousness” that has never been real, that has only ever been a false abstraction no different from that which separates any individual human consciousness from other human consciousnesses. If human and non-human subjectivities alike are embodied subjectivities, and if therefore they are always already intercorporeally entangled with one another, there is no way to strictly isolate what is “human” subjectivity from all of the other subjectivities that share its carnality and its carnal world. The risk of egocentricity or narcissism in our relations with our fellow humans is no different from that of anthropocentricity in our

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relations with non-humans: they are, logically and ontologically, the *same risk*. So yes, as we have seen, we should be careful not to identify “too easily” with our non-human cohabitants, but as we have also seen, and as so many of us still must come to see, the whole concept of “anthropomorphism” is unsalvageably mired in Cartesian metaphysics, in the idea that a body is a signifier divorced from what it signifies, that the Other’s body stands *between* myself and the Other rather than being a direct expression of the Other’s subjectivity or otherness and rather than already being constitutive of my own embodied subjectivity. Bad epistemology (which is rooted in bad ontology and also bad ideology) sets us in opposition to non-human beings and suppresses the knowledge we have of them as “minds” or as “others” through the carnality that we share with them, the carnality that constitutively grounds and entangles every form of subjectivity. Thus, we inescapably and primarily experience through our bodies (rather than reductively “constitute by our thought”545) other living beings as “variant[s] of our corporeity, that is, as the appearance[s] of behaviors in the field of our behavior,”546 and for all of the reasons just elaborated, Merleau-Ponty affirms, as we must, that “animal life refers to what is sensible for us and to our carnal life.”547

546 Ibid., p. 271.
547 Ibid., p. 271.
Chapter Five

“The Flesh of My Flesh”
Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology of Radical Community

“Animality no longer arouses horror...a brilliant and happy exuberance in favour of the animal in man is the most triumphant form of intellectuality.”

– Nietzsche

“There is intercorporeity such that even God himself can become an instance only on the condition of being taken up in the tissue of carnal things.”

– Merleau-Ponty

I was not present when Sammy passed away, and a part of me is glad that distance and timing spared me what my father has described as the “most traumatic day” of his life. Sammy’s health had slowly declined during the last two years of his life, and so his death was not entirely unexpected when, on April 8, 2011, two veterinarians reported that his organs were failing and that not much more could be done for him. Around a week prior to what my father describes as a “life changing” decision, my parents brought Sammy to the vet to be fed food and medicine intravenously. On April 8, my father met my mother at the vet’s office on his way home from work. The instant my father stepped into the area where he was being kept, Sammy perked up and our vet remarked: “he knows who loves him.” My parents were told that not much more could be done for him, and the decision was made. They knew that they were about to “lose an important member of the family.” My Dad even referred to Sammy as his “second son,” and indeed they would frequently call me Sammy’s “brother.” They said their goodbyes and cried inconsolably throughout the hours and days that followed. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, my father had initially been adamantly opposed to getting a dog. However, according to

548 *Writings from the Late Notebooks*. Trans. Kate Sturge (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2003), §10[21], p.180.
549 *Nature*, p. 76.
my mother, Sammy’s death was the first time she ever saw my father cry. Sammy was buried in a pet cemetery near our home, and to this day my father visits his grave every weekend and talks to him (as he always did), claiming that Sammy “had more humanity in him than most people.”

It is clear that my father’s relationship with Sammy constituted and transformed his “being-in-the-world.” The fact that my father could refer to Sammy as his “second son” – and the fact that my parents could refer to me as Sammy’s “brother” – begins to reveal to us the fact that the family is constructed without essential species boundaries, that community need not be, and already never is, rigidly demarcated *intra*-specifically. The thousands of years of coevolution between dogs and humans is something we know quite well yet nevertheless do not seem to appreciate adequately. In what follows, I will discuss Merleau-Ponty’s thesis that humans and non-humans fundamentally co-constitute one another, and this thesis is not merely an empirical one, for it concerns a fundamental ontological structure of existence and meaning. However, it is already empirically undeniable that our anthropological development has been inextricably linked with the domestication of canines (and vice versa), that just as surely as a human child will never achieve true “human” subjectivity without the presence and nurturance of other humans, so too is it the case that humans would never have achieved what we call “humanity” without their canine best friends, and this point deserves more attention than I can give to it here. Suffice it to say, it might be just as true that dogs domesticated *us* as the reverse. For now, the point I wish to make is that even though dogs do indeed have a special, perhaps even unique place in the human community, this fact alone already helps disclose the radical fluidity of those communal boundaries we often “naturalize” or take for granted as fixed, essential, or impermeable.
There are, of course, often significant differences between different forms of life, and these differences always matter, yet far from negating the possibility of genuine or meaningful relationships between them, difference – radical, irremediable, irreducible difference – is not only compatible with relationality or “kinship” but is always constitutive of it. A central insight of Merleau-Ponty’s ontology is that every genuine, fundamental relationship requires both proximity and irreducible distance or difference. If there is a relationship between, say, two things, there surely must be some difference or distance between them: were one of the terms reducible to, or identical with, the other, then there would in reality only be one term in relation with itself, and that is not really a “relationship” at all, for if, as Merleau-Ponty also argues, the “identity” or being of something is constituted only relative to what is “other” than itself, then a simple tautological identity (i.e., “A=A”) cannot be regarded as ontologically basic because that term (i.e., “A”) must derive its identity as such relative to something other than itself (that is, relative to something other than “A”). Thus, even the reflexivity of identity can never be total self-coincidence, for the reflexivity of anything entails its extension into what is irreducibly other than itself, and while this may seem to be a rather formal or abstract point, it is very clearly demonstrated, as we have already seen, by the reflexivity of the sentient body, or by even the most rudimentary sensory experiences; it is especially demonstrated, as I will further discuss below, by intersubjectivity, or rather by the essential intersubjective constitution of subjectivity.

In short, no real relationship is ever purely a relationship between one thing and itself: solipsism or absolute solitude is precisely irrelational. To put the point more simply, relationships are always relationships between things, and this “between-ness” designates precisely the distance or difference – the non-coincidence or non-identity – that is necessarily constitutive of any relationship. At the same time, however, this very distance or difference
between the terms in a relation must also precisely bring them together, for otherwise no relation at all would obtain between them. This means that the distance or difference that separates the terms in any genuine relationship can never be conceived as oppositional, or that the terms in a genuine relationship can never be regarded as truly “opposed” to one another. This means, in other words, that the space, limit, or interval between terms in a relationship can never be rightly conceived as a divide that absolutely segregates them from one another or as amounting to a dualism; this means, in short, that their non-identity cannot be understood as a strict negation. “Opposition” means mutual exclusion, and terms that mutually exclude one another are not really in a relationship with one another at all, since for each to mutually exclude the other precisely means that each exists as such in a way that is radically independent of, or isolated from, the other: if two terms mutually exclude one another, that means that the identity or being of each is completely autonomous or self-standing, that the identity or being of each may not, in principle or a priori, incorporate or overlap with that of the other in any way. Terms that are truly opposed to one another are utterly, impregnably isolated from one another: there can be no continuity between them whatsoever; they must be separated by a vacuum. Yet, things that are truly isolated from one another, or things that in principle may have no continuity with one another at all, cannot (if the words “isolation” and “relation” have any meaning) be said to be in any kind of “relation” with one another.

This, then, is why Merleau-Ponty argues and repeatedly insists that all relations between things – whether they be between mind (subject) and body (object), between seeing and being-seen/visibility, between touching and being-touched/tangibility, between self and Other(s), between self and world, between the self and itself, between materiality (the sensible) and ideality (the intelligible), or even between “humanity” and “animality” – require a distance that
is not “the contrary of proximity” but that is “deeply consonant” and indeed “synonymous” with it.  

Genuine relations must be neither a reductive or totalizing unification of their relata nor an absolute dichotomization or severance of their relata. Genuine relations must be neither (simple) identities nor binary oppositions but, in a word, relations of genuine difference. Though all of these points seem rather simple or obvious, they have profound implications, not the least of which is that they require us to reject the concepts or conceptual schemas most deeply entrenched in Western philosophy, for the latter has historically floundered upon the antitheses of reductionism and dualism, immanence and transcendence, equivalence and contradiction, identity and negation. As we have already seen, lived experience and Being as such – the relations that comprise all things and phenomena – are below all of these oppositions, below even the opposition between ‘sameness’ and opposition itself. Being is difference, and difference (‘worthy of the name’) is “identity without superposition…difference without contradiction…”.

Thus, relations entail both continuity and irreducible distance/difference, or rather they entail a kind of continuity that is itself already irreducible distance/difference. The necessary space between the relata of any relationship must be simultaneously disjunctive and conjunctive, and (as I will further discuss below) this space that both separates things and brings them together – this spaces that brings things together precisely because it separates them – is what Merleau-Ponty often calls “Flesh” (or “the flesh of the world”). The point I mean to

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551 Merleau-Ponty, ibid., p.135.
552 I wish to offer here some helpful remarks concerning Merleau-Ponty’s terminology: in other places, Merleau-Ponty refers to this opening or divergence between things that brings them together as either “dehiscence” (which, as I mentioned in chapter one, is a term borrowed from botany) or écarts (which is a term borrowed from Gestalt psychology). As I also mentioned in chapter one, although each of these terms (“flesh,” “dehiscence,” and écarts”) may be best suited to certain contexts, they are roughly equivalent to one another, and “dehiscence” may be the one that best captures Merleau-Ponty’s meaning because it more clearly signifies a movement or process, or because it
underscore here is that, regardless of how similar or different various “things” or beings may be, all relationships paradoxically involve both proximity and infinite distance, both continuity and irremediable non-coincidence. All relationships entail radical difference. Contact is always contact-at-a-distance. Thus, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, “kinship” is indeed always “strange,”

signifies something less “static” than what the others seem to signify upon immediate acquaintance. I will use and elaborate each of these terms in the following discussion, but it is always important to keep in mind that the difference that constitutes every relation – hence the difference that constitutes the being or meaning of anything – is never something static but is always differentation; relationality (or communalization) is differentiation; coming-into-being is ‘coming-together’ (or ‘coming-into-relation’), yet it is never a coming-together that would resolve into a fusion, identity, coincidence, or subsumption of things. And though relations may be stable over time, they are always fluid, always subject to transformation, to re-composition or decomposition, and thus are always becoming. I hope to make all of these points clear in what follows.

Lastly, since genuine relations are neither unities nor oppositions, or since they involve both proximity and distance, they entail precisely the overlapping of their relata, and Merleau-Ponty usually refers to this as either “reversibility” or “the chiasm” (i.e., “the intertwining,” which is a term that also must always be read as a verb and not merely as a noun). The “chiasm” is also synonymous with “Flesh,” yet Merleau-Ponty often uses the former to highlight the overlapping or reciprocal “encroachment” of things essential to the latter (whereas he usually uses “dehiscence” or “écart” to highlight the divergence between things that makes possible and entails their overlapping). Again, all of these terms may be understood as roughly synonymous, yet at the same time they tend to have slightly different valences: “dehiscence” and “écart” tend to refer to the divergences between relata, while “reversibility” or “the chiasm” tend to refer to the overlapping of relata that accompanies their divergence, and both of these things at once – divergence and overlapping, or rather overlapping-through-divergence – is what Merleau-Ponty means by “Flesh” (or “the flesh of the world”) in his later writings.

See, for example, Merleau-Ponty’s criticism of Husserl’s concept of intentionality according to which Husserl, in reducing intentional relations to structures immanent to consciousness, is unable to conceptualize the radical distance that must be constitutive of any relationship between consciousness and what it intends. Thus, in the context of discussing Husserl’s understanding of the relationship between past and present in his account of time-consciousness, Merleau-Ponty writes:

“Husserl’s error is to have described the interlocking starting from a Präsenzfeld considered as without thickness, as immanent consciousness: it is transcendent consciousness, it is being at a distance...” (The Visible and The Invisible, p.173).

Thus, we already see here Merleau-Ponty’s attempt to break phenomenology out of its traditional immanence/transcendence dichotomy and to think relationships as relationships to or with a kind of transcendence that is neither reducible to nor the simple contrary of “immanence” (if understood traditionally as designating the domain of consciousness). Conversely, Merleau-Ponty attempts to develop a concept of immanence that would be liberated from “the ego” yet not collapse into a reductive naturalism or empiricism. In other words, Merleau-Ponty attempts to conceptualize, on the one hand, “immanence” as something other than mere immanence to consciousness or as something other than transcendental (noetic-noematic) ideality, and on the other hand he attempts to conceptualize “transcendence” as something other than the antithesis of consciousness, or as something other than either Kantian noumenal reality or Platonic/theological ideality. As I will suggest below, Merleau-Ponty attempts to develop exactly what Deleuze would call a true philosophy of immanence, that is, a philosophy in which immanence is emancipated from both reductive materialism/empiricism and any kind of transcendental idealism or “supernaturalism.” Thus, Merleau-Ponty explicitly remarks that his conception of relationality – and in particular, his conception of the relationship between embodied subjectivity and the world – is beyond “the immanence-transcendence alternative” (ibid., p.268). As we will see, for both Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze this also means developing a philosophy of difference, and I hope to show that that is exactly what Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of
always open and fluid, always a “cohesion of extreme divergencies,” always a limit or fission that both separates and binds, always a threshold through which things transgress themselves and overflow into one another, and this is attested in particular not only by the relationships we human beings have with each other but also especially by those we have with non-human beings, by the communities or ways of being-together that we cultivate and in which we already find ourselves situated with others and with other others: communities and ways of being-together that precisely refute the essentialisms, dualisms, solipsisms, or false and arbitrary “isms” that infiltrate how we later conceptualize “community” or “being-together” and that thereby violate what we live. There is, as Merleau-Ponty says, “a strange kinship between the human and the animal,” but Merleau-Ponty also makes clear throughout his writings that all relationships or forms of kinship are “strange” (or characterized by what he otherwise calls “ambiguity”), for they all entail both familiarity and estrangement, both intimacy and distance, both continuity and non-coincidence; they entail familiarity through a kind of estrangement, intimacy through distance, continuity through non-coincidence. This “double-bind” (if we may call it that) of familiarity and estrangement, of intimacy and distance, of continuity and non-coincidence is that which binds anything together at all: it is an “aporia” (if we may call it that) – one of those “figured enigmas,” “paradoxes,” or combinations of “incompossible details” – that is essential to any experience of alterity, that is essential to the possibility or constitution of any community, and that is indeed essential to embodied experience and to Being as such.

flesh is, for flesh is always relatedness through irreducible distance (or “transcendence”), always being as “being-at-a-distance,” always a relationship with otherness that is realized in and through a shared space or carnality (and which is thus in no way transcendentally ideal or “supernatural”).

555 The Visible and The Invisible, p. 84.
557 Merleau-Ponty, The Visible and The Invisible, p.4.
So, my father can make sense of the idea that he has both a canine son and a *Homo sapiens* son, and thus living with Sammy brought my father to think about his own humanity differently. Yet the categories of “canine” and “human” themselves must be fluid as well, as is evidenced by my father’s insistence that Sammy “had more humanity in him” than most people he had ever known. The speaker of such a claim no doubt means that what we think of as the finest human qualities are also to be found in a dog, and that we find such qualities in dogs more often than we actually find them in humans. But, as we have seen, it is not necessarily naïve, crude, or reductive anthropomorphism to say that Sammy really did possess “humanity”: dogs (and other animals) really are human in certain ways; indeed, what it means to be human is to be dog as well, and vice versa. That is to say, human beings and other forms of life – all styles of embodied existence – are defined by limits between them that are never quite clear or decidable; their distinct identities are achieved by precisely a bi-directional, antepredicative transference of sense, or by an overlapping of bodily schemas, affects, intentions, and comportments prior to reflective categorization and ascription. And so, as we have seen, to recognize “humanity” or an affect such as love in a non-human animal (like a dog) is not necessarily a “mere” projection, and neither is it necessarily a totalizing or reductive gesture. It is not to collapse, say, humanity into dogness or dogness into humanity but to recognize the ambiguity, or what Merleau-Ponty, again, calls the “strange kinship” – the distance as well as the continuity – between them that inflates them to meaning. My father recognizes his own humanity in Sammy, and this means that he also recognizes Sammy’s dogness in himself. To recognize “humanity” in a dog is at once to recognize our own “dogness.” It is not so much the case that my father “projected” human qualities into Sammy but rather that, in their dealings with one another, my father and Sammy
taught one another more about what it is to be human and dog, more about what it is to be father and son, and above all more about what it is to love and to be loved.

Even months after his death, Sammy’s absence continued to linger; the traces of his life continued to permeate every corner of my parents’ home. My mother, for example, would walk around Sammy’s crate long after it had been removed from the house, and described the silence in the house as oppressive and unbearable. Such, of course, is always the case in mourning. We have discussed the fact that lived experience always includes experiences of both absence and presence, that “presences” are not the only things that are ever “present” to us, for absences may be, and always are, present, too. Lived experience is always a play of presence and absence, always, we thus might say, haunted. If this were not so, there would be no such thing as grief. If absences could never be present, or if non-presence were the negation or absolute erasure of presence, we would never suffer from the deaths of others, nor would we even suffer from the notion of death at all; indeed, if absences could never be present, nothing could ever be present. All presence is inflated with absence; every presence – especially the presence of an Other – bears and leaves traces. Yet mourning is not the experience of any ordinary absence, not the experience of just any absent Other. If I am at home and think of my partner, Byler, who is at work, Byler’s absence is present to me, yet I know that her absence may be transformed into “real,” “in-the-flesh” presence, that her present absence (or absent presence) may become a present presence. Mourning, then, is not just the presentation of an Other’s absence, but is the presentation of an Other’s absence that can never be, as Husserl would put it, brought to intentional fulfillment (like the back of a building, or like my partner who is alive and well but not currently near me): it is the presentation of an absence that will never again be “really” present, the presentation of a radical, irrevocable absence. Like a phantom limb, grief consists of
the painful, stubborn assertion of an irremediable absence. And also like a phantom limb, grief consists of an absence that so painfully and stubbornly asserts itself precisely because it indexes a once pivotal fixture in our orientation in the world that is now obliterated forever, because the Other whose presence is now forever withheld from me once structured my existence or orientation in the world just as much as, say, my arms or legs.

In grief, we palpably learn that we are bodies, that we are vulnerable and finite beings, but indeed this is something we learn when we confront the death of anyone, and of course we do not grieve just anyone. Thus, we learn something more in grief: we learn not only that we are bodies but also that we are never *just* individual bodies, that our “individual” bodies are always already composed of the bodies of others and that, indeed, our continual composition with other bodies is the very condition of our individuation. I *am* my body, but in grief I learn that I am not just “my” body but also the bodies of intimate others, that other corporealities – especially those with whom I share my own in love – are integral to my own, are structurally embedded in my embodied subjectivity. I learn that I am “through and through compounded of relationships with the world” and that these, of course, include relationships – especially, intimate relationships, such as relationships of friendship and love – with other living bodies. I learn that what Merleau-Ponty says of space and time is equally true of other embodied beings and is especially true of other embodied beings who profoundly matter to me, namely that “I belong to them, [that] my body combines with them and includes them,” yet at the same time “the scope of this inclusion…can never be all-embracing.”

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559 Ibid., p.140.
I am a self only because I am differentiated from others, and this precisely means that I am never isolated from others, that my own presence to myself is always, in a sense, haunted by the presence of others. I am separated from others, yet nevertheless “our traces mix and intermingle,” and in grief we learn that we are enveloped not only by the traces (the present absences) of living others but also by the traces left in the world and on our bodies by others who are even more absent than any living absent Other, others who can never again be present as anything more than such traces, others who have become, in a sense, ghosts. Such “ghosts,” naturally, are not incorporeal but on the contrary demonstrate, in the manner in which they make themselves felt in their radical absence, or in the manner in which they impress themselves upon our flesh in grief, precisely the radical (inter)corporeality of everything that exists, the radical (inter)corporeal constitution especially of what we call “a self.” “There is no ghost, there is no becoming-specter of the spirit,” writes Derrida, “without at least the appearance of flesh, in a space of invisible visibility, like the dis-appearing of an apparition. For there to be a ghost, there must be a return to the body, but to a body that is more abstract than ever. The spectrogenic process corresponds therefore to a paradoxical incorporation.” This “abstract body” of the ghost of the Other who haunts me in grief consists precisely of the traces or echoes of the concrete, living body through which that Other was once entwined with my own but which is now, of course, in the grave; yet, this “abstract body” of the ghost is a body nonetheless, for in truth it lives as such through its inscriptions upon my living body, and thus what Derrida refers to as the “paradoxical process of incorporation” that constitutes any spectral phenomenon is, in fact, an extension of what Merleau-Ponty elaborates as the very “paradoxical process” through

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which all living bodies come to be in-corporated as such at all, which is to say the same
paradoxical, constitutive process through which living bodies are incorporated in one another.
So, in short, others whom I mourn are of course other than me, yet they are also part of me all
the same, just as I was part of them (yet also a distinct self) when they were alive. Grief precisely
discloses to me the fact that the bodies of those whom I grieve – that the bodies of intimate
others who can no longer live with me nor live at all, that the bodies of beloved others who can
longer love me nor love at all – are, just like any limbs I might lose due to illness or injury,
formerly actual but now only phantom “prolongations” of my bodily being; in grief, I learn
that “my body is also made up of their corporeality,” that “…others become our flesh.”

This is why grief is so disorienting, so dis-locating. I never, in principle, experience my
own death, and this is why Levinas is correct to argue (against Heidegger) that it is only through
the deaths of others that I truly “experience” death at all, that “death is the death of the Other,
contrary to the view of contemporary philosophy which remains attached to the self’s solitary
death.” Any true experience of death is always relational and never purely individual (or
individualizing), always an experience with dying or of dead others, always an experience of and
amidst ghosts. Yet this is also why, as much as I may, in mind and in flesh, recoil from my own
mortality or be struck with angst over the ever-looming, never to be “outstripped” “possibility of
the impossibility of any existence at all,” true vertigo comes not from the abstract
contemplation of eternity or nothingness but from the persistent, keenly felt absences of others

564 Ibid., p.211
whose existence formerly anchored my own, from the equally ever-looming and never to be outstripped yet actually experienced impossibility of any future coexistence with others who matter to me and who made my life matter, others whose deaths leave me, not them, to inhabit an afterlife that can only but be a very pale shadow of the earthly, corporeal life we once inhabited together. To grieve is not just to lose an Other but to lose oneself, too, because this Other was, though indeed truly “Other,” not just “other” but entwined with oneself – entwined with one’s being-in-the-world – too. This is why, in the stygian, abyssal depths of grief, we so often say that we feel as if we have “lost a part of ourselves,” for indeed we have; this common phrase is not, as I have been suggesting, merely a metaphor, for indeed others are just as much parts of ourselves as any limbs or organs. To lose a beloved Other is a trauma no different from the amputation of an arm or leg; it is an unmooring of one’s very body-schema.

An important concern here might be that in mourning, or that at least in such a description of mourning, I risk failing to respect or honor the alterity of the deceased Other, I risk regarding the lost Other as nothing but an extension of myself. In short, one’s concern might be that grief can lapse into, or perhaps even inherently is, consumptive or narcissistic: when I grieve, I make the Other a part of myself, but an Other that is merely a “part” of me is not an “Other” at all. One point to make in reply to this concern is that, as I mentioned above, we do not grieve just anyone; rather, we grieve others who cannot be substituted for just any others, we grieve those who are precious to us, those whose lives were intimately, deeply intertwined with our own. Thus, grief must always entail an affirmation of the alterity or singularity of the Other whom I grieve, though this Other’s “alterity” or “singularity” cannot be, and never is, a distance or transcendence that abolishes any “kinship” with me, for then this Other would not be one whom I would grieve and indeed would not be one with whom I ever had, or ever could have
had, any relationship at all. We see, then, that the paradox endemic to grief is the same paradox endemic to any of our relationships with others, or the same paradox endemic to any lived experience of alterity; it is the same combination of “incompossible details” that, as Merleau-Ponty argues, makes any kinship with others possible yet also, for that very reason, “strange” indeed.

However, the point I wish to emphasize here is that, though certain forms of grief might be infected with egoism or narcissism, and though there surely are unhealthy, pathological forms of grief, at the same time there is never really any issue of “reducing” the Other to the “self,” for that assumes the false notion that there was ever an “otherless” self in the first place. Of course, others are never identical to me and I must always work to let them be (or become) who they are, but that is not to say that they are not “parts” of me all the same, nor is it to say that I am not equally a “part” of them: in fact, who we are is inseparable from the “We” that we are; we already co-constitute one another such that, though indeed each us is constituted as a distinct self, it is impossible to determine where one of us ends and where others begin. This is what Merleau-Ponty means when he proclaims that “in the tête-à-tête of the Füreinander [for-another] there is a linkage of egotism and love which wipes out their borders…”567 Who I am is inseparable from those others with whom I am, inseparable especially from those others with whom I am intimately tied. To be a “self” at all is to be an Other for an Other. Thus, the false dilemma that affirms that others are either absolutely removed from me or are otherwise entirely absorbed into me (or into my “ego”) is simply yet another repetition of dualism and solipsism. Others are always “parts” of me because there simply is no “me” apart from them. Though of course there are always ways we can fail to respect alterity, always ways we can fail to let others

be the others they are, we in fact articulate this concern to respect alterity badly if we do so (as we commonly do) as a concern not to “reduce the Other to the self”: there is a never a self to whom others may be “reduced” because there is never a self that exists or knows itself as such independently of others in the first place. The Other can never be reduced to the self for the same reason that the mind can never be reduced to the body: the notion that one might ever be reduced to the other assumes from the start the false notion that they were ever absolutely separate; again, there has never been an “otherless” self.

Others are not me, yet they are also constitutive of me. This is, again, one of those “paradoxes” or “figured enigmas” that is endemic to lived experience and that even reveals, as we will see, the nature of Being as such.\footnote{The point I am making here is analogous to the one I made in the previous chapter when I addressed the common concern about anthropomorphism: the concern that we might merely be “anthropomorphically projecting” ourselves into non-humans, and thus might be violating their non-human otherness, whenever we perceive human-like qualities in them assumes, since such projections are conceptualized as unidirectional impositions, that we exist as humans apart from them in the first place. In the previous chapter, this is precisely the assumption that, following Merleau-Ponty, I tried to show we have good reason to reject, and in this chapter I will further elaborate Merleau-Ponty’s argument for rejecting this assumption. To be clear, Merleau-Ponty’s account of the fundamental intertwining of human and non-human life is the crux of this chapter (even though it was surely adumbrated in the previous one).} As far as I know, Merleau-Ponty never wrote about grief, but I am sure he would affirm it as an exemplary disclosure of the intercorporeity – the communal enmeshment or embodied togetherness – that constitutes us. So, as Merleau-Ponty would argue, grief is quite literally comparable to phantom limb syndrome because others are just as constitutive of our body-schemas – just as structurally embedded in the ways in which we habitually navigate and orient ourselves in the world and understand ourselves – as any of the organs of our senses or consciousness. Our intentionalities are always enlaced with the intentionalities of others, our corporeal schemas are always in composition with the corporeal
schemas of others, our flesh is always touched, shaped, and inscribed by the flesh of others. The flesh of others is always “the flesh of my flesh.”\(^{569}\)

This, again, is why the death of a beloved Other is so painfully and poignantly felt: when the Other I love dies, some “part” of my being does as well; when I lose the Other whom I love, I lose my once familiar hold on the world. Sammy, my childhood dog, was precisely just such a beloved Other, and my parents and I mourned him no differently, no less intensely or purely (and perhaps even more intensely and purely) than we had ever mourned a human member of our family. We mourned – and are still mourning – Sammy’s death, and it is not a lesser or counterfeit kind of “mourning,” not some pathological transference or displacement of ourselves onto an entity that was never truly our kin, an entity that was too “other” even to have ever been an “Other” at all. Our mourning was, and is, genuine mourning. What conclusions ought we to draw from this? What conclusions ought we to draw from the patent fact that non-human others are genuinely mournable? What conclusions ought we to draw from the fact that a non-human being (like Sammy) can also become a ghost, that non-human others can haunt us just as much as any human others? If it is possible to mourn a non-human animal, and if anyone we mourn may be truly said to be a “part” of ourselves, what then does this reveal to us about who “we” are? About who “we” have always been? About who “we” might be? About what we already are as embodied beings, or about the possibilities latent in our embodied being? So many of us know what it is to mourn an “animal other,” and if such mourning is true mourning – if it really is “mourning worthy of the name” – it follows that such an “animal other” must have been part of us just as much as any intimate human other. And if “animal others” can constitute who “we” are just as genuinely as human others can and do, then it follows that who “we” are – that our very

being, our very “humanity” – has never been in principle restricted only to other humans, that
who we are, or that who one is, has always potentially been open to and inscribed by relations
with non-humans. Yet, if endemic to who “we” are, or if endemic to our very “humanity,” is
precisely this potentiality to form such formative bonds with other-than-human others, precisely
this possibility of weaving bonds with non-human others into the basic fabric of our own
experience and sense-of-self, then we are compelled to acknowledge that who “we”
fundamentally are has never been essentially delimited or defined by “species,” that kinship or
filiality has never been defined by biological filiation, that our “humanity,” our flesh, our
community has always already been more-than-human.

Loving and grieving a non-human other therefore teaches us a profound ontological and
not merely a psychological truth, namely that no living body is ever a priori closed off from any
other kind of living body, or conversely that all living bodies are a priori open to, and
fundamentally involved with, one another. Any of the actual, empirical relationships or
experiences we may have with non-human others attests to, as their condition of possibility or
givenness, a more fundamental intertwining of human and non-human life. We usually have no
trouble accepting an anti-essentialist conception of “family.” That is, although we do typically
understand family in terms of relations of biological descent, and though for most of us the first
families we know are those composed of our genetic parents, grandparents, siblings, cousins, and
so forth, we nevertheless have no difficulty understanding “family” otherwise to include close
friends, romantic partners, neighbors, perhaps professional colleagues, and of course even pets.
We have no trouble understanding “the family” as not essentially circumscribed by direct blood
or genetic relationships or even, thus, by species. We readily accept that familial boundaries,
though real and meaningful and not merely imaginary, are fluid, malleable, porous constructs.
We readily accept that my romantic partner’s relationship with me, with her best friends, and with her cat may even have more of a claim to being a family than the one she inherited at birth. None of this is controversial. Every family is a particular kind of community, and it is not one that is delimited by any essential or fixed boundaries, and therefore especially (as any pet owner knows) not by species boundaries. And if this is true of the family, why should it not be true of every community? Merleau-Ponty’s ontology, of course, entails that this is the case. This point concerning the nature of “family” is the same point that Merleau-Ponty’s ontology entails concerning the nature of community as such.

My partner, Byler, is a psychotherapist who specializes in trauma and attachment, and she knows first-hand (as do so many others) that what we call “the family” can never be pinned down in any biological or speciesist way, that the circle of intimate others through which one thrives in the world and even achieves of a sense-of-self at all may include bonds of intimacy with non-human others just as well as with human others. Moreover, she knows that one’s bonds with non-human others may even be stronger and healthier – we might even say “more human” – than those one has had with other humans. Byler was raised in a profoundly abusive environment, one in which she and her siblings were continually neglected. Her father verbally and financially abused her mother, and her mother largely coped with this by withdrawing into insular detachment. Often for durations of several weeks, Byler’s mother and father hardly left their own separate rooms in the house and barely even spoke to Byler or to her two brothers. Byler and her brothers were hardly attended to medically let alone emotionally. Thus, Byler tells me that her “biological family was incapable of providing [her] with secure, healthy attachments,” that due to her upbringing “experiences of love, friendship, and belonging were foreign” to her. She needed to learn at an early age how to provide for her own survival, and
though this indeed led her to succeed academically and professionally, the traumas of childhood neglect and abuse left their marks in other ways. She was unable to form intimate attachments with others because she had never known true intimacy and because, moreover, the dearth of intimacy in her life had forced her to invest her energies in mere survival rather than in genuine flourishing. This alone indicates just how profoundly intersubjective everything in our existence truly is: without others who show me what friendship or love is, without others who befriend or love me, I cannot know what friendship or love really is, and my capacity to cultivate bonds of friendship or love is thereby deeply impoverished if not stamped out entirely. Of course, no matter how severe such traumas may be, the need for intimacy is never stamped out entirely. The need for intimacy is deeply inscribed into our being, into our very bodies; indeed, it is inscribed in some way into every living body, for no living body is ever isolated; no living body springs into the world utterly alone, fully formed, and radically autonomous or self-sufficient. Only humans in classical Liberal political theory or in Ayn Rand novels have never had childhoods. The need for intimacy is so deeply embedded in who we are, so deeply embedded in our corporeality, that we know, for example, that babies who are literally never touched or hugged suffer severe neurological deficits; their brains simply do not develop fully. Connections with others are in fact necessary for the formation of crucial neuronal, synaptic connections, and this empirical fact alone confirms and discloses at least one of the basic ontological truths to which Merleau-Ponty devoted his efforts to elaborate, namely the fundamental corporeality of subjectivity (which is also to say the fundamental intercorporeality of subjectivity).

My point is that no matter how impoverished one’s capacity to attach to others may be, one never ceases to be attached, and never ceases to need to be attached, to others. If this were not so, severe childhood neglect would not be traumatic in the first place. Thus, no matter the
extent of the traumas one may have suffered, these never eviscerate one’s vital need to enjoy healthy, intimate relationships with others. The “intentional threads”\(^\text{570}\) that tie us to others may become variably attenuated or strengthened, but they can never be severed, and an absence of intimacy is never an erasure of others or of intimacy but is, like many other kinds of absences, one that painfully asserts itself and tinges every aspect of one’s life regardless of the ways one’s mind or body attempts to repress it. Thus, at the age of thirty, and despite all the professional success she had achieved, Byler came to realize she was deeply unhappy. She realized the “avoidant attachment patterns” that characterized most of her relationships and, along with that, realized, or rather finally allowed herself to feel directly or honestly, what she describes as the “deep-seated loneliness” that had always palpitated beneath the surface of her consciousness.

Byler, however, did not (at least not initially) seek out close relationships with other humans. For the most part, other humans had never shown her warmth, kindness, love, friendship, nurturance, or concern at all, so why would she, or how could she, turn to them now for such things? How would she even know how to engage other humans in such ways? How would she even know how to allow other humans to engage her in such ways? How would she know how to show other humans these things so that they might reciprocate and show them to her as well? It is thus that Byler, as she puts it, “allowed a cat to adopt [her] into his family.” It is thus that Byler came to meet Mr. Bojangles (“Bo”) and to embark upon the long and difficult path of learning what love and family really are. As Byler recounts it, “legally, I adopted Bo, but emotionally it was the other way around.” According to her, Bo chose her and “like an adoptive parent who chooses to love an abused child, it was not an easy road for him.” Like many

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\(^{570}\) Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. xiii, 72, 106, 130.
traumatized children who are unable to attach easily to adoptive parents, Byler did not and could not easily attach to Bo; it was not love at first sight, at least not on Byler’s part. Like many traumatized children, Byler, as she herself claims, “required unconditional acceptance, emotional support, and consistent attention over a period of time” before she was able to “experience attachment and eventually a sense of what people call ‘a family.’” Byler’s relationship with Bo, of course, developed into the intimate, deeply satisfying and thriving one that it is today, and she was able to transfer her attachment to Bo to other humans, that is, to carry what Bo taught her into human relationships. In her interactions with other humans, she is now able to access those once dormant or repressed parts of herself – those vital, eminently “human” affective powers – that Bo precisely taught her how to access. Thus, Byler’s attachment to Bo became what, in her training as a therapist, she learned is a “transferable attachment,” an attachment to a specific Other that, in modeling a healthy, secure, and rewarding attachment, opens up an expanded horizon of intersubjective possibilities. It is precisely in and through her relationship with Bo that Byler began to learn, and is still learning (as all of us always are), how to access and sustain those intersubjective sources of affirmation and fulfillment that make any of our lives worth living but that many of us are privileged enough to take for granted.

Byler now has many close human friends and a committed romantic relationship with someone who loves her dearly and who is still hardly able to imagine that her emotional development had ever been so stunted, yet it is very likely the case that none of that would have been possible had Bo not entered her life to be the caregiver she never had; it is very likely the case that, without what James Hart calls Bo’s “gracious acts of attention,”571 Byler’s potential to

571 The Person and the Common Life: Studies in A Husserlian Social Ethics (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer/Kluwer, 1992), p.179. See also Hart’s discussion of the “formative original gracious empathic perception” (ibid., p. 180) that a human adult takes toward a human infant and which is necessary for the latter to achieve
form and enjoy intimate, loving relationships with others (whether human or non-human) would have remained unactualized. Byler now frequently refers to herself as Bo’s “mamma,” yet, from Byler’s own account of the history of their relationship, it is clear that Bo has been just as much of a “parent” to her as she now is to him, that indeed it is impossible to determine with sharp precision who in the relationship is “parent” or “child,” “caregiver” or “care-receiver.” I have no doubt that Bo was a “parental figure” for Byler in some legitimate sense of that term, and now I prefer simply to think that they equally take care of (or “parent”) each other. However, the most important point – the one to which I continually return – is that Byler’s relationship with Bo, just like my father’s relationship with Sammy, helps disclose the fluidity of all of these categories and constructs, the porousness and ambiguity of “parent” and “child,” “mother” and “daughter,” “father” and “son,” “sibling” and “friend,” “love” and “family,” even “human” and “dog” and “cat.” “Simply put,” Byler tells me, “this cat provided me with a family and taught me how to love – a task that humans were unable to accomplish.” Without Bo’s devoted care and hospitality, without Bo’s persistent affection and generous attention to her, Byler perhaps would never have truly learned what “love,” “friendship,” “parent,” and “family” are. Bo quite literally taught Byler – and is still teaching Byler – how to be (fully, flourishingly) “human,” and if this does not lead us to rethink radically what all of these categories mean, if this does not at the very least lead us to call into question the ways in which such categories are conventionally understood and policed, then nothing will.

So, as we have seen, Byler’s case clearly illustrates the fact that, given prior traumas, bonds with non-human others may be necessary to allow one to develop healthy bonds with

“human” subjectivity or any conscious self-reflexivity. My point, of course, is that not only Bo but all kinds of non-human others regard us with similar “gracious acts of attention” or “empathic perceptions” all the time, and we achieve a sense of self through these no less than we do through those that extend from other humans.
fellow humans, necessary even simply to allow one to access those very kinds of relational, affective experiences and attachments (such as those of love or friendship) typically considered quintessentially human. That this is the case is not just a fact about human psychology, for indeed no fact about human psychology is ever just that, and, as I mentioned in the previous chapter, no supposed empirical fact in general is ever just an empirical fact. As Merleau-Ponty remarks and as we have already seen several times, “…what one might consider to be “psychology” is in fact ontology.”572 So, I hope it is clear that the foregoing observations do not merely demonstrate facts about human psychology; they also demonstrate a fact about what it means to be a carnal being at all, namely that to be a carnal being is already to be situated in carnal relationships with other carnal beings and that these relationships, precisely because they are carnal, are intrinsically labile and permeable, and that therefore all of the categories according to which we “group” things together – whether as members of a genus or species or as members of a “family” or broader community – are likewise labile and permeable, likewise already open to and co-constituted by other “categories” of being and identity, meaning and relating. If the boundaries of “the family” are radically open, then so too are those of “community” in general, so too, indeed, are those of any of the categories through which we – imperfectly and often in ways that violently suppress their intrinsic fluidity – delineate and represent the ‘being-together’ of beings in the world, including, for example, the categories of “human” and “dog,” “parent” and “cat.” The possible scope of affective intimacy and intersubjective recognition – that is, the possible scope of any particular community, whether it be that of a few close friends or that of a polis – already in principle embraces all kinds of

572 The Visible and the Invisible, p. 176. I also wish to add, and have attempted to suggest throughout this work, that “what one might consider to be ontology” is also in fact ethics and politics. This point will be the focus of the following chapter.
perceiving, affective bodies, already in principle includes or “appresents” non-human others before we ever rationalize ways to exclude them from it, before we ever abstract from the webs of intercorporeity in which all of us are embedded “universals,” “natural kinds,” or classification schemes that pretend to shred those webs to pieces, that pretend to “carve the world at the joints” or that pretend that the world even has “joints” to be carved in the first place.

If the world can be said to have any “joints,” they are those “hinges,”573 “pivots,”574 or “clear zones”575 – those limits, interstices, or non-figurable “between-spaces” or “mid-places” (“mi-lieus”576) – through which things and beings see and feel, penetrate and “encroach upon,”577 fold and “gear into”578 one another. If the world can be said to have “joints,” they are those points “where multiple entries into the world cross,”579 those nodes of carnal relations between carnal beings. If the world can be said to have “joints,” then they, too, are flesh, and were we to “carve” or in any way attempt to dismember them – were we to attempt to incise divisions between things where in fact there can only be differences or adhesive spaces between them – we would be left only with yet more flesh, only with more yet wounded flesh, only with wounds in our flesh. We so often use concepts like scalpels and forceps. With our concepts we typically

574 Ibid., p.205, 226, 260.
575 Ibid., p.148.
576 I am referring here to Leonard Lawlor’s way of articulating Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the chiasm. I will further elaborate Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the chiasm later in this chapter, but as I have already mentioned, it refers to the intertwining or overlapping of things in their constitutive, differentiating relations with one another. It is a point of divergence that is also at the same time a point of conjunction. As I mentioned in chapter one, the term “chiasm” derives from the Greek letter chi, which is written as an “X,” and also refers to a crossing of optic nerves in the brain. As Lawlor explains, the “mi-lieu” or liminal “mid-place” here refers to the point at which the lines in a decussation cross. Since such a point is simultaneously a point of intersection and divergence, it artfully captures Merleau-Ponty’s account of the ontological structure of relations and of the relational nature of Being, and that is exactly why Merleau-Ponty so often chooses to use the term in the first place. See Lawlor, Thinking through French Philosophy: The Being of the Question (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003), p.25, 33, 40, 44, 160.
577 Merleau-Ponty frequently uses the term “encroachment” to refer to the chiasmatic overlapping of things. See, e.g., The Visible and The Invisible, p.117, 234, and “The Philosopher and His Shadow,” in Signs, p. 169, 173.
578 Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, p. 77.
attempt to dissect “the common tissue of which we are made,”580 to cut to ribbons the “ontological tissue”581 or “closely woven fabric”582 that binds everything to everything, yet the insuperable truth is that our concepts, and that we ourselves, are lifted from, or are distensions of, that very tissue, that our concepts and that we ourselves are also woven into the same fabric. Thus, we hardly realize that the forms of violence for which we deploy our concepts are also forms of violence we deploy against ourselves, for they separate from us all of those “things” or others upon which or upon whom we already depend for our sense of ourselves in the first place. In presenting a vivisected, mutilated image of the world, our concepts mutilate our ability to understand it and our place in it clearly; they mutilate our sense of who or what we and others are, and they thereby mutilate us and others, too, and often not merely metaphorically. And perhaps no concepts have inflicted more violence (epistemically and materially) than those of “humanity” and “animality,” or rather perhaps the gravest violence begins with the supposed opposition between “the human” and “the animal,” for we curiously tend to find this opposition entwined with all of the others that have inflicted the worst forms of violence upon “humans” and “animals” alike. Perhaps it is this (false) human/animal opposition that is the source of all of the other (false) oppositions or dualisms – those of mind/body, subject/object, culture/nature, logos/pathos, autonomy/heteronomy, self/other, individual/community, universality/particularity, identity/negation, public/private, masculinity/femininity, and so on – that motivate the worst forms of violence against ourselves, against others, and against the world. At any rate, even if we cannot say that this opposition (or that any other opposition) is the source of all the others, it is clear to me that all of them overlap and mutually reinforce one another.

580 Ibid., p. 203.
581 Ibid., p. 253
582 Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, p. x; see also The Visible and the Invisible, p. 266.
As I mentioned in the introduction to this project, it is perhaps impossible to think or speak without concepts, and thus it is perhaps impossible to think or speak without violence. The point of philosophy, then, should be to create concepts that at least help us think and speak less needlessly violently: not without violence, but with the “least violence.” I believe the ontological concepts (if they may be called “concepts”) that Merleau-Ponty develops throughout his career but especially in his later writings – primarily those of “the flesh (of the world),” “the chiasm”, “écart,” and “interanimality” – do precisely that, and to begin to understand them we must begin with the basic truth that most clearly discloses them: the foundational co-constitution of “self” and “Other(s),” or, in a word, intersubjectivity. We have, of course, already discussed intersubjectivity (or intercorporeity) extensively, but here I wish to draw attention first to Merleau-Ponty’s insistence (following Husserl) that subjectivity (and even “objectivity”) simply cannot exist without intersubjectivity, that “the self” and the very intelligibility of the world is from the beginning shaped by relations with others all the way down. As I remarked in chapter one, ontological issues are always inseparable from epistemological issues, for the latter always tacitly depend upon the former; for this reason, though the previous chapters were primarily intended to address epistemological questions (i.e., “how do we know that other minds exist?” and “how do we know that “animals” have “minds”?”), we have already seen much of Merleau-Ponty’s ontology, for in order to answer those questions it was necessary to dismantle the ontological presuppositions that motivate anyone to ask them in the first place. That being said, I now wish to make even more explicit the ontological concepts and commitments that Merleau-Ponty’s answers to those questions depend upon or disclose and that are further elaborated in his

583 I am borrowing this phrase (which I also used in the introduction to this project) from Leonard Lawlor. See This is Not Sufficient: An Essay on Animality and Human Nature in Derrida (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), especially chapters 2 and 3.
later writings. Merleau-Ponty not only argues that we can and do know that others exist but also argues for the stronger claim (again, following Husserl) that relations with others are necessary structures of (embodied) consciousness, that subjectivity is constituted intersubjectively, that “the self” is constituted communally. From there, we will then have to proceed to the yet deeper truth that this one itself helps disclose and which the aforementioned concepts that Merleau- Ponty develops in his later writings are really intended to articulate, namely that differentiation and communalization\textsuperscript{584} structure everything, that differentiation and communalization are at the core of perception, knowledge, meaning, and identity, that Being as such is what I propose we call “radical community”: a community that is “radical” in the original sense of the term, for it is a community that is the radix – the “origin” or condition – of every particular empirical community, the primordial relational and differentiatinal field in and through which all communities are instituted and which is also, therefore, the compresence and inosculating of all of them.

In particular, Merleau-Ponty further argues that, once we truly understand the nature of Being as it is saliently disclosed through intersubjectivity, we realize that we are constitutively embedded not only in relations with other human subjectivities but also in relations with non-human subjectivities, that indeed “intersubjectivity” has always already included human and more-than-human subjectivities, that “humanity” arises in sense only amidst or within “animality” and “nature” in the same way, and for the same reason, that a (“human”) “self” arises in sense only amidst or within (a “human”) community, that indeed any particular

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\textsuperscript{584} As I hope to further clarify (in case I have not already made the point sufficiently clear), “differentiation” and “communalization” must be understood as one and the same ontological process, or rather as two, mutually entailed aspects or moments of one and the same ontological process. Since differentiation is not opposition, it entails the overlapping or being-together (that is, the communalization) of the things it differentiates; conversely, things cannot be in community with one another if they are not differentiated from one another, for “community” is not an amorphous, Parmenidean monolith.
community (regardless of how its boundaries are drawn) is already entangled with all other communities, thus revealing a primordial community (or communalization) of all communities or what I wish to call, again, a “radical community.”

So, although I think the distinction between epistemology and ontology is tenuous at best, I now wish to transition from what we might call Merleau-Ponty’s epistemology of incarnate perception to his ontology of incarnate community. Merleau-Ponty shows not only that the “We” is prior to, and constitutive of, the “I” or the “ego” but also that, in the end, there is no such thing as an isolated “We” for the same reasons that there is no such a thing as an isolated ego and that, therefore, the boundaries that determine any particular “We” must always be ambiguous or never strictly exclusionary, always questionable or undecidable. Moreover, my conviction is not only that Merleau-Ponty’s ontology is simply correct but that it is one that may indeed help us dwell in the world more lucidly and therefore, one hopes, more responsibly, or that at any rate it is one that dismantles the false, abstract constructs that underlie and motivate so much of the needless violence we perpetrate against others and the world, forms of violence that, in most if not all cases, begin with a false, abstract construction of a “We” (and, correlatively, with a false, abstract construction of a “self” or “I”).

In the course of demonstrating how it is possible for one to experience or “know” others we have, in fact, already seen that one’s experience or knowledge of others is always already a necessary structure of one’s experience or knowledge of oneself, that intersubjectivity always already constitutes subjectivity, that a “self” does not simply “have” or “enter into” or “stand in” relations with other selves but is in itself, all the way down, an ensemble of relations with other selves, that every living body is itself a knot of ties to other living bodies, that intentionality even at the most “rudimentary” level is interlaced with other intentionalities. However, now it is
important to elaborate this point more explicitly, for it is utterly integral to Merleau-Ponty’s later ontology of flesh (or to what I have proposed we call Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of radical community). As I have suggested and as I hope to show, in Merleau-Ponty the phenomenon of alterity, or the relation between self and Other, discloses the essential relational and differentia tional – that is, the radically communal – nature of Being, and, as Merleau-Ponty explicitly argues, such an account of Being has profound, transformative consequences for how we ought to understand the nature of any particular community of beings, including especially that community of beings we call “human.”

Though it is important not to assimilate Husserl and Merleau-Ponty to one another and to honor the important differences between them (for one thing, I think it is clear that Merleau-Ponty abandons “transcendental” philosophy and seeks to develop a thoroughly post-transcendental phenomenological ontology\(^{585}\), it is also important not to elide or downplay the close relationship between them, or the deep extent to which Husserl’s arguments and concepts inform Merleau-Ponty’s. I hope that I have already clearly and responsibly drawn attention both

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\(^{585}\) Merleau-Ponty’s relationship to transcendental philosophy is, to say the least, complicated (and we might even say “ambivalent”), and the question concerning whether or not Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy may be characterized as belonging to the transcendental tradition (broadly construed) is one that that continues to be debated, and it is one that I do not intend to address any more directly or extensively than I have done so here. I hope that my exposition of Merleau-Ponty’s later ontology will make it obvious (if it is not already obvious) that his philosophy is ultimately opposed to transcendental philosophy. My position is that Merleau-Ponty, even in his early writings and despite the resources he borrows from Kant and Husserl, makes a decisive break from transcendental philosophy in favor of a “naturalistic” alternative (broadly construed), for he consistently seeks to exorcise all vestiges of dualism or supernaturalism from philosophy and to demonstrate the ways in which forms of transcendence (i.e., forms of ideality and alterity, or what he calls “the invisible”) emerge from, and are always embedded within, the carnal world (or “the visible”); he is, therefore, thoroughly committed to what Deleuze calls an ontology of immanence. I bring up the point here only to say that, though Merleau-Ponty is decided ly not a transcendental thinker insofar as his ontology is decidedly not in any way dualistic or supernaturalist, he does often strategically adopt a transcendental style of argumentation, for he often reasons from a given phenomenon to the grounds of its givenness. Nonetheless, Merleau-Ponty explicitly repudiates any commitment to dualism, and that includes any dualism between “the transcendental” and “the empirical” (see below). For a good example of an (erroneous) interpretation of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy as a transcendental philosophy, see Sebastian Gardner, “Merleau-Ponty’s Transcendental Theory of Perception,” in *The Transcendental Turn*, eds. Sebastian Gardner and Matthew Grist (Oxford University Press, 2015).
to the differences and similarities between them, yet I mention this point here because Merleau-Ponty’s radically communal conception of subjectivity hews so closely to Husserl’s that it is simply impossible to discuss the former without reference to the latter, or because it is indeed often difficult to determine where the latter ends and where the former begins. In fact, Merleau-Ponty accepts Husserl’s basic account of the intersubjective constitution of subjectivity, yet he uses this account as a point of departure for developing an ontology that arguably goes beyond anything Husserl was able to envisage, an ontology beyond the terms or parameters of “transcendental” philosophy, that is, an ontology whose method would not be a classical regression to “conditions of possibility,” an ontology that would be beyond the traditional “immanence-transcendence alternative” or beyond the supposed “absolute difference between… the transcendental and the empirical.” In other words, Husserl’s account of intersubjectivity is a starting point for Merleau-Ponty’s own later radical rethinking of phenomenology and ontology. Husserl’s account of the co-constitution of self and Other discloses what Merleau-Ponty calls the “chiasmatic” relationality or “reversibility” that constitutes every form of being, identity, phenomenality, or meaning. In particular, Merleau-Ponty extends Husserl’s insights into the relationship between self and Other to the relationship between “humanity” and “animality” and, even yet more broadly, to the relationships between all distinct communities of embodied beings. As we will see, the co-constitution of self and Other reveals an even more primordial co-constitution of “humanity” and “animality” that, as such, disrupts the conventional ways in which we conceptualize what is indexed by both of those terms, or that transforms the senses of each precisely because it designates the cross-

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587 Ibid., p. 268.
588 Ibid., p. 266.
contamination or undecidable limit – the “strange proximity”\textsuperscript{589} or “strange kinship”\textsuperscript{590} – between them.

Husserl’s radically communal (hence, in a sense, anti-Cartesian) conception of “the self” or “ego” – his insistence upon the ontological, epistemological, and experiential primacy of the “We,” or his insistence upon the fundamental, constitutive sociality and publicity of selfhood and worldhood – is perhaps his most significant contribution to philosophy, yet it is one that is perhaps still not adequately appreciated as such, and his argument for it certainly remains widely (albeit excusably, given his often dense and tortuous style of exposition) misunderstood. Husserl develops this argument throughout many of his writings, though most famously (and succinctly) he develops it in the fifth of his Cartesian Meditations, in which he addresses directly the problem of solipsism. Since up to this point in the text Husserl’s investigation into the basic structures of lived experience has involved what he calls a “reduction” to the ways in which appearances are structured and given meaning by intentional acts and processes that seem to be exclusively immanent to the unitary, monadic ego (i.e., to the “transcendental ego”) to whom they appear, the question concerning how any genuine experience or presentation of alterity is possible – how a supposedly solitary, transcendental ego could conceivably enter into relations with other supposedly solitary, transcendental egos – is an urgent one.

The objection that Husserl poses to himself and attempts to answer here is that it seems to be the case that his phenomenological method of investigation inevitably results in solipsism. When I perform what Husserl calls the “phenomenological” or “transcendental” reduction (or “epoché”), I bracket all preconceptions I may have concerning the “objective” existence of whatever appears to me – that is, I suspend all traditional metaphysical questions or

\textsuperscript{589} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{Signs}, “Introduction,” p. 15.

commitments – and attend exclusively to those appearances themselves and to the ways in which they appear to me, and from that point I regress to the underlying structures or processes that make those appearances (and ways of appearing) possible. Importantly, this means that I neither doubt nor affirm that such things “really” exist (either at all or in the ways in which they appear): I focus only upon how they appear in order to discover their conditions of appearance; I attend to what is given *purely as it is given* in order thereby to learn its conditions of givenness. Thus, in order to reveal the conditions that make everyday lived experience – experience in the mode of what Husserl calls “the natural attitude” – possible, it is (paradoxically) necessary to distance oneself from such experience or to adopt a different kind of attitude toward it; rather than remain absorbed in one’s immediate, direct consciousness of things, one must bend the ray of one’s consciousness back upon itself so as to thematize or uncover the ways in which one is conscious of things; rather than remain pre-reflectively engaged with things, one must reflectively take stock of the ways in which such things present themselves in order to understand the structures that make their presentation possible.

We have already seen that this sort of reflection yields many important and fruitful truths. In chapter two, for instance, we saw that it reveals the constitutive play of presence and absence in experience. And in chapter one, I mentioned that it reveals that experience is always in the *dative case*, that appearances must appear to someone: all experiences must be indexed to some subject who “has” them, and in order for such experiences to be minimally coherent (hence experienceable), they must be unified in some way, and their unity precisely corresponds to the monadic unity or individuation of the subject who experiences them. This subject *to whom* appearances appear – this dative pole of experience – is precisely what Husserl calls the transcendental ego. It is a “transcendental” and not an empirical, psychological, or biographical
ego because it refers to a structure that makes any ordinary, empirical experience – including even any ordinary experience of *oneself* – possible; again, it is that pole around which all possible and actual appearances cluster or gravitate, a center to which all experienceable and experienced phenomena and meanings centripetally refer. Thus, even any possible empirical appearances of oneself to oneself presuppose an index or pole around which such appearances of oneself (like the appearances of *anything*) must be organized, an index or pole of empirical appearances that, as such, cannot be identified with any self who appears empirically and thus must be below or outside such appearances, or must itself be a non-empirical (and non-empirically intuited) structure. The problem, then, is to explain how such a transcendental subject is not utterly isolated, hopelessly imprisoned within its own sphere of appearances or within its own sphere of “ownness” or sphere of “immanence.” In particular, since it seems that such a transcendental ego has always already constituted the meaning of anything that presents itself to it – since it seems that nothing ever presents itself to me that my transcendental ego has not conditioned or constituted in advance of its presentation – it becomes a problem to understand how any genuine presentation of *otherness* is possible, or how it is possible for a true “*alter*-ego” to come onto the scene for me within a sphere of experience I have already constituted, a sphere of experience within which everything that appears is uniquely *mine*. How can I affirm that other egos exist – how can I even *experience* the existence of other egos (*qua* other) – when every possible object of my experience is supposedly a correlate of my own transcendental ego? In other words, how can otherness truly breach the fortress of what Husserl calls my “sphere of ownness”? These are the questions Husserl attempts to answer in the fifth *Cartesian Meditation*. 
I am not going to deny that Husserl’s transcendental philosophy is problematic in many of the ways that his critics (including Merleau-Ponty) have argued, however I do not think that his answer to the problem of solipsism is flawed in the ways many critics have claimed, and neither does Merleau-Ponty. Husserl’s argument in the fifth *Cartesian Meditation* is often poorly understood, yet properly understood it offers, as I have suggested, a radical rebuke to the traditional Cartesian conception of consciousness, and this is a point that Merleau-Ponty not only appreciated but composed an entire essay (“The Philosopher and His Shadow”) in order to elaborate. Moreover, Husserl’s argument in the fifth *Cartesian Meditation* crucially informs Merleau-Ponty’s own account of intersubjectivity (which I have already extensively examined) and later relational ontology (which I have broached in the preceding chapters but intend to explain in greater detail in this one).

In order to put solipsism to the test, Husserl invites us to perform a particular thought experiment: he asks us to perform a reduction to a pure “sphere of ownness.” This reduction to a pure sphere of ownness is “a peculiar kind of *epoche*” in which “we disregard all constitutional effects of intentionality relating immediately or mediately to other subjectivity…”[591] The thought experiment Husserl asks us to perform here is a simple yet radical one. In order to see whether it is at all coherent to suppose that I (or that my transcendental ego) might be *completely* isolated, Husserl simply asks me to reflect on whether I truly can imagine myself to be completely isolated and autonomous, or whether my experiences of the world are even possible or coherent if I truly, consistently pare them down to *nothing but* the meanings and appearances that *my ego alone* would constitute. Is it, in fact, possible to do this? Is it, in fact, possible to conceptualize oneself consistently as an atom? Is it possible to bracket or strip away any sense of

alterity and still be left with something that would be intelligible as a self or locus of experience? Is it even possible to experience anything that would not bear any traces of otherness? Husserl’s argument is precisely that it is not possible to do this, and that therefore solipsism is intrinsically absurd; his argument is that the notion of a purely isolated and autonomous ego – that the notion of a self whose existence or whose experiences would be utterly removed (whether in content or in structure) from others or from any inscriptions of otherness – is as conceptually incoherent as the concept of a square circle. Husserl intends this thought experiment to demonstrate that the concept of a truly isolated, atomistic self – that the concept of a self without an Other (or without others), that the concept of an “I” primitively separated from a “We” – is quite literally a contradiction in terms.

We need to understand exactly what Husserl demands we do here: it is not enough simply to screen out the factual existence of others. As Husserl says, “if I abstract from others, I “alone” remain. But such abstraction is not radical.” Such an abstraction is not radical because, for one thing (and this is a point to which I will soon return), the very concept of “aloneness” is unintelligible apart from a sense of otherness, but moreover, in merely imagining myself to be factually alone in the world, I do not thereby truly restrict myself to a sphere of appearances that I alone would constitute. If I simply imagine that I wake up one morning and, like the protagonist of a “Twilight Zone” episode, shockingly find myself to be the only person who any longer exists in the world, it is nevertheless the case that “such aloneness in no respect alters the natural world-sense, “experienceable by everyone,” which attaches to the naturally understood Ego and would not be lost, even if a universal plague had left only me.” What Husserl means here is that, in order to carry out a true reduction to a “sphere of ownness,” I must also strip away

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592 Ibid., p. 93.
593 Ibid., p. 93.
even the very *publicity* of the world itself, for to imagine a world that is even hypothetically available to others is still to imagine a world whose sense would also be constituted by others or marked by otherness. If I imagine myself alone in the world such as I ordinarily conceive of it – that is, if I imagine myself in a world in which no others actually exist but which is nonetheless still potentially available to others – I have not yet radically abstracted myself from others. If I radically abstract myself from others, I must also abstract myself even from a world whose meaning would refer to others in any way. A world that presents itself to me as “available-to-others” is a world whose meaning is structured by a sense of otherness even if no others actually inhabit it. Thus, to perform a reduction to a genuine “sphere of ownness” is to perform a reduction to an utterly private sphere of experience, a sphere of experience that would include nothing that in *any manner* refers to others.

So, it is crucial to appreciate the radicality of this thought experiment. Husserl does not simply ask me to imagine that I am factually alone in the world. In order to test the coherence of solipsism, one must, again, screen out “all constitutional effects of intentionality relating immediately or mediatly to other subjectivity,” that is, one must screen out from one’s consciousness of the world *everything* that depends in *any way* upon a sense of otherness for its meaning or intelligibility. More than merely imagining myself to be Robinson Crusoe, I must disregard or strip away any kind of experience that refers in any manner to the presence of others, any experience that a sense of otherness even makes possible. Naturally, I might begin by stripping away any experience of the presence of others, but I must also go further than this: I must also strip away any experience of the *absence* of others as well, for an experience of even the absence of others is still an experience of otherness, or still an experience whose possibility or intelligibility depends upon the presence of others. I must, of course, systematically disregard
all social phenomena and institutions; I must remove from experience anything pertaining to
culture, religion, politics, morality, education, commerce, art, entertainment, and so on. I must
abolish my notions of competition, cooperation, sharing, stealing, buying, selling, owning,
feeling crowded, feeling isolated or lonely, arguing, speaking, agreeing, disagreeing, leading,
following, helping, harming, trusting, distrusting, abandoning, mourning, promising, betraying,
lying, etc. I must strip away my race, my ethnicity, my gender, my sexuality, my class, my
species, and my historical context. I obviously must discard language since, as Wittgenstein
argues, there is no such thing as a truly private language; thus, I must discard from my mind all
*words*, for the meanings of words are intersubjectively determined and sedimented. In order to
perform this thought experiment, then, even thinking in terms of words or concepts whose
iterable meanings derive from social or cultural convention is cheating. Furthermore, I must
surely screen out any qualities of myself that depend upon others: being a son, being a cousin,
being a nephew, being a member of a family at all, being a partner, being a friend, being a
professor, and so on. I must bracket family, friendship, work, all forms of communication, and
all conceivable social relations. I must even remove all aspects of my physical appearance, since
endemic to my physical appearance is my visibility to others. Not only must I remove all of the
ways in which I *do* appear to others, I must remove all of the ways in which I *can* appear to
others. I must also bracket all aspects of my personality and all emotions that depend upon my
relations with others: kindness, generosity, compassion, empathy, love, lust, honesty, anger,
indignation, hatred, envy, jealously, shame, avarice, selfishness, cruelty, introversion or shyness,
extroversion, independence, interdependence, codependence, courteousness, insensitivity,
apathy, and so on.
What, then, remains at the end of this process of abstraction? Have I now unearthed my “true,” essential, singular self? Have I now uncovered the “real,” ontologically basic “me”? Am I even left with anything we may rightly call a “self?” Am I even left with any consciousness at all? Husserl’s (and Merleau-Ponty’s) answer is decidedly “no,” and it should already be clear why that is the case. When I attempt to perform a reduction to a pure “sphere of ownness,” I find that such a reduction is, in fact, impossible, or that I cannot help but smuggle into such a sphere experiences that refer to others, for even my own, most minimal awareness of myself depends upon an awareness of otherness. We should recall that if I truly, consistently remove all otherness from experience, I must disregard even any feelings of aloneness or isolation, for such feelings implicitly depend upon others. As we just saw, not only must I bracket the presence of others, so too must I bracket even any experience of the absence of others, for of course any experience of the absence of others presupposes a sense or experience of their presence. As I discussed in chapter two (and as I discussed above in my consideration of the experience of mourning), the absence of others is itself a mode of their presence. So, if I truly, consistently strip away every experience that has anything to do with the presence of others, so too must I strip away anything that derives its meaning from the absence of others. Thus, when I strip away all of my relationships with others, I cannot even experience, understand, or articulate myself as alone or isolated, and furthermore I cannot even experience, understand, or articulate myself as a distinct self or as an “individual” at all, because any sense or concept of oneself as a distinct self or individual – hence any sense-of-self at all – is necessarily a sense or concept of oneself as a self amidst or relative to others. To be aware of oneself as a distinct self – hence to be aware of oneself at all – is to differentiate oneself from others, but of course to differentiate oneself from others entails an awareness of others or a sense of otherness; it entails being situated in relations
with others. There is no self prior to or independent of others because “selfhood” is
differentiation from others in the first place; without others or without some presentation of
alterity, there simply is no such thing as “individuation,” and therefore so too is there no such
thing as experience at all. As Merleau-Ponty writes:

To say that the ego “prior to” the other person is alone is already to situate it in relation to a phantom of
the other person, or at least to conceive of an environment in which others could be. This is not the true
and transcendental solitude. True, transcendental solitude takes place only if the other person is not even
conceivable, and this requires that there can be no self to claim solitude either. We are alone only on the
condition that we do not know we are; it is this very ignorance that is our solitude…The solitude from
which we emerge to intersubjective life is not that of the monad…What “precedes” intersubjective life
cannot be numerically distinguished from it, precisely because at this level there is neither individuation
nor numerical distinction. The constitution of others does not come after that of the body; others and my
body are born together from the original ecstasy. 594

By systematically stripping away all of my attachments to others or all of my intersubjective
roles and relationships, and moreover by stripping away all of my experiences of anything whose
meaning depends upon the presence of others, I do not uncover some fundamental kernel that is
“me” or, at any rate, a conceivable subject of experience; I do not come to some sphere of
experience that is peculiarly, privately, or exclusively “mine” because even such a sense of
“mineness” implicitly refers to, or is parasitic upon, a sense of otherness or “not-mineness.” My
consciousness or understanding of myself – even the very predicate “mine,” even the very
concept or utterance of the pronoun “I” – depends upon a sense of alterity, a “primordial We.” 595

To modify one of William James’ most well-known claims, “the trails of others are over
everything.”

Thus, Husserl concludes that “…Ego and alter ego are always and necessarily given in
an original “pairing.” 596 Many interpretations of Husserl’s argument fail to appreciate his
insistence that any attempted reduction to a “sphere of ownness” precisely demonstrates that

595 Ibid., p. 175.
596 Cartesian Meditations, §51, p. 112. Italics are Husserl’s.
such a sphere is from the beginning constitutively infested with otherness, that a “sphere of ownness” always already, irrecusably derives its very sense of “ownness” from a sense of otherness, that anything pertaining to “the self,” or that anything that might be predicated of “me,” is necessarily founded upon relations with others, necessarily “given in an original pairing” with others. It is important to heed consistently Husserl’s insistence upon the primordial co-constitution of self and Other. For Husserl, there simply is no self without the Other and no Other without the self. It is never the case that I am first aware of myself and only later come to posit the presence of others, for I would have no awareness of myself at all if I were not already aware of others, that is, if I were not aware of myself as distinct from others (or of others as distinct from myself). It is not the case that I acquire self-awareness and then others step onto the scene for me. Husserl is clear that the self is founded upon, and thus in no way precedes, a reciprocal (bilateral) exchange of meaning between self and Other. This means that, contrary to Cartesianism, the self is no longer a privileged, originary, autonomous seat of meaning, for its whole existence or field of experience is, from the start, communally embedded and dependent. The “self” only ever perceives, feels, thinks, knows, believes, doubts, or acts together with others.

Thus, it is crucial to appreciate that Husserl’s (and Merleau-Ponty’s) account of the intersubjective constitution of subjectivity radically decenters “the self” or cogito in the order of being, meaning, and knowing. If there is such a thing as a “self” or “cogito” at all, it is a surface phenomenon of a prior, immemorial yet continual process of communalization. What we call “an individual” comes into being as such only through a process of individuation or differentiation that presupposes, or that rather already is, a process of coming-together with others. As Husserl demonstrates, the very ipseity or sense of “mineness” that, as Kant argues, must accompany all
of “my” appearances must also, as Kant did not argue, have already derived from, or must also already be accompanied by, a sense of otherness or “not-mineness.” My “self” at the most basic, immediate level of experience only “gets this character of being “my” self by virtue of the contrastive pairing that necessarily takes place.”

Thus, Husserl also clarifies that the point of the argument he presents in the fifth Meditation is not to establish a sort of “bridge” between “ego” and “alter-ego,” for that assumes that they were ever separate in the place, whereas the point of his argument is precisely to show that they have never been separate or separable at all, and unfortunately this is often lost on readers of the text. Husserl’s point is not to establish a bridge or epistemic relationship between a solitary sphere of ownness and genuine alterity; rather, his point is to show that such a “sphere of ownness” was never purely or exclusively a “sphere ownness” all along but has always already been coupled with, or lifted into meaning by, otherness:

These two original spheres, mine which is for me as ego the original sphere, and his [the alter-ego’s] which is for me an appresented sphere – are they not separated by an abyss I cannot actually cross, since crossing it would mean, after all, that I acquired an original (rather than an appresenting) experience of someone else? If we stick to our de facto experience...we find that the sensuously seen body is experienced forthwith as the body of someone else and not merely as an indication of someone else. Is not this fact an enigma?...But the enigma disappears only if the two original spheres have already been distinguished – a distinction that already presupposes that experience of someone else has done its work.

Thus, though I might consider my “sphere of ownness” to be “original,” the outcome of my attempt to reduce my experience to a pure sphere of ownness is, in fact, to realize that such a sphere of ownness is not “original” at all, since, again, it derives its being or sense as a sphere of ownness only from its relations with “spheres of otherness” (or spheres of “not-its-ownness”). In other words, what is ontologically originary is not my “sphere of ownness” but an antecedent differentiation of my “sphere of ownness” from a sphere of alterity (or from phenomena outside

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597 Ibid., §51, p. 115.
598 Ibid., §55, p. 121.
the determinations of my ego); what is fundamental is a differentiation and, therefore, a coupling or overlapping of what we call “immanence” and “transcendence.” For Husserl, there must be a primary apperception of an Other that founds any sense I have of myself in the first place and that is, therefore, logically prior to any sharp, abstract distinction one might draw between a “sphere of ownness” and a “sphere of otherness,” a sphere of “immanence” and a sphere of “transcendence.”

It should now be clear that Husserl’s proposed reduction to a “sphere of ownness” is simply a thought experiment intended to demonstrate the impossibility of such a reduction, or intended to demonstrate the phenomenological and ontological primacy of “the We.” Husserl’s point is, in fact, to decent the “ego”; it is to show that the ego is never an autonomous, primal source of its own intentional acts or of the intelligibility of its own experiences. The point of attempting to abstract the self from all conceivable relations with others is precisely to prove the absurdity of such an abstraction, or precisely to bring to light the essential, inseverable bonds with others that always already tether and suffuse everything one experiences or thinks, and Merleau-Ponty understood this. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, “reduction to egology or the “sphere of belonging” is, like all reduction, only a test of primordial bonds, a way of following them into their final prolongations.” As I have mentioned, however, this is often a point that scholars misinterpret. A representative example of how Husserl tends to be misinterpreted (and thus wrongly criticized) is M.C. Dillon’s interpretation and critique of him:

It [Husserl’s *Cartesian Meditations*] is, in my judgment, a noble failure. It fails – has to fail – because it is written within the brackets of a radical epoché and conceives its task as moving from the standpoint of immanence and reflective solitude to arrive at the phenomenon wherein the transcendental ego recognizes its counterpart in an alter ego. Given the point of departure to which Husserl is committed, the destination cannot be reached…the validity of his reasoning demonstrated, by an unintended *reductio*, the falsity of his premises and thereby opened the way for another approach from a different direction…the major

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599 “The Philosopher and His Shadow,” in *Signs*, p. 175.
problem Husserl faces is that of explaining how the meaning ‘other ego’ can be constituted in the sphere of ownness: if, as he claims, the sphere of ownness is primordial and foundational, and if all sense of alienness or otherness is initially absent from this sphere, then it is difficult to see how the sense of otherness can emerge within it. Again, if the world and all its contents are experienced by me as correlates of my conscious life, then how do they acquire the significance of being correlates for subjectivities other than my own when I have as yet no direct experience of any subjectivity other than my own (and, moreover, can never have any such experience)? The answer to this question is that the experience of an alter ego as alter ego is an impossibility within the sphere of ownness: the problem Husserl defines is insoluble within the framework of his definitions.  

Contrary to Dillon’s critique of Husserl here, Husserl’s argument in the fifth Meditation is not an unintended reductio but in fact an intended reductio. Husserl never actually claims, as Dillon alleges here, that a sense of alienness or otherness is absent from the sphere of ownness; rather, Husserl invites to see whether we can imagine that it is, and the point of such a thought experiment is precisely to show that imagining it as such is impossible. As we have just seen, Husserl’s point is not to posit the “sphere of ownness” as originally lacking any sense of otherness and then to show how otherness may somehow come to presence or meaning within it; rather, his point is to show that the so-called sphere of ownness was never devoid of alterity all along, that it is not, in fact, possible to imagine a sphere of ownness as lacking any sense or traces of otherness, that any supposed sphere of ownness has always already been constituted as such relative to alterity or to a “sphere of transcendence.”

This is why Dillon’s critique of Husserl is misdirected. Husserl never actually posits the “ego” as fundamentally isolated from any “alter-egos” but challenges us to see whether it is possible for us to conceive of a fundamentally isolated ego precisely so as to reveal that it is not, in fact, possible to do so. Husserl attempts to demonstrate that the ego never has been, and never can be, truly isolated but is, from the beginning, dependent upon its relations with others. Indeed, Husserl’s whole point is that the “phenomenological reduction” in general has never truly a

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600 Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology, p. 114-115.
reduction to an “I” but a reduction to a “We.” Thus, as Merleau-Ponty writes (contrary to Dillon’s reading of Husserl):

…The “solipsist” thing is not primary for Husserl, nor is the solus ipse. Solipsism is a “thought experiment”; the solus ipse a “constructed subject.” This isolating method of thinking is intended more to reveal the than to break the links of the intentional web. If we could break them in reality or simply in thought – if we could really cut the solus ipse off from others and from Nature…there would be fully preserved, in this fragment of the whole which alone was left, the references to the whole it is composed of. In short, we still would not have the solus ipse…in reality the solus ipse does not merit its name.

Although the abstraction we have carried out is justified intuitively, it does not give us the isolated man or the isolated human person. Furthermore, an abstraction which did succeed in doing so would not consist in preparing a mass murder of the men and animals surrounding us, a murder in which the human subject I am would alone be spared.”

For Husserl, the subjectivity to whom appearances appear has always already been not an atomistic, solitary subjectivity but an intersubjectivity (or an intersubjectively constituted subjectivity). Appearances primordially appear never just to me but to us. Thus, the fundamental dative referent of experience has always been a first-person plural and never a first-person singular referent. Just as my own subjectivity necessarily subtends the primal, immediate appearance of the world and accompanies all possible subsequent appearances, so too does intersubjectivity. As I will mention again later when I discuss Husserl’s thesis that intersubjectivity constitutes not only subjectivity but also objectivity, the world’s publicity is fundamental to the world's appearing: it is not something that is "added on" to the world later.

Built into the appearance of the world to me is its experiential availability to others, or all of the ways in which the world can appear not just from my own perspective but also from the perspectives of actual and hypothetical others. This means that appearances are always necessarily given in the first person plural dative case, that my appearances are never solely given to me as appearances to me but also already as appearances to a We. As James Hart puts it, the fundamental, constitutive condition of experience is not the “I” but the “plural dative of

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manifestation as the correlate of the world’s publicity, i.e., the world appearing as ‘the same for us all.’”

So, we see that the very point of attempting to perform a reduction to a “sphere of ownness” is to demonstrate that such a reduction is logically impossible. Husserl’s argument in the fifth Cartesian Meditation is, in fact, a particular reductio ad absurdum: its point is for us to suppose provisionally that a certain premise is true in order to show that such a premise entails a contradiction (or is in fact inherently contradictory or self-refuting) and therefore cannot be true: if I suppose myself to be completely isolated, I eventually discover that even the sense of myself as “isolated” depends implicitly upon the presence of others or upon some basic sense of otherness; to be “isolated,” after all, is to be isolated from others; to be alone is always already to be situated in some way relative to actual or hypothetical others. Thus, the notion of an isolated self is inherently contradictory, for no self would ever be able to think itself as isolated without a sense of otherness or if some presentation of alterity has not already come to pass. In short, then, solipsism is self-refuting because its formulation presupposes the truth of its own negation. I cannot imagine myself as utterly isolated without situating myself relative to others. Indeed, I cannot be aware of myself at all – that is, I cannot have any notion of myself as a distinct, individual self – if am not differentiated from others. In order to have any awareness of oneself – hence in order to be “a self” – one must be differentiated from others, yet to be differentiated from others is, of course, to be embedded in relations with others. Individuation is differentiation from others, which is also to say that individuation is at the same time communalization. The process through which a self is individuated or constituted as such and the process through which

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602 The Person and the Common Life, p. 445.
a self is plunged into relationships with others are not two different processes but two moments of the same process.

In other words, Husserl’s argument (which Merleau-Ponty accepts and simply expands) is that something we might take to be doubtful (i.e., the presence of others, or more broadly the sphere of transcendent things and beings) is in fact always already implicated in what we take to be apodictically, a priori true (i.e., the existence one’s own ego, or one’s sphere of immanent appearances). If Descartes got one thing right, it is that the statement “I do not exist” is a performative contradiction. Yet, Husserl shows that to declare that the only conscious existence that is real or certain is one’s own is as much of a performative contradiction as the denial of one’s own conscious existence, for there is no self that can have any minimal reflexive sense of itself at all – hence there can be no “self” as such – without the presence of others, and this is the case precisely because to be a self is to be differentiated from others. Thus, if I reflect or meditate on my existence in a way that is even more radical than Descartes’ “hyperbolic” method of doubt, what is disclosed to me as certain or indubitable is not my ego in solitary communion with itself, or not simply my own bare existence as a monadic “thinking thing,” but rather my “ego” or “self” as rooted in an “intersubjective field”\(^{603}\); what is revealed as apodictically true is that “vision…is not the originator of its own presence in the visible world” and that “there is no hyle, no sensation which is not in communication with other sensations or the sensations of other people…”\(^{604}\) As Husserl argues, and contrary to what initially might seem to be the case, the phenomenological reduction does not lead to solipsism; it does not reveal to us the existence or primacy of a solitary ego or “sphere of ownness” but, on the contrary, reveals the existence and primacy of the ego in relation to alter-egos. What is foundational is not the relationship between

\(^{603}\) Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 452.

\(^{604}\) Ibid., p. 405.
the self and itself (as Descartes took it to be) but the bilateral relation between self and Other (or rather the web of multilateral relations between self and others). It is precisely alterity (or community) that enables and mediates selfhood as such, and this is why (as we saw in chapter two) Husserl proceeds to elaborate the ways in which the self comes to an awareness of itself in and through “pairing” with others. A “sphere of ownness” – a space of actual and possible appearances whose content would derive entirely from the unique ego to whom they appear, or which would include nothing whose meaning depends in any way upon a sense of otherness – is in fact conceptually and phenomenologically impossible: a so-called “sphere of ownness” is always already, constitutively infested with alterity. If I attempt to strip away all experiences that depend upon the presence of others for their meaning, then so too must I strip away even my own experience of myself. By getting rid of all of my involvements and relationships with others, I also get rid of the very conditions of my own consciousness. Severing all of my attachments to others cannot unearth or result in an experience of a more basic, pure, atomistic “me,” because in doing so no “me” or “I” would remain to think or experience itself. In just the same way that I can only ever experience an object against a background or amid a horizontal context, a “self” can only come presence amid an intersubjective horizon or a context of coexistence. I can only perceive and understand myself against the background of a life I live with others. So again, for Husserl (and for Merleau-Ponty) the essential dative referent of experience is plural rather than singular: that to whom the world appears – the fundamental “subject” of experience – is never just “me,” but “us,” never merely an “I,” but a “We,” not a solitary ego, but a community. And as Merleau-Ponty further argues, if intersubjectivity requires us to reconceptualize the nature (or “boundaries”) of the self, so too does it require us to reconceptualize the nature (or boundaries) of every community of “selves.”
As we saw in chapters one and two, “interiority” – a “subject” or a “self” – is defined and constituted not by its isolation from the exterior world and from others but, on the contrary, by its distension beyond itself into the exterior world and into the lives of others. It is for this reason that, though it is impossible for the self to know others completely or “without remainder,” it is likewise impossible for the self to “know” itself completely or “without remainder,” for the self can only ever exist as such in and through its paradoxical exposure to, or participation in, what is irreducibly other than itself. In short, “I know myself only in ambiguity.”\(^{605}\) The self’s constitutive relationship with itself, far from being the private, unmediated communion that Cartesian philosophy imagines it to be, is mediated by the conduit through which it is ensconced in the world outside itself, which is to say its flesh. The self’s corporeity is what lets it relate not only to itself but to others, for these others are corporeal beings as well. As I discussed earlier, there is no such thing as a self that is not a living body, and since there is also no such thing as a self without others, it follows that there is no such thing as a self or living body without other living bodies: the self’s corporeity, then, is always already shaped and informed by its relations with other corporeities. The self’s corporeity is always already intercorporeity; intersubjectivity is always already intercorporeity. Merleau-Ponty’s original contribution to phenomenology (and to ontology) consists in recognizing and extrapolating the implications of this truth and in developing a new vocabulary – even a new method of phenomenological reflection, or a new “expressive” mode of writing and thinking – in order to do just that. The Husserlian insights we have just discussed inform Merleau-Ponty’s own ontology of radical relationality (or of “radical community”); as we will soon see, they lead Merleau-Ponty to problematize and transform our conception of the relationship between the “human” and “the animal” and, in general, lead him

\(^{605}\) Merleau-Ponty, ibid., p. 345.
to argue (primarily through his concepts of “flesh,” “écart,” and the “chiasm”) that the singular is necessarily an effect – a surface phenomenon – never of the One but only of the already, irreducibly plural.

Husserl himself labored to explain my awareness of others in terms of intercorporeity. As we saw in chapter two, it is undeniable that for Husserl the living, behaving body mediates intersubjectivity, yet if there is one likely insuperable problem that Husserl’s account of intersubjectivity confronts, it is how to make sense of this role that embodiment clearly plays in founding intersubjectivity within the framework of transcendental philosophy. In short, the problem is to make sense of how a supposedly “transcendental” ego can be embodied, of how a subjectivity that is always behind the scenes of natural, empirical phenomena as their condition of possibility can have (or rather be) flesh. In the end, I do not think – nor does Merleau-Ponty think – that this is a problem Husserl was able to solve, and it is this problem that motivates much of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy. Merleau-Ponty recognizes that the most important insights of Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology carry us beyond it, that is, beyond the classical distinction between “the transcendental” and “the empirical,” or beyond the traditional antithesis of “immanence” and “transcendence.” Merleau-Ponty even points out that Husserl, despite himself, encountered and glimpsed beyond the limits of his own transcendental phenomenology, for his efforts to explain lived experience purely in terms of meanings constituted by acts of consciousness or intentionality eventually led him to realize that consciousness must depend or live upon, or must express or sublimate, certain ontological conditions and processes it does not constitute, conditions and processes that are below the very distinction between “noesis” and “noema” and that, therefore, are radically anterior to, and can never be recuperated or fully brought to presence by, phenomenological reflection. Though “originally a project to gain
intellectual possession of the world.” Merleau-Ponty writes, “constitution becomes increasingly, as Husserl’s thought matures, the means of unveiling a back side of things that we have not constituted…,” and, Merleau-Ponty adds, “the picture of a well-behaved world left to us by classical philosophy had to be pushed to its limit…in order to reveal all that was left over: these beings beneath our idealizations and objectifications which secretly nourish them and in which we have difficult recognizing noema.”606 For Merleau-Ponty, Husserl’s example throws into relief the inherently aporetic character of phenomenology, since Husserl leads us to see (as we already saw in chapter two) that phenomenology – that any rigorous investigation of lived experience – forces us to confront dimensions or structures of reality that necessarily exceed phenomenological reflection. The aporia here, however, consists in the fact that, though such aspects of the world must escape phenomenological reflection, they nonetheless call for (indeed, demand) it; the light of phenomenological reflection cannot illuminate those elements of Being upon which it depends, but it is precisely their very radical darkness or absence that phenomenology must register and integrate into its considered understanding of subjectivity and Being. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, “the ultimate task of phenomenology as philosophy of consciousness is to understand its relationship to non-phenomenology.”607 To radicalize phenomenology is to confront and pass beyond, while also always heeding or never completely transcending, its limits (or to reckon with its “impossibility” in Derrida’s sense of the term); or as Heidegger argues, it is to engage in genuine thinking, and genuine thinking – thinking “worthy of the name” – must be, in a sense, a thinking of the “unthinkable,” a thinking of what “turns away from us” or most “withdraws” from thought.608 If conducted properly, phenomenology

607 Ibid., p. 178. The two quotations from Merleau-Ponty that follow come from the same passage.
leads us to discover that “what resists phenomenology within us – natural being, the “barbarous source” Schelling spoke of – cannot remain outside phenomenology and should have its place within it,” and that therefore “the philosopher must bear his shadow, which is not simply the factual absence of future light.” I think we may rightly consider this to be the basic thesis statement of Merleau-Ponty’s later philosophy, and as we will soon see, this “barbarous source” of lived experience – this “brute,” “wild,” or “savage” Being (être sauvage), this “back side of things we have not constituted” – is exactly what Merleau-Ponty’s later concept of “flesh” is intended to articulate, and it is why intercorporeity is integral to his broader ontological project, for we find that this “flesh (of the world)” or “savage Being” is saliently disclosed through our intercorporeal relationships with others (and with things and the world). Intercorporeity reveals the paradoxical logos that is always beneath the constructions of philosophical reflection, scientific analysis, and classical logic; it reveals “the logos of the sensible world,” “the only pre-existent Logos [that] is the world itself.”

We have seen that my non-coincidence with myself is what makes my self-awareness and awareness of others possible, but it is important never to lose sight of the fact that self-awareness and awareness of others dawn in the same instant, that selfhood and alterity are equiprimordial. Moreover, we have also seen that self-awareness is possible only in virtue of my incarnation, for only if I am sensible (that is, incarnate) may I be sensible to myself. I may see things only because I myself participate in their visibility, I may touch things only because I participate in their tangibility, I may hear things only because I participate in their sonorousness, and in

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609 See e.g., The Visible and the Invisible, p. 203, 210-211. In many places throughout his later writings, Merleau-Ponty uses this expression (“être sauvage”) as a synonym for what he calls the “flesh (of the world),” for it is intended to designate precisely that dimension or element of Being that resists phenomenological reflection and conventional philosophical or linguistic categories.


611 Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, p. xx.
general I can sense things only because I participate in their sensibility, only because all of my “senses” are enveloped in one another and are enveloped by the world to which they are open. And it is precisely my incarnation – precisely the implication of my consciousness in the sensible world – that exposes me to others and that implicates me in their lives, for these others are themselves likewise implicated in the very same sensible world. The sensible world folds back upon me (and back upon itself) insofar as I sense it, and it is through the medium of this sensible world that others – that other sensing, behaving bodies – fold into, elaborate, or encroach upon my own senses, behaviors, or vital intentions and that I, in turn, fold into, elaborate, or encroach upon theirs. We are caught up in the same “circuit,” the same skein of phenomena; it is because self and Other are not pure subjects but incarnate subjects that they are implicated in one and the same carnal world, and it is for this reason that they are intercorporeally implicated in one another:

What is interesting is not an expedient to solve the “problem of the other”…it is a transformation of the problem. If one starts from the visible and the vision, the sensible and the sensing, one acquires a wholly new idea of the “subjectivity”: there are no longer “syntheses,” there is a contact with being through its modulations, or its reliefs…The other is no longer so much a freedom seen from without…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…

Syncretic unity – total communion, coincidence, or fusion – with others would be the dissolution of the self and also of others. My relations with others are possible only if I am indeed a distinct or individualized self, but at the same time I am, by definition, the distinct or individualized self that I am only if I am differentiated from, hence situated in and amid, relations with others. This, again, is what Husserl means when he claims that self and Other are primordially paired or co-constituting: the self may only be differentiated as such in and through contact with others. The self – or consciousness at even the most germinal level – is relationally constituted. The self can

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only be individualized on the basis of its relations with others, and this means that the self can never be atomistically individuated and can never enjoy a pure, translucent, private, unmediated contact with itself. The contact of the self with itself is always at the same time dependent upon and suffused with its paradoxical contact with what is not itself, its contact with a world and with others; and just as I would not be able to touch anything if I were not tangible myself, any contact with things or others outside myself would be impossible if I did not myself “have” an “outside,” which is to say if I were not embodied. This means that what Husserl calls the “transcendental” ego cannot in fact be a transcendentally ego at all or, at any rate, must be something that either radically transforms the meaning of “transcendental” or that renders “indistinct” the “borders of the transcendental and the empirical”\textsuperscript{613}: it means that what we call an “ego” must be a living body; more precisely, it must be flesh in contact with other flesh. It is only through integration into a community, only through the incorporation of one’s own corporeality into other corporealities and of other corporealities into one’s own, only through the “reciprocal insertion and intertwining”\textsuperscript{614} of perceptual, bodily schemata and powers, that a “self” or “subject” is baptized into existence.

It is crucial to appreciate the carnality through which (inter)subjectivity is realized. My own interiority is inextricably enlaced with exteriority, already exposed to what is outside itself, and this exposure to what is outside itself is not only the condition of interiority – not only that peculiar involution through which “a self” or form of life comes into being – but is already access to, and already contact with, other interiorities in the world. This means that my presence-to-myself, that my presence-to-others, and that the presence-of-others-to-me are mutually

\textsuperscript{613} Merleau-Ponty, “The Philosopher and Sociology,” in Signs, p. 107. The original quote is: “Now if the transcendental is intersubjectivity, how can the borders of the transcendental and the empirical help becoming indistinct?”

\textsuperscript{614} Merleau-Ponty, The Visible and the Invisible, p. 138.
dependent structures of being-in-the-world, that self-presence is constituted precisely by the self’s passage into otherness and that otherness as such is possible only on the condition that there is a self that is differentiated from others in the first place; again, it means that self and Other are, as Husserl maintained, primordially paired, but Merleau-Ponty argues that this pairing can only happen through corporeal reflexivity (or affectivity). And as we saw in a passage cited above, Merleau-Ponty is careful to clarify that it is not the case that we first achieve self-awareness, or that our body first becomes a living, self-reflexive body, and that we only subsequently become receptive to or aware of others. On the contrary, “others and my body are born together from an original ecstasy.”615 Self and Other arise in sense and being only together. Self and Other are paired in and through their common embodiment, or in and through the very exteriority that they share, the flesh into which their interiorities are necessarily extended. I do not have any sense of myself as a self – I do not even have any reflexive awareness of my own body – if I am not immersed in ensembles of relations with other living bodies. The self and the Other, then, arise as two moments of a primordial dehiscence in nature or in the world’s flesh; the very dehiscence through which a body acquires a sense of itself or becomes a living body – that is, the opening through which a body becomes also a phenomenal body, or the opening between the objective and phenomenal aspects of a living body that precisely makes a living body a living, sentient body – is the same dehiscence or opening that simultaneously separates and couples a living, self-sensing body with other living, self-sensing bodies. In short, I sense myself only through the sensibilities of other self-sensing bodies. Even my own corporeal self-reflexivity (or auto-affection) is only possible because other self-reflexive corporealities mirror it. As Merleau-Ponty writes:

It is necessary and it suffices that the other’s body which I see and his word which I hear, which are given to me as immediately present in my field, do present to me in their own fashion what I will never be present to… an absence, therefore, but not just any absence, a certain absence and a certain difference in terms of dimensions which are from the first common to us and which predestine the other to be a mirror of me as I am of him, which are responsible for the fact that we do not have two images side by side of someone and of ourselves, but one sole image in which we are both involved, which is responsible for the fact that my consciousness of myself and my myth of the other are not two contradictories, but each the reverse of the other.616

It is traditionally supposed that the “mirror stage” is a key, necessary moment in the development of self-consciousness, that one is not conscious of oneself until one becomes an object for oneself (as one does in a mirror). This is correct, however Merleau-Ponty emphasizes that the “mirror stage” does not primarily signify one’s literal recognition of oneself in a mirror, which indeed is a solitary affair; moreover, the traditional mirror stage tends to be regarded as the moment at which one achieves thematic or reflective self-consciousness, yet such an achievement of reflective self-consciousness presupposes – indeed sublimes – a prior achievement of pre-reflective (or reflexive) bodily self-consciousness, and so the classically conceived “mirror stage” fails to account for how, in fact, subjectivity or “selfhood” is primordially achieved. Thus, for Merleau-Ponty the true “mirror stage” does not consist in the self, alone with itself like Narcissus, gazing into and identifying itself with its own literal image in a mirror; on the contrary, the true or fundamental “mirror” stage is that wherein others mirror me or my embodiment, that wherein I come to a sense of myself or of my own body through the affirmations and even the literal senses – the visions and palpations, the “encroachments” – of other bodies. The true or fundamental mirror stage is that wherein I learn what I am through the compact of my bodily affects, potencies, vulnerabilities, and intentions with those of other bodies. If a body ever becomes an “object for itself” – hence a sentient body – it is only insofar as it (at least pre-reflectively) identifies itself with the manner in which it is sensed by or given to

616 The Visible and the Invisible, p. 82-83. Italics are Merleau-Ponty’s.
others, and it first senses itself or is given to itself as such because others, through their own living bodies, mirror its very own visibility and tangibility, its own affectivity, its own life outside itself, its own peculiar enknottedness with exteriority, its own ecstasy. I can sense myself only because I have already passed through the senses of others, or only because others, through their (sentient) flesh, reflect back to me the flesh with which I too am entwined, the flesh through which I am perceptible to others as they are reversibly perceptible by me, the flesh that I myself am.

So, as Merleau-Ponty suggests in the above passage, the relationship between self and Other is a sort of specular relationship or phenomenon, or is founded upon and expresses a kind of reflexivity. Like the relationship between an object and its mirror-image, or like the chiral relationship between two hands, self and Other are irreducibly different or non-superposable yet nonetheless are not “contradictories” or negations of one another and are, indeed, interdependent. This kind of paradoxical relationship in which things are non-superposable yet co-constitutive, irreducibly different yet interdependent, separate yet inseparable, foundationally continuous yet non-identical or non-coincident, is, in a word, what Merleau-Ponty calls a “chiasm,” and for Merleau-Ponty all *fundamental* relationships are chiasmatic relationships. Thus, “the chiasm is not only a me other exchange…it is also an exchange between me and the world, between the phenomenal body and the “objective” body, between the perceiving and the perceived.”

Indeed, all identities or phenomena are, at the ontologically fundamental level, constitutively embedded within a lattice of chiasmatic relationships. *Any* “identity” or distinct manner of being – not just a “self” or “subject” – is a sort of reflexive relationship or torsion with itself that, like all reflexive relationships, requires its distension beyond itself, its folding-back upon itself.

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617 Ibid., p. 215.
through a detour into what is outside itself. This point may seem “abstract,” but not only is it
simply what any form of identity or meaning entails, we have already seen that it is attested by
even the most ordinary, concrete, lived sensory experiences (such as experiences of vision or
touch). As we have already observed, a space between perceiver and perceived is necessary for
perception. Vision, for example, is possible only if there is some distance between “seer” and
“seen,” yet this distance between seer and seen cannot be a vacuum or strictly exclusionary
(dualistic) partition, for the negation of any continuity between them would just as surely negate
any relationship between them as would the negation of any distance between them.

Now, Merleau-Ponty realizes that this essential relational structure of perception is
essential not only to perception but to Being as such. That is, Merleau-Ponty generalizes this
paradoxical relationality-through-distance as the very relationality that is endemic to all forms of
existence and meaning, for it is not only the relationship between self and Other that entails
contact with and through otherness. Not only the experience of alterity but even perception in
general (e.g., vision and touch) discloses a paradoxical contact with and through otherness that
constitutes any distinct being, phenomenon, or presentation of meaning. It is clearly the case that
relationality (or difference) is, in general, constitutive of any identity, particular manner of being,
or form of meaning: “to be” is to be differentiated, yet traditionally such differentiation has been
deformed into binary oppositions or sharp antitheses, that is, into precisely irrelational
constructs, or at any rate into abstract relations that are carved out of a more basic relational
fabric and generative movement. As I mentioned earlier, on the one hand genuine, fundamental
relations are not simple, self-standing identities, for such identities arise only through a process
of differentiation in the first place; yet, on the other hand, genuine relations are also not
oppositions, since oppositions are always oppositions between already constituted or taken-for-
granted “simple” identities, and since no oppositional “relationship” – that is, no relationship of *mutual exclusion* – is truly a “relationship” at all because mutually exclusive terms are, by definition, isolated and autonomous. So, as neither an identity nor an opposition, as neither a strict equivalence nor a strict contradiction, as neither a unity nor a binary, or as neither a totalizing or reductive monism nor a dualism, every ontologically fundamental relationship is what Deleuze calls “difference” and what Merleau-Ponty calls an “intertwining” or a “chiasm.” Thus, we are already seeing why, for Merleau-Ponty, intersubjectivity reveals the very nature of Being itself and entails a radical reformulation of our traditional ontological categories.

A chiasmatic relationship is one whose terms reciprocally determine yet never absorb one another and therefore constitutively overlap or intertwine with one another. A chiasmatic relationship is, in short, a relationship of genuine *difference*, for it designates a relationship that is neither a simple identity nor a strict opposition; indeed, a chiasm is never a static relation but is always a relational *process*, a process of *differentiation*: it “binds as obverse and reverse ensembles unified in advance in process of differentiation.”618 As we have just seen, for Merleau-Ponty the flesh of the sentient body (or the intercorporeity in which sentient flesh is implicated) is a “mirror phenomenon,”619 and it is a mirror phenomenon that discloses a more basic ontological process at work in the world: the constitution of being, identity, and meaning through differentiation or “othering,” that is, through a kind of reflexivity of which ordinary specular phenomena are merely particular exemplars. The relationship between self and Other and the “perceiving-perceived *Einfühlung*”620 exhibit the proximity-through-distance or overlapping-through-difference – the intertwining and dehiscence, the “flesh” – at the heart of all

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618 Ibid., 262.
619 Ibid., p. 255.
620 Ibid., p. 248.
relationships and thus at the heart of all “things.” As I will elaborate below, this is why Merleau-Ponty considers not just the flesh of the sentient body but “flesh” as such (or the “flesh of the world”) to be a “mirror phenomenon,” for it is a field of chiasmatic relationships as well as the originary spacing or interval that is the crux of every chiasmatic relationship, the hiatus at the heart of every reflexive movement or the distance that lets anything relate either to itself to anything other than itself. The relationship between the self and itself and the relationship between self and Other are particular exemplars of a more basic or general reflexivity at work in the world, exemplars, that is, of the mediation of identity or determinacy through differentiation (which is also communalization, or intertwining), a relational process or process of becoming that is, in fact, synonymous with (“capital B”) Being.

Contrary to Sartre, Merleau-Ponty argues that it is not pure, absolute “nothingness” but reflexivity – the liminal space that weaves things together precisely by distancing them from one another, or the interval through which things enfold one another – that “lies coiled in the heart being – like a worm.”621 Being as such is a “coiling” of things over one another and back upon themselves, or rather is the space that enables and entails this coiling, envelopment, or “encroachment” of things, this “relation of transgression and overlapping”622 through which all things are constituted as such. As we began to see in chapter two and as we will further see later in this one, for Merleau-Ponty “Being” is not the antithesis of “nothingness” or “non-being” but is in itself an altogether new kind of “negativity”: it is a “negativity that is not nothing”623 or a radically immanent, productive or “fecund”624 negativity, a “negativity” demonstrated by (but

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623 Ibid., p. 151.
624 Ibid., p. 263.
not equivalent to) the reflexivity of the living body, that is, by the “coiling over of the visible upon the seeing body, of the tangible upon the touching body, which is attested in particular when the body sees itself, touches itself seeing and touching the things…” 625 In Sartre’s dualistic ontology, Being (or the “in-itself”) is pure, “absolute plenitude.” 626 For Sartre, “there is not the slightest emptiness in being, not the tiniest crack through which nothingness might slip in,” 627 and thus it is only consciousness (or the “for-itself”) that introduces “difference,” “nothingness,” absence, or non-identity into the world by negating Being (and by negating itself in its intentional directedness toward Being and toward things other than itself), yet Merleau-Ponty shows at length that such a dualism (like all dualisms) cannot account for any supposed or asserted relationship between its terms and is a false abstraction carved out of a relational fabric in which those terms are intertwined and which itself, as such, cannot be understood on the side of either of them.

Merleau-Ponty points out that Sartre (despite himself) arrives at the insight that “nothingness” (the for-itself) must be immanent to Being (the in-itself), yet the dualistic opposition Sartre insists between the two makes such a relationship between them logically impossible, and in the end Sartre’s ontology founders as a result of this inconsistency. Sartre’s philosophy “begins by opposing being and nothingness absolutely, and it ends by showing that nothingness is in a way within being, which is the unique universe,” and as Merleau-Ponty asks, “where are we to believe it? At the beginning or at the end?” 628 So, whereas for Sartre consciousness (or intentionality) alone brings “difference” or “negativity” into the world in opposition to Being, for Merleau-Ponty difference (or “negativity”) must be endemic to Being.

625 Ibid., p. 146.
626 Sartre, Being and Nothingness, p. 48; see also, e.g., p. 120.
627 Ibid., p. 121.
628 The Visible and the Invisible, p. 66.
itself, which precisely means that Being, properly understood, is below the traditional distinction between “the in-itself” and the “for-itself.”\footnote{As I will soon elaborate, this is why Merleau-Ponty says that the lived body is a phenomenon that saliently discloses the nature of Being, and it is why he often chooses to refer to Being as “flesh.” As I discussed in chapter one, Merleau-Ponty demonstrates (primarily in \textit{Phenomenology of Perception}) that the lived body is prior to, and the condition of, the distinction between “the in-itself” (object, body, exteriority) and “the for-itself” (subject, consciousness, interiority, etc.), and the same is true of Being.} Moreover, as Merleau-Ponty will further argue, to conceive of “Being” (as Sartre does) as an “in-itself” is to conceive of it as an object set over and against the gaze of a subject, yet Being as such is not an object at all; rather, it is the elemental condition or medium from which the very distinction between “subject” and “object” is derived, and as such it is not something we can understand by adopting a “frontal” (objectifying) perspective toward it.\footnote{This is why Merleau-Ponty calls for what he calls an “intra-ontology,” which would be an ontology that “defines being from within and not from without” (\textit{Nature}, p. 220), that is, a thinking of Being that does not deform Being into an object set over against oneself, but takes stock of the truly elemental character of Being: the fact that Being constitutively envelopes and invades us from all sides because it is the always presupposed condition of any thought or presentation of an “object,” or the fact that Being is that “in the midst of which” we think or perceive anything at all. For Merleau-Ponty’s explicit references to such an “intra-ontology,” see \textit{The Visible and the Invisible}, p. 225, 227.} This also implies (as we will further see) that the “negativity” we must ascribe to Being must not be understood as mere “negation” (i.e., as “negation” as it is conceived in traditional logic and metaphysics): it is not the contradiction of some already given, positive identity or determinacy because it is that through which any given, positive identity or determinacy emerges into being or meaning (or is given) in the first place. Since this “negativity” is the source of any “identity,” it must be prior to the distinction between identity and opposition and thus cannot be understood as the pure or mere privation of some already presupposed or established identity. As Merleau-Ponty claims, “in thinking on the basis of the pure negative we already decide to think according to identity…”\footnote{Ibid., p. 67.} Thus, the “negativity” Merleau-Ponty refers to here and which he argues is endemic to Being is not negation as it is conceived in classical logic or metaphysics, for it is below the classical alternatives of identity and negation, sameness
and contradiction. What Merleau-Ponty calls the “fecund negative” that defines “flesh” or chiasmatic relationality is, we might say, a “positive” or “impure” negative, a “negative” that is not reducible to the “negation” operator of classical logic, a negative that cannot be conceptualized in opposition to identity or that itself cannot be conceptualized as opposition; in a word, it is difference; and in a word, difference is “intertwining” (or chiasmatic relationality, which is also to say community).

I will return to this concept of (“fecund”) “negativity,” but it is crucial to keep in mind that it informs how Merleau-Ponty conceptualizes all ontologically foundational relationships, including especially the relationship between “humanity” and “animality,” and I briefly wish to offer a preview of its implications here. Since such a notion of “negativity” (or of difference) is below the classical alternatives of identity and contradiction (or “negation”), it will follow that the kind of relationship (i.e., the chiasmatic relationship, the “fecund negativity” or dehiscence) that institutes “humanity” and “animality” is one that demands we radically transform the conventional manner in which we understand those two categories; it will follow that we may no longer conceptualize “animality” as the mere negation of “humanity” (or as simply that which is not human), and correlatively it will follow that we may never take for granted “humanity” as a transparently clear or sharply determined or determinable, entirely autonomous or self-standing, unambiguous positive category of identity or being; though irreducibly different, “humanity” and “animality” – like “self” and “Other” – are co-constitutive or interdependent and thus nonetheless continuous or inextricably entangled with one another, and such a relationship or “strange kinship,” properly understood, registers a “never-finished differentiation” (which is also, I must always hasten to add, a never-finished communalization) that renders any limit

between them undecidable. Simply put, all of this means that we will mistakenly interpret
Merleau-Ponty’s conception of the “human-animal” relation if we simply interpret it as a relation of complementary opposites or if we think that, for Merleau-Ponty, “the human” simply and fundamentally defines itself by negatively contrasting itself with “the animal” and that, consequently, “the animal” is merely the *priviation* of “the human.” To conceptualize “the human” (and correlative, “the animal”) in such a manner is implicitly to ascribe to “the human” precisely the sort of positive identity that is, far from a primary or immediate given, at best a derivative abstraction, a sort of identity or form of meaning that is only ever constructed upon the basis of, and that is always disrupted, displaced, and deferred by – that is always *ambiguated* or deprived of clear and autonomous determinacy by – the chiasmatic, symbiotic imbrications of “human” and other-than-human forms of life, by the shared flesh, or by what I have proposed we call the “radical community,” in which all beings, and in which all communities of beings, are embedded.

Being as “flesh” or chiasmatic relationality – as a “negativity that is not nothing” – is thus thoroughly “material” in a broad sense of the term, for it is no more “transcendental” or “supernatural” than the auto-affection of a living body through which it is saliently expressed, yet Merleau-Ponty is careful to indicate that, as inherently a movement of reflexivity or of intertwining through differentiation (that is, as a particular kind of relational *process*), “the flesh we are speaking of is not matter,”634 which is to say it is not “matter” as traditional materialism or empiricism (or as traditional substance ontologies) conceive of it; in other words, it is not on the side of the “in-itself” but is below or outside the distinction between the “in-itself” and the “for-itself,” object and subject, exteriority and interiority. This is why Merleau-Ponty draws an

634 Ibid., p. 146.
analogy between the lived body and the space of relations (or “mi-lieu”) that constitutes and weaves together all beings and phenomena and refers to both as “flesh” (though often he distinguishes the latter as the flesh “of the world”): as the former is prior to, and the condition of, the traditional distinction between subject and object or interiority and exteriority, so too is the latter; indeed, the latter is precisely disclosed through (though is not reducible to) the former; that is, the flesh of the sentient body expresses a more basic relational tissue and process that Merleau-Ponty often calls the “flesh of the world” or the “chiasm.” The “fission of its own mass”\(^{635}\) that constitutes the reflexivity of a living body – that is, the dehiscence that at once institutes the distinction between and couples the objective and phenomenal aspects or “leaves”\(^{636}\) of a living body – instantiates a more fundamental process of differentiation, a process of differentiation (and communalization) that constitutes the Being of all beings and not just the being of a living (sensible-to-itself) body. We see, then, that for Merleau-Ponty neither perception nor intersubjectivity nor Being itself can be understood in terms of the traditional “in-itself/for-itself” dichotomy but only in terms of a kind of relationality, or only in terms of a (quasi-transcendental) plane of relations, that is prior to such a dualism and that is prior to all dualisms (and thus prior to all complementary reductive monisms). Being (“qua Being”), or the world that precedes and escapes all analysis, presents itself “neither in the for Itself, nor in the in Itself, [but] at the joints, where multiple entries of the world cross.”\(^{637}\)

We have already discussed the paradoxical character of any experience of alterity: it would be impossible for me to recognize or affirm an Other if there were no continuity or

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\(^{635}\) Ibid., p. 146.

\(^{636}\) Ibid., p. 137.

\(^{637}\) Ibid., p. 260. Italics are Merleau-Ponty’s. Notably, this is why Merleau-Ponty suggests we “take topological space as a model of being,” for topological (as opposed to classical Euclidean) space is a “milieu in which are circumscribed relations of proximity, of envelopment…” (ibid., p. 210; see also p. 213, where Merleau-Ponty refers to “primordial space” as “topological”).

“kinship” between us, and yet the Other—in order, precisely, to be Other—must also be irremediably distant from me. This is the aporia of intersubjectivity. Self and Other are co-constituting: my relations with others (or any experiences of alterity) are possible only if I am indeed a distinct or individualized self, but at the same time I am the distinct or individualized self that I am only if I am differentiated from, hence situated in and amid, relations with others. The self may only be differentiated as such in and through contact with otherness. Auto-affection is always hetero-affection. However, as we are now seeing, this paradoxical contact with otherness is not only essential to one’s (equiprimordial) awareness of oneself and awareness of others: it is essential to all beings and phenomena. If all beings and phenomena are relationally constituted, then in order to understand the Being of beings and phenomena it is necessary to understand what any genuine relationship entails, and, as we have seen, all genuine relationships entail a kind of distance between their terms that is not contrary to their proximity but that is “deeply consonant” or “synonymous” with it. Relata must be different (or separated from one another) yet also in some sort of contact with one another (for otherwise they would not indeed be in any “relationship” with one another at all). Thus, contact (or relationality) cannot be a fusion or pure communion of terms, for then there would only, in fact, be one term in communion with itself, and we have already established that nothing can ever truly achieve pure communion with itself, for nothing can exist in utter isolation or apart from its relations with other things. Relational contact between terms (or simply relationality as such), then, requires a distance or space between them that is also, paradoxically, the condition and realization of their proximity.

638 Ibid., p. 135.
In short, proximity is always “proximity through distance”639 and distance is thus always a “strange proximity,”640 and this compresence of distance and proximity, or rather this constitution of proximity (or relationality) through distance, is what Merleau-Ponty designates as “chiasmatic” relationality or be(com)ing. Of course, this “proximity through distance” or chiasmatic relationality constitutes any relationship between self and Other, but we have also seen that it constitutes any relationship between a perceiver and a perceptual object, and now we are seeing that it constitutes any relationship at all. All ontologically foundational relationships – principally but not only the relationships between self and Other and (as Merleau-Ponty will later argue) between “humanity” and “animality” – are “strange kinships.” So, the point I wish to underscore here is that Merleau-Ponty realizes that the apparent aporias – the “figured enigmas” or “incompossibilities” – of lived experience are variations or different aspects of one and the same “aporia,” different instantiations or disclosures of the aporia of (or of the aporia that is) Being as such. The “paradox” of alterity and all of the “paradoxes” of lived experience are ultimately this paradox of proximity-through-distance or of overlapping-through-difference, this paradox of “cohesion of self with self, identity in depth, transcendence as being-at-a-distance”641; ultimately, they are all this paradox of what Merleau-Ponty calls “the chiasm” or the “flesh,” and it is “indeed a paradox of Being, not a paradox of man, that we are dealing with here.”642

We have seen that not only is subjectivity always already intersubjectivity but that intersubjectivity is always already intercorporeity. Not only is my interiority constituted by its exposure to other interiorities, but all interiorities are already entangled with one another through their shared embodiment:

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639 Ibid., p. 128.
642 Ibid., p. 136.
...Before others are or can be subjected to my conditions of possibility and reconstructed in my image, they must already exist as outlines, deviations, and variants of a single Vision in which I too participate. For they are not fictions with which I might people my desert...but my twins and the flesh of my flesh. Though Merleau-Ponty refers to others here as my “twins,” it is clear that this is not intended to be a totalizing or reductive gesture, for (as he states here) others cannot fundamentally be “subjected to my conditions of possibility” or “reconstructed in my image.” Merleau-Ponty agrees with Levinas’ insistence that “the Other” is irreducible to “the same” (that is, to the self or to the egoistic economy of the self’s worldly enjoyments and appropriative, sense-making acts), yet Merleau-Ponty also insists that there must be some sort of “sameness” (that is, some sort of ontological continuity) between self and Other if there is to be any relationship between them (or any presentation of alterity) at all. As I have repeatedly underscored, there must be some sort of “sameness” between self and Other that does not dissolve the irreducible difference between them but that paradoxically also is the irreducible difference between them. In other words, we might say that, for Merleau-Ponty, intersubjectivity (or intercorporeity) is below Levinas’ opposition between “sameness” and “transcendence” altogether. So, Merleau-Ponty’s point here is not that others are literal mirror-doubles or mitotic offspring of myself; rather, his point is that other living bodies “mirror” my own no less so than my own body’s literal image in a mirror because, indeed, it was never the case that my embodied consciousness existed radically, autonomously apart from other embodied consciousnesses: I have no consciousness at all without being exposed to and affirmed by the (embodied) consciousnesses of others, and this, again, is why it is a mistake to think that I am constituted as a distinct embodied self first and only later enter into relations with other embodied selves. Self and Other – or all living bodies – only come into being as such together. As Merleau-Ponty suggests in the above passage, there is

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an intertwining of self and Other before there is ever any question or worry concerning the self “reducing” the Other to itself or even before the self reflectively compares and contrasts itself with others. To return to a point I made toward the beginning of this chapter, there is a sense in which the worry concerning the “reduction of the Other to the self” is misdirected because there has never been an “other-less” self in the first place. Of course, I am not denying that respect for alterity is important (as it also clearly is for Merleau-Ponty, which I will further discuss below). Such a worry is to be taken seriously, yet so often it seems to presuppose or to be framed in terms of an opposition between self and Other (or between “sameness” and “transcendence,” as Levinas puts it) that has never been (or that never can be) real if any relationship between them is possible in the first place.

Subjectivity is made possible and realized by the flesh through which it inhales and respires the myriad meanings, affordances, and demands that the world incessantly impresses upon it, the “being by porosity” that is essential not only to its own flesh but to all flesh and that, as such, constitutes a liminal space of passage between itself and (enfleshed) others, a “frontier surface…where occurs the veering I-Other Other-I,” “a sort of straits between exterior and interior horizons ever gaping open,” a site of exposure not only to a world but to the senses and tremulations, entusiasms and antipathies, vitalities and lethargies, desires and intentions, capacities and vulnerabilities of other corporealities that come along with the world, or that are likewise embedded within the world, as well. Kant was right to insist that experiences must be indexed to a subject who “has” them, that appearances must by definition appear to someone. However, Kant was wrong to consider this subject of experience, this pole or center of

645 Ibid., p. 263.
646 Ibid., p. 132.
gravity around which experiences or appearances cluster, to be a solitary or purely discrete ego. For Merleau-Ponty (as for Husserl), no content of “my” experience can ever just be indexed “to me” but is already indexed to actual and possible others, or is already emergent within a shared carnality or “anonymous visibility.”647 already emergent amid the horizon of a world that is “the correlative not only of my consciousness, but of any consciousness which I can possibly encounter.”648 As we have seen, the singular first-person dative referent of appearances is always already founded upon a “primal latent plural first-person dative of appearing.”649 The “I” or “me” is but the surface effect of an “anonymous primal latent ‘we,’” of a “foundational communalization which is the frame for all subsequent communalization.”650 What Kant called the “transcendental unity of apperception” is already a communal “unity,” already a “unity” in and through being-together with others. The sensible world – which is “decidedly the universal one”651 – draws together, yet never dissolves into syncretic oblivion, other affective, perceiving bodies in its sweep, others whose affects and perceptions are indeed “thorns in my flesh”652 for the simple reason that we are of the same world or of the same flesh, that we are “moments of the same syntax”653 or nodes – individuated yet nevertheless entangled instantiations – of the same relational, “polymorphic matrix,”654 “differentiations of one sole and massive adhesion to Being which is the flesh.”655

So, self and Other are co-present and co-constituting, differentiated and coupled articulations or “folds” of a common sensible-carnal world. Self and Other are reflexively related

647 Ibid., p. 142.
648 Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, p. 338. Italics are Merleau-Ponty’s.
650 Ibid., p. 363.
653 Ibid., 83.
654 Ibid., p. 221, 252.
655 Ibid., p. 270.
or open to themselves in and through their reflexive relation or openness to one another, and they are reflexively related or open to – which is also to say, differentiated from – one another on the basis of their shared incarnation. Self and other can be and are sensible to one another because they are sensible to themselves by virtue of a common carnality or Sensibility, or by virtue of their embeddedness in a common field of relations (or in a common relational field) – their autochthonous belonging to a “common tissue”\(^{656}\) – that Merleau-Ponty calls “the flesh (of the world).” We are open to and already implicated in one another through this “flesh” that we share, that is, through this “intermundane space (l’intermonde) where our gazes cross and our perceptions overlap,”\(^{657}\) through this spatiality or interval that joins or conjugates the very things it separates, this elemental field or limit that is at once conjunctive and disjunctive, at once adhesive and othering, at once a site of “overlapping and fission.”\(^{658}\) We are inseparably, irremissibly tied to one another through this distance or “thickness”\(^{659}\) that every relationship and experience – that any mode of contact with what is other – requires. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, “…the thickness of flesh between the seer and the thing is constitutive for the thing of its visibility as for the seer of his corporeity; it is not an obstacle between them, it is their means of communication.”\(^{660}\) Contact between things is possible only on the condition of a kind of continuity that brings them together precisely because it does not fuse them together into an identity or amorphous totality, or precisely because it is a continuity that does not resolve into an absolute communion or Parmenidean “Oneness” (or Hegelian synthesis) but is also irreducible

\(^{656}\) Ibid., 203.

\(^{657}\) Ibid., p. 48; for other references to this concept of an “intermundane space” or “interworld,” see ibid., p. 62, 84, 269, and Nature, p. 210, 214.

\(^{658}\) Ibid., p. 142.

\(^{659}\) See e.g., ibid., 173, 220, 264, 268.

\(^{660}\) Ibid., p. 135.
distance or separation, “a torsion of self upon self…which calls “coincidence” in question”\textsuperscript{661}; conversely, any contact (or relationship) between things is possible only on the condition of a kind of separation between them that is not a dualistic, exclusionary divide, a kind of separation that does not separate \textit{absolutely}. As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, every relationship entails a divergence between its relata that is “not an ontological void”\textsuperscript{662}; in other words, every basic relation must be a space of pure difference or a site and movement of differentiation. Relations must be neither a fusion or synthesis nor a diremption of their relata, neither an identity or assimilative totality nor an opposition. All ontologically basic relations are relations between irreducibly distinct yet interdependent, co-given or co-determining (hence overlapping, mutually “encroaching,” cross-contaminating, or \textit{intertwined}) terms, and thus the ontologically basic structure that enables and founds all beings and phenomena is precisely this “between-ness” endemic to any relation \textit{between} things, which is, again, what Merleau-Ponty calls “flesh.”

We see are now able to understand clearly why intersubjectivity (or intercorporeity) instantiates a more fundamental ontological dynamic – even the very nature of Being itself – and thus why it is integral to Merleau-Ponty’s ontology. The core thesis of Merleau-Ponty’s later philosophy is that co-existence or overlapping-through-difference – in word, \textit{community} – is ontologically (hence also epistemically) foundational. Merleau-Ponty argues that everything is necessarily constituted relationally, and foundational relations – which are attested by lived experience if we attend to it lucidly – are neither syntheses nor antitheses, neither monistic unities nor dualistic non-identities, neither identities nor contradictions (or negations), but generative sites of \textit{difference} (or sites of generative differentiation); that is, they are

\textsuperscript{661} Ibid., p. 128.
\textsuperscript{662} Ibid., p. 148, 272.
interwinnings. As we have seen, this is what Merleau-Ponty (in his later writings) calls “reversibility” or the “chiasm”663 or simply “flesh.” Now, as I mentioned above, in Merleau-Ponty the “flesh (of the world)” is surely intended to evoke, but is not at all reducible to, the flesh of the sentient body (similarly, it is also intended to evoke, but is not at all reducible to, “materiality” as traditionally conceived), and this point is often a source of confusion for readers of Merleau-Ponty’s later writings (especially for those who are new to them). For this reason, Merleau-Ponty insists that “the flesh is not matter, is not mind, is not substance.”664 That is to say, “the flesh” (at this ontological register) is not a thing or even a kind of thing but is the relational medium or mediation of things; it is the differentiation – the diacritical space, openness, or interval, or what Merleau-Ponty also often calls the “dehiscence” or “écart” – that enables and constitutes any relation and that therefore constitutes the meaning and being of any particular thing or being. What Merleau-Ponty calls “the flesh of the world” is the all-pervasive, elemental enabling condition of that reflexivity that respires at the heart of subjectivity and identity, the matrix within and through which all things emerge into being, presence, and meaning. As I have just discussed, an irreducible divergence between the relata of a relationship is necessarily constitutive of relationality as such (indeed, it simply is the very “between-ness” of any relationship between things), but at the same time this divergence between relata cannot be

663 I wish note here that Merleau-Ponty often uses certain German terms as substitutes for “chiasm.” Most often, he uses the term Ineinander, which of course literally means “in/into-one-another,” and thus may be translated as “intertwining.” Merleau-Ponty will often simply use the term Ineinander untranslated as a synonym for “chiasm.” Merleau-Ponty also uses the term “Einfühlung” (which we have already encountered in several places) as a substitute for “chiasm.” “Einfühlung” means “empathy” in German, and it is a common term used in German phenomenology (especially in Husserl’s philosophy) to describe the relationship between self and Other. However, Merleau-Ponty often artfully uses this term not only to describe the relationship between self and Other but also the relationship between the self and (non-sentient) perceptible things and the world. Lastly, chiasms are relationships of intertwining, so the term “intertwining” appears frequently throughout Merleau-Ponty’s writings (usually wherever he opts not to use either “Ineinander” or “Einfühlung”). The French word for “intertwining” is “entrelacs,” and “entrelacs” directly translates the German word “Verflechtung” (in addition to intertwining, “Verflechtung” may be rendered as “interconnectedness,” “interwovenness,” “interlinkage,” “interlacing,” “interlocking,” etc.). 664 The Visible and the Invisible, p. 139.
the negation of any continuity between them, for this would dissolve their relationship just as surely as would the total absorption of one in, or the total reduction of one to, the other. Thus, the point to which we continually return is that a relationship requires both proximity and distance, both conjunction and estrangement, which is to say a kind of divergence between its terms that is not an impassable divide but is precisely that which brings them into touch with one another, a limit that – like the literal skin of a living body – is at once a site of separation and contact, an institution and blurring of the distinction between “interior” and “exterior.” This is what Merleau-Ponty means by “the flesh of the world”: the paradoxical conjunctive distance or, conversely, the paradoxical disjunctive continuity – that is, the relational or differentiatival field or limit, the “between-ness” – at the heart of every particular, empirical relationship, the spatiality that couples or entwines things with one another because it differentiates them from one another. And the reflective inflection or reification of this coupling-through-divergence as a binary opposition is precisely what engenders a mind/body problem and consequently a problem of other minds (whether human or non-human).

I have alluded to the fact that Merleau-Ponty suggests an analogy between the flesh of living body and what he later calls the “flesh of the world.” Merleau-Ponty likely could have chosen other terms or expressions to designate what he calls “the flesh of the world” (and doing so might have obviated certain confusions or problems of interpretation that such an expression has invited), yet he chooses the latter expression partially in order to evoke “flesh” or carnality in its more ordinary valences, and he does not make this choice for merely poetic reasons; though they are not reducible to one another, there really is an important analogy to be registered between them, and the “flesh of the world” – or “flesh” in Merleau-Ponty’s peculiar, deeper ontological sense of the term, which we might helpfully render (in a way Merleau-Ponty does
not) as (capital ‘F’) “Flesh” – is, according to Merleau-Ponty, saliently disclosed through
the flesh of the living body and through relations between living bodies. Merleau-Ponty’s concept of
“Flesh” is an extension of his earlier insights into the incarnation of (inter)subjectivity. If
subjectivity is essentially incarnate, and if (as Husserl argued) subjectivity is always already
intersubjectivity, then intersubjectivity is essentially intercorporeity. Now, as the living body is a
kind of “middle term” or “a third genus of being”\(^{665}\) below the distinction between subject and
object, so is the “flesh of the world” a kind of “middle term” or “element”\(^{666}\) – a metaxic,
differentiating and conjunctive spacing (écart)\(^{667}\) – between all “things” and phenomena that
both weaves them together and institutes them as the distinct things or phenomena that they are;
it is a thoroughly “material” (not at all “supernatural”) though nevertheless non-empirical
relational field or tissue between subjectivity and behavior/the body, between subjectivity and
perceptible things, between subjectivity and the world, between subjectivity and other
subjectivities, and even between (and within) all perceptible “things” themselves:

When we speak of the flesh of the visible, we do not mean to do anthropology, to describe a world
covered over with all our own projections, leaving aside what it can be under the human mask. Rather, we
mean that carnal being, as a being of depths, of several leaves or several faces, a being in latency, and
presentation of a certain absence, is a prototype of Being, of which our body, the sensible sentient, is a
very remarkable variant, but whose constitutive paradox already lies in the visible. For already the cube
assembles within itself incompossible visibilia, as my body is at once phenomenal body and objective
body…What we call the visible is, we said, a quality pregnant with a texture, a surface of a depth, a cross
section of a massive being, a grain or corpuscle borne by a wave of Being. Since the total visible is
always behind, or after, or between the aspects we see of it, there is access to it only through an
experience which, like it, is wholly outside itself…One can say that we perceive the things themselves,
that we are the world that thinks itself – or that the world is at the heart of our flesh. In any case, once a
body-world relationship is recognized, there is a ramifications of my body and a ramifications of the world
and a correspondence between its inside and my outside, between my inside and its outside.\(^{668}\)


\(^{666}\) See Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 139.

\(^{667}\) I wish to mention here that I think that the “Flesh” in Merleau-Ponty is very close in meaning to Plato’s concept
of the *khôra* (or that it is at least close in meaning to the concept of the “*khôra*” as it has been appropriated by later
thinkers, in particular Heidegger and Derrida), though to elaborate this comparison would take me too far afield
from the present discussion.

\(^{668}\) Ibid., p. 136. Note that the portion after the second ellipsis is included by the editor as a footnote at the bottom of
the page from which the first portion of the passage has been taken, as it was originally a note Merleau-Ponty
As the lived body is defined by both a separation and coupling of its “objective” and “phenomenal” aspects and, as such, precedes and institutes the abstract distinction between object and subject – or as the lived body is constituted by a kind of irreducible non-coincidence yet overlapping of what we traditionally refer to as “mind” and “body,” hence by a kind of difference between “mind” and “body” that is also the condition of their continuity or enmeshment – so is the “flesh of the world” (or “the flesh of the visible”) a kind of immanent,\(^669\) interstitial “depth,” “thickness,” or distance, a simultaneously conjunctive and disjunctive space or hiatus (or a kind of non-oppositional separation or non-negating “negativity”), between all perceiving bodies, between all perceiving bodies and all perceived things, and between all perceptible things themselves that is necessary for them to be at all. If all things are relationally constituted, and if every relation is a kind of “reflexivity” (that is, a kind of relationship with or passage through otherness), then the flesh or reflexivity of a living body is but one instantiation (albeit an “exemplary” one) of an originary openness, depth, and liminality (hence of a more basic kind of “flesh”) through which all beings, determinacies, or phenomena are necessarily, relationally mediated, or but one “variant” (albeit a “remarkable” one) of a cohesion with otherness – thus of a kind of reflexivity or movement of othering – at the heart of presence, meaning, and identity; it is one site of an intertwining, or one site of a “coming-to-self” or “Selbstung of Being,”\(^670\) that is “untiringly enunciated within us”\(^671\) and within all things.

\(^{669}\) Here I mean “immanent” not in the Husserlian sense of “immanent to consciousness” but in the Deleuzian sense of “contrary to transcendental ideality or Platonic/ontotheological transcendence.” In Merleau-Ponty, the “Flesh” is “immanent” in exactly the latter sense of the term.


\(^{671}\) Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, p. xviii.
In short, for Merleau-Ponty there is an analogy between the flesh of the lived body and the “flesh of the world” because, if the former precedes and institutes the distinction between subject and object and is thus an intertwining of the two, the latter precedes and institutes any distinctions whatsoever (including especially that between subject and object) and is thus an intertwining of all things; if the lived body is an intertwining of subject and object at the level of an individual sentient being, the flesh of the world is an intertwining of all beings (sentient and non-sentient alike). The flesh of the world, then, is a primordial (or radical) community (or communalization, which is also differentiation) of things from which all ordinary, empirical identities or determinacies – from which all “things,” or from which all particular communities of things and beings – arise. As a living body is at once the dehiscence and contact between perceiver and perceived – as perception is the folding back of flesh upon itself – so is the flesh of the world the dehiscence and consequent encroachment of all perceivers or embodied perspectives and even of all perceptible things (qua perceptible). As my right hand and my left hand can reversibly touch one another because they both belong to the same living, self-sensing body, so can my living, self-sensing body sense not only things but also other living, self-sensing bodies because all living bodies are nodes or folds of reflexivity in the same “Flesh”; they all belong to the same carnal world, the same differentiating and connective tissue or field of Being or, in a sense, the same “Body.”

As the lived body is to the relationship between subject and object, so is the flesh of the world to the relationships between all living bodies. Thus, “my two hands “coexist” or are “compresent” because they are one single body’s hands. The other person appears through an extension of that compresence; he and I are like organs of one single intercorporeality.”

embodied beings – no matter how deeply divergent their styles of bodily being may in fact be – intercorporeally constitute a community, and thus what Merleau-Ponty says of the parts of an individual living body may equally well be said of all living bodies in their relationships with one another and with the world that differentiates and grounds them in common, namely that they are “‘inter-related” in a peculiar way…not spread out side by side, but enveloped in each other.”\(^\text{673}\) All things are in community; they encroach upon one another, and their mutual encroachment entails a distance or hiatus between them (and reciprocally, the distance or hiatus between them entails their mutual encroachment). So, I hope I have made it clear that Merleau-Ponty’s concept of “Flesh” is not mystical pablum or cheap poetry but refers to the necessary, ontologically basic relational (or differentiatitional) medium and process through which every form of existence is instituted; it is not reducible to the flesh of the lived body, yet the flesh of the lived body is an illustrative “exemplar”\(^\text{674}\) or “remarkable variant”\(^\text{675}\) of it. This is why Merleau-Ponty says, on the one hand, that “the flesh of the world is not explained by the flesh of the body…it is by the flesh of the world that in the last analysis one can understand the lived body,”\(^\text{676}\) yet, on the other hand, that “the flesh of the body makes us understand the flesh of the world.”\(^\text{677}\) This is not a strict inconsistency (as it might seem to be upon first glance). Merleau-Ponty’s point here is analogous to the one Heidegger makes in *Being and Time* concerning the relationship between his “analytic of Dasein” and his inquiry into the meaning of Being. For Heidegger, “Dasein” – the manner of being-in-the-world that essentially characterizes those beings that we (human beings) are – discloses, but does not itself constitute, the meaning of

\(^{673}\) *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 98.

\(^{674}\) Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 135.

\(^{675}\) *ibid.*, p. 136.

\(^{676}\) *ibid.*, p. 250.

\(^{677}\) *Nature*, p. 218.
Being as such (and the argument of *Being and Time* is largely devoted to demonstrating how that is so). This means that it is through Dasein’s manner of being-in-the-world that we come to understand something more fundamental than (hence irreducible to) it, something that indeed retroactively illuminates Dasein and justifies it (in a “virtuously” rather than “viciously” circular way) as the appropriate point of departure for our inquiry into the meaning of Being. Merleau-Ponty’s similar point is that the lived body discloses the nature of Being (as “Flesh”), yet at the same time Being (as “Flesh) is surely not reducible to the phenomenon of the lived body; after all, the “flesh of the world is not self-sensing as is my flesh,” yet it is nevertheless that which makes the reflexivity of the lived body possible: Being (as Flesh) is the basis for the existence of the lived body in the first place and is therefore retrospectively revealed to be the basis for understanding it.

Intersubjectivity and the “natal secret” of the lived body disclose the nature of Being itself as “identity without superposition…difference without contradiction…the divergence of the within and the without…”. Lived, embodied experience – especially the lived of experience of otherness, or rather the lived experience of one’s own body through otherness and, reversibly, of otherness through one’s own body – disrupts the disjunctive, binary logic of traditional philosophical frameworks and of ordinary reflective thought. Lived experience has its own *logos*, and it is one that both grounds and unsets the categories or schemas through which we usually articulate and explain the world. This is why Merleau-Ponty suggests that the phenomenon of alterity demands a revolution in ontology, that is, a relational ontology or ontology of difference that is beyond the polarities of dualism and monism, idealism and reductive materialism, the transcendental and the empirical; it demands an ontology that

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transforms not only how we conceptualize Being but especially how we conceptualize relations between beings or between categories of beings. As Merleau-Ponty writes, “against the doctrine of contradiction, absolute negation, the either or – Transcendence is identity within difference.” Merleau-Ponty consistently argues that lived experience and Being as such operate according to a “both/and” logic (which is, again, what he often refers to as a logic of “ambiguity”) that both founds and disrupts any conventional “either/or” logic. This is why Merleau-Ponty frequently contrasts “identity” with “non-difference” and suggests that we substitute the latter for the former, for the traditional contrary of identity is negation (i.e., contradiction or opposition), yet neither identity nor negation (or contradiction) describe the fundamental ways in which things are related to one another. To think of things or relations in terms of identity and negation (or absolute non-identity) is to remain caught up in precisely a traditional, disjunctive (“either/or”) logical framework that fails to honor lived experience or the nature of Being (as Deleuze argues, such a logical framework is one that illicitly reifies identity as ontologically primary when in fact it is only an effect of difference, and this is precisely Merleau-Ponty’s point as well). “Non-difference” is thus one way in which Merleau-Ponty attempts to signify an alternative to the concept of identity that we find within traditional binary schemas of logic, that is, an alternative to “identity” defined relative to contradiction or negation; in other words, it signifies a kind of continuity between things below the conventional opposition between identity and opposition, or a way of being-together that does not amount to coincidence or analytic equivalence or to a reductive or totalizing unity. “Non-difference,” then, is in fact another way of articulating “difference,” since it is neither “identity” (in the classical sense) nor negation (in the classical sense); it is but one way in which Merleau-Ponty succinctly expresses

680 Ibid., p. 225.
681 See e.g., ibid., p. 261, 273.
the (“both/and”) “logic” of Being disclosed through lived, embodied experience, which is also the logic of community.

Thus, the intercorporeal constitution of subjectivity clearly has profound implications for how we conceptualize and draw the boundaries of identity and community (and even for how we conceptualize the nature of Being as such). It reveals to us our embeddedness in what I have suggested we call a “radical community,” that is, a community that is “radical” in the original sense of that term: a community that is the radix – the originary, generative and differentiating field, the ‘dehiscence’ and attendant overlapping – of all beings or of all communities and lifeworlds. Such a “radical community” is another name for what Merleau-Ponty refers to as the “flesh of the world” (or simply “Flesh”); it is that lattice of internal and affective relations, or that “formative medium of the object and the subject,”682 that renders all living bodies receptive to a common world, perceptible to themselves, and perceptible to one another. No matter how different they may be from my own style of being, all living bodies truly are, as Merleau-Ponty says, “the flesh of my flesh,”683 for all embodied beings, hence all communities of embodied beings, are differentiated articulations of a common sensible world, different styles of a shared embodiment, expressions of the world in which I too participate, the world of which my sensing body is also a variant.

We are all caught up in the same “circuit” or skein of phenomena, and at the most fundamental level we must understand this “we” to embrace all living bodies. All living bodies – human and non-human alike – are fundamentally in-corporated into the world they interrogate, and they are therefore fundamentally in-corporated into one another. My body is “in a circuit with the world, an Einfühlung with the world, with the things, with animals, with other

682 Ibid., p. 147.
bodies…”  

All carnalities are implicated in one another. We saw in chapters three and four that if subjectivity is incarnate, we cannot maintain a rigidly “speciesist” or otherwise essentialist account of subjectivity, but this also entails that we cannot maintain a rigidly speciesist or otherwise essentialist account of community. All living bodies are “subjectivities,” and living bodies simply cannot be dualistically (or essentialistically) opposed to one another. Not only does the embodiment of subjectivity mean that every living body is embedded in an intercorporeal community with other living bodies, it also means that every such intercorporeal community is itself embedded in community with other intercorporeal communities: if no living body is ever utterly isolated from other living bodies, it follows that no specific community of living bodies is ever utterly isolated from other communities of living bodies. Thus, though distinct communities do exist in the world and though these distinctions are often significant, such distinctions can never be conceptualized (and thus ought never to be policed) as strict, exclusionary borders or divides, and it follows that all of the ways in which we do commonly conceptualize or police them as such – including especially in speciesist or anthropocentric ways – are false abstractions. As M.C. Dillon writes, “the bifurcation of body and soul is the essential presupposition of humanism”  

by doing away with the bifurcation of body and soul, we also do away with all of the other specious bifurcations we construct in our heads and violently impose upon the world, and therefore we also do away with those (violent) ideologies (such as “humanism”) that conceptually or structurally depend upon such bifurcations.

So, for Merleau-Ponty, though human beings and animals often demonstrate very different styles of existence, these styles nevertheless envelop and implicate one another, for

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different corporeal schemata or styles of existence are, indeed, nevertheless *corporeal*. Different carnalities necessarily overlap one another through the “elemental” carnality that they share. Differences between living bodies are, in principle, never oppositional: living, behaving bodies are never totally closed in on themselves or closed off from one another (no matter how different from one another they may be); they never belong to separate domains of Being but are *intertwined* through the very flesh and through the world (or through the flesh of the world) that they share. Thus, Merleau-Ponty claims that animals are (like non-sentient things and “madmen”) our “quasi-companions,” “thorns in our flesh.” Is it not the case, then, that “animal others” constitute who “we” are just as much as human others do, and that we reciprocally constitute “animal others” as such? Must we not say that, as “the self” is to “the Other,” so is “humanity” to “animality”? This is, indeed, the conclusion to which Merleau-Ponty was led toward the premature end of his philosophical career.

Following Husserl on the pairing relation between self and Other, Merleau-Ponty decenters the *cogito* as the locus of all meaning and value in the world; instead, he locates meaning and value in the compresence and manifold synergies – in the communal embeddedness – of living bodies, that is, in *intercorporeity*, in “Flesh.” Husserl shows that the “ego” is not the central or autonomous source – not the pure, atomic origin – of its own being or identity or immanent sphere of appearances and is thus not entirely, unidirectionally or centrifugally responsible for the meanings it may constitute through its modes and acts of intentionality. The “ego” only arises in sense *together with others*, and thus all of its achievements – all of the things it may ever perceive, intend, think, know, or do – are ultimately communal, or are ultimately only achieved in and through reciprocal, multilateral exchanges with others. Merleau-Ponty

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simply proceeds to decenter the “ego” more radically than Husserl ever did. In his later writings, Merleau-Ponty takes Husserl’s project one step further – the logically necessary step further – by decentering the traditionally presupposed “humanity” of this ego. Merleau-Ponty recognizes that what applies to the “ego” must equally apply to the implicit “humanity” of the ego. Just as there is no “self” or “cogito” without others, so too is there no “humanity” – no “human” selves – without “animal others.” Since the pairing of self and Other entails that the self cannot be understood as an originary and autonomous, purely self-contained locus of meaning, neither can “the human,” or neither can the “humanity” of any supposed “self,” be understood in such a manner (and moreover, Merleau-Ponty denies that there are any such “pure,” simple origins in the world). Everything said thus far concerning the relationship between self and Other is analogously true concerning the relationship between “the human” and “the animal,” for indeed the “self” in the “self-Other” relationship has traditionally, implicitly been a “human” self and, reciprocally, “the animal” has always been “the Other” of “the human.” However, traditionally “animality” has been conceptualized merely as the negation or privation of “humanity,” yet the non-dualistic or non-binary “logic” of intersubjectivity and even, more broadly, of lived experience and of Being as such – that is, the logic of difference or of community, the logic of “Flesh” or of the “chiasm” – demonstrates that such a conceptualization of the “human-animal” relationship is a false abstraction and therefore demands that we radically transform how we conceptualize it, that we radically transform what we mean by “human” and “animal” and even, therefore, what we mean by “we.”

Merleau-Ponty argues that we are essentially (we might say “quasi-transcendently”) in community with “animal” others, that the “We” has always fundamentally enunciated human and non-human forms of life, that “intersubjectivity” has not only always already been
intercorporeity but also, and for that very reason, “interanimality.”\textsuperscript{687} In short, “humanity” and “animality” and all embodied beings are foundationally, intercorporeally intertwined. As I will elaborate below, Merleau-Ponty argues that “humanity” is necessarily continuous with, and is thus necessarily but a particular expression or articulation of, “animality,” but this is not to say either that “animality” is merely the privative counterpart to “humanity” or that humanity “arises” or “descends” from animality, for they both – like “self” and “Other” as Husserl explained them – primordially arise in sense \textit{together}. It will be crucial that we heed (as Merleau-Ponty insists we do) this strict analogy between the “self-Other” relation and the “human-animal” relation, for otherwise we will misinterpret the latter. As the “self” is to the “Other,” so is “the human” to “the animal.” Thus, Merleau-Ponty affirms that “it is humanity that grounds the animal as animal and animality that grounds man as man.”\textsuperscript{688} For Merleau-Ponty, however, this does not mean that they reciprocally ground one another simply by negative or complementary contrast, for that, again, is to conceptualize the “difference” between them as derived from some prior, already positively given and self-standing identity (presumably that of “the human”), or it is simply to conceptualize the difference between them as some sort of ordinary predicative, empirical difference (which also derives from already given or presupposed identities), yet neither is “difference worthy of the name,” or neither is the kind of difference through which they (or any other distinct kinds of things in existence) are instituted.

So, for Merleau-Ponty “humanity” and “animality” are neither opposed nor reductively identical to one another and are neither “higher” nor “lower” than, or neither “anterior” nor “posterior” to, one another. Their relationship is certainly not oppositional, but it also cannot be hierarchical since, given that they are equiprimordial or foundationally co-given and

\textsuperscript{687} See ibid., p. 172 and \textit{Nature}, p. 173, 189.
\textsuperscript{688} Ibid., p. 307.
interpenetrating, it is impossible to conceptualize one as either the pure, autonomous, simple origin or as the predetermined “telos” of the other. As I argued in the previous chapter, there is logically no non-arbitrary way to privilege one’s own distinctive manner of being over others, yet here Merleau-Ponty dismantles the ontological commitments – the supposed transparency, autonomy, essentiality, primacy, or isolation of one’s own manner of being – that one assumes whenever one privileges it as the Archimedean pivot of all meaning and value in the world relative to which all other forms of existence are to be derivatively or negatively interpreted, categorized, and evaluated. “Humanity” and “animality” are (like everything else in existence) instituted through an irreducible process of differentiation, and this means that their relationship does not resolve into a classical “ladder of Being” or *scala naturae* because neither descends from the other as from some pure hearth of creation: there is only ever differentiation and “cross-contamination” – hence only ever ambiguity, only ever hybridity or “promiscuity”689 (or what Alphonso Lingis calls “bestiality”), only ever community, or only ever webs of ontological interdependencies – *all the way down*. So, as we will soon see, this is why Merleau-Ponty insists upon what he calls the *laterality* – both the equiprimordial and non-hierarchical nature – of the “human-animal” relationship. At the most basic level, “humanity” and “animality” are laterally related, or co-constituting: coupled and interdependent by virtue of a constitutive difference between them or by what Merleau-Ponty calls a shared Flesh. This means that each is defined as such by a limit between them that is ultimately undecidable, or that each is defined by an inexpugnable ambiguity, by the impossibility of any sharp demarcation of its identity relative to the other because each is always already intertwined with the other.

Again, this is not, of course, to deny that there are distinct and often deeply divergent communities of living beings in the world. But all communities or lifeworlds are never absolutely divorced from one another, for they precisely acquire their distinct identities or styles of being (as do all distinct beings, identities, or styles of being) from their mutual differentiation from one another, hence also from their mutual involvement with one another; they are all but variations of the same world, irreducibly different styles of corporeity that are, for that very reason, nonetheless intercorporeally implicated in one another. The world is “…a pell-mell ensemble of bodies and minds,” a “promiscuity of visages, words, actions, with, between them all, that cohesion which cannot be denied them since they are all differences, extreme divergencies of one same something.” Though they may indeed be extremely different from one another, all embodied beings, and all communities of embodied beings, are nevertheless but different folds or expressions of “the flesh of the world.” If there is one simple yet, at the same time, exceedingly difficult point in Merleau-Ponty – one that challenges or frustrates our habitual ways of thinking – it is that we must learn to conceptualize irreducible, even extreme divergence and radical continuity together, as two compresent aspects or mutually dependent conditions of any genuine or fundamental relationship. This is, again, why Merleau-Ponty considers all fundamental relationships or “kinships” to be “strange” or paradoxical. Kinship is not the contrary of difference, but is constituted by it. It is in this sense that “there is a “kinship” of the living beings and us among them,” and such kinship is a necessary, ontological and not merely empirical condition of our existence and of the existence of all beings.

Thus, Merleau-Ponty realizes that if we are truly to reject the solipsism or egocentricity of traditional reflective thought – or if we are truly to reject the solipsism or egocentricity that

690 Ibid., p. 84.
Husserl took great pains to disentangle from phenomenology – then so too must we also reject everything else that goes along with the traditional standpoint of reflective thought (or with the traditional standpoint of phenomenological reflection), including especially its implicit anthropocentricity. Phenomenological reflection is radical inasmuch as it aims to excavate and dismantle all of those prejudices that insidiously keep us from actually “knowing what we see,” and for Merleau-Ponty this includes (among others) humanist prejudices. If we are truly to radicalize phenomenology, we must decenter not merely an ego-centered perspective on the world but also a human-centered perspective on it.

However, before I continue to elaborate the conception of the human-animal relationship (or, more broadly, the conception of community) that Merleau-Ponty extrapolates from this insight and bring this discussion to a close, and in order to better clarify everything that has been discussed up to this point, I wish to address an important, even potentially devastating, objection one might pose here. The objection in question is one we implicitly encountered in Nagel’s famous essay “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?,” yet it is also one that might even be motivated by certain core insights of hermeneutics and phenomenology. As I discussed in the previous two chapters, phenomenology rejects the classical, Enlightenment conception of knowledge and “objectivity” as a false abstraction and insists upon the fundamentally situated or perspectival nature of thought and knowledge. In other words, thought and knowledge are (like perception itself) always grounded in a particular, concrete standpoint; far from being an obstacle to knowledge or “objectivity,” a situated perspective or worldly standpoint and identity is precisely the condition of our access to knowledge or “objective truth,” or is indeed the condition of the possibility of all thought, meaning, and experience. All of those “encumbrances” that constitute
our material, bodily, context-specific being-in-the-world are not “encumbrances” at all but are what make knowledge, experience, or any kind of objectivity “worthy of the name” possible.

The question, then, is this: is this repudiation of a classical conception of knowledge or “objectivity” – is this general commitment to a “standpoint epistemology” – not in tension with the demand to decenter our human standpoint? In other words, will not the position from which we perceive, reflect upon, or seek to know the world (and others) always be inescapably, inexpugnably “human”? Is not my species or “humanity” just as constitutive of the standpoint from which I will always necessarily understand the world as any of the other axes of identity (race, gender, sexuality, class, ability, and so on) that constitute me? If it is, then what hope can we have to “decenter” it? And moreover (or more damningly), far from “radicalizing” phenomenology, is Merleau-Ponty’s call for us to decenter our “human” standpoint therefore but a reinstatement of the very classical, Enlightenment ideal of objectivity or impartiality – the ideal of a God’s eye “view from nowhere” – that he (or that phenomenology in general) repudiates? Is it not the demand that we transcend rather than heed our own specific standpoint in the world? And is not such a demand not only inherently impossible to satisfy but also inconsistent with the core – and, I think, fundamentally correct – tenets of phenomenology or hermeneutics? If we take seriously (as we must) the situated, perspectival nature of being and knowing, must we not accept that we will forever be enclosed within an “all-too-human” vantage point, or that we will only ever be able to think anthropocentrically? As William James famously puts it, is it not the case that “the trail of the human serpent is thus over everything”\(^{692}\)? Are we in fact condemned to a world “in which every object displays the human face it acquires in a human gaze”\(^{693}\)? If so,


it seems that the project of Merleau-Ponty’s later philosophy (and that the philosophical project I myself have sought to advance throughout this work) are doomed to failure.

I think that Merleau-Ponty (or that phenomenology in general) offers a decisive answer to this objection, and though it is one we have already broached in the previous chapters, I now wish to articulate it more explicitly, and doing so will further elucidate the central concepts of Merleau-Ponty’s later philosophy. The objection in question assumes a particular false dilemma and in fact reflects a false understanding of the phenomenological or hermeneutical alternative to classical epistemology (or at least a false understanding of what such an alternative entails). The false dilemma in question affirms that we are either able to extricate ourselves entirely from our own situated, embodied standpoint in the world and ascend to a God’s eye “view from nowhere” (which is an inherently absurd notion), or we must accept that we are absolutely imprisoned within our own worldly standpoint. However, phenomenology or hermeneutics (or standpoint epistemology) advances a third alternative beyond these two equally false ones; it rejects the false abstraction or absolutism of a “view from nowhere,” but it also rejects, and logically does not collapse into, the equally false abstractions of solipsism or relativism.

It should already be clear that Merleau-Ponty repudiates Enlightenment rationalism and its abstract, ontotheological conception of “objectivity.” “If we ask ourselves what philosophy can be today,” writes Merleau-Ponty, “we shall see that the philosophy of God-like survey was only an episode – and that it is over.”694 God, Platonism, and Cartesianism are dead. Following Husserl and his phenomenological precursors (such as Nietzsche), Merleau-Ponty thus emphatically rejects what he calls “high-altitude thought (pensée de survol)”695 or the ideal,

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695 The Visible and the Invisible, p. 69, 73.
disembodied vantage point of a “kosmotheoros” or “pure spectator.” For Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology demands that we abolish the “illusion of an absolute view from above” and consequently demands “a radical examination of our belongingness to the world before all science.” “Philosophy does not hold the world supine at its feet,” and so in order to do philosophy (or phenomenology) appropriately we “…must plunge into the world instead of surveying it…” This commitment is one to which Merleau-Ponty remains consistently and passionately committed, and it is necessary to understand that his demand to decenter the conventional anthropocentricity of human thought and philosophical reflection is not only not inconsistent with such a commitment but is, on the contrary, entailed by it; it is no more inconsistent with such a commitment than is the equally necessary demand to decenter the conventional egocentricity of human thought and philosophical reflection. Indeed, such “centrism” or “centricities” are only conventions (and equally false abstractions), and they are ones that keep us from genuinely thinking at all.

There is no question that we must take seriously the core insight of phenomenology (and of hermeneutics) that all thought and knowledge is perspectival or situated, which is to say grounded in a particular experiential or interpretive standpoint, a standpoint always constituted by an ensemble of overlapping markers of identity: culture, history, race, class, gender, sexuality, (dis)ability, and, we should add, species. However, the point of phenomenology (and of hermeneutics) is not that one therefore ought to withdraw deeper into the confines of one’s own specific standpoint. Though Gadamer, for example, in repudiating the Enlightenment concept of

697 The Visible and the Invisible, p. 110.
698 Ibid., p. 27.
objectivity as a “view from nowhere,” or in repudiating the classical concept of the ideal knower as an utterly disengaged spectator, repudiates what he calls the Enlightenment’s “prejudice against prejudice,” that is, the notion that knowledge (or that subjectivity in general) can or ought to be unencumbered by antecedent historical, cultural, political, and otherwise existential horizons of meaning, he and others make clear that the point of hermeneutics (and of phenomenology) is never to make excuses for, or never to insulate from critique and leave intact, whatever cloistered, blinkered, un/pre-critical attitudes and beliefs one may have about the world; it is not an excuse to dismiss or to refuse to engage with other standpoints; indeed, the point is precisely the opposite: the point is to acknowledge that one’s own standpoint is one amidst, and in fact one always already entangled with, an irreducible plurality of other standpoints and to push against and interrogate, as much as possible, the limits of one’s own. The point is to bring one’s own horizons of lived experience into closer proximity with others yet never in such a manner that would deny any distance between them or that would presume they may ever coincide. As Merleau-Ponty insists, the point is to acknowledge, and to think according to rather than against, the distances between different subjectivities, between different lifeworlds or communities, or between different horizons of being and knowing that precisely make contact or communication (whether perceptual, affective, semiotic, or epistemic) between them possible, that in fact already fold them into and round about one another in fluid and ever shifting involutions and circumvolutions and that ground their presence and intelligibility from the start. The point is to confront authentically one’s own horizons of lived experience and thereby the manifold alterities that constitute them, the othernesses that are the other sides of one’s own familiar sphere of existence. In other words, the point is to see the limits of one’s own standpoint

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not as *strict* “limits” or impermeable borders – or as boundaries that *merely* separate – but as sites or thresholds of passage, as horizons that let alterities come to presence in the first place and thus separate yet never divide or isolate, as limits that are therefore *liminal*, ambiguous, or undecidable rather than oppositional or exclusionary. The point, moreover, is precisely to enrich one’s own standpoint through encounters with other standpoints (and even with other “worlds”) that are non-assimilative, that appreciate and affirm rather than consumptively negate (or sublatively resolve into a higher unity) their otherness.

In short, then, the point of the hermeneutic or phenomenological critique of the traditional Enlightenment conception of knowledge is not to retreat to some sort of isolationism or relativism, yet it is also not to resort to the abstract universalism or absolutism that is traditionally regarded as the only conceivable alternative to relativism. As Gadamer writes:

…A hermeneutically trained consciousness must be, from the start, sensitive to the text’s otherness. But this kind of sensitivity involves neither “neutrality” with respect to content nor the extinction of one’s self, but the foregrounding and appropriation of one’s own fore-meanings and prejudices. The important thing is to be aware of one’s own bias, so that the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one’s own fore-meanings.\(^{702}\)

The upshot of a hermeneutic or phenomenological alternative to classical epistemology is not to entrench the false notion that one’s own standpoint is the central pivot of all meaning and truth but precisely to *decenter* one’s own standpoint through lucid encounters with other standpoints and with the fact that one’s own is but one among them, indeed one whose being owes itself to them. Moreover, as Gadamer suggests in the above passage, otherness as such is only possible – otherness can only come to presence as such – relative to embodied, worldly axes of experience, identity, meaning, and knowing, or relative to some concrete, situated standpoint. “Having” a standpoint and lucidly acknowledging one’s own standpoint are preconditions for any genuine

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\(^{702}\) Ibid., p. 271-272.
appreciation of alterity. Indeed, *nothing* can come to presence at all except with respect to some particular perspective or experiential/epistemic context. As Heidegger would put it, one’s standpoint in the world is what *clears* the presencing of phenomena; it is what opens the space wherein something may appear. And as Merleau-Ponty argues, no boundary – no demarcation of a specific standpoint or context – is ever impermeable; like the skin of the body, every boundary is at once a site of ingress and egress, a waypoint between “interior” and “exterior,” a limit that is simultaneously disjunctive and conjunctive, and therefore the indices of “interior” and “exterior” or of “self” and “Other” are always already coupled: every boundary that constitutes one thing by differentiating it from others inherently entangles it with those “others” that are differentiated from it. There is no “inside” without an “outside,” no mind without flesh, no self without others (or without a community), no community without other communities, no standpoint or perspective without the standpoints or perspectives of others, and it is precisely this interdependence that we overlook or suppress with relativism and absolutism alike: the latter erases the differences between apparently different standpoints or absorbs all standpoints into a universal, monolithic one, whereas the latter collapses reality into a plurality of utterly isolated, incommunicable, or self-contained standpoints or realities, and in the shift from the former view to the latter (and vice versa) we thus exchange “one abstraction for a counter-abstraction.”

As we have seen, it is absurd to think that I can ever completely inhabit another’s subjectivity, but this truth far from legitimates solipsism, or far from negates the equally basic and indisputable truth that I have no subjectivity or selfhood independently of relations with others, and the point here concerning one’s perspectival or epistemic “limitations” – that is, one’s standpoint or situatedness – in the world is analogous. The ultimate lesson here, paradoxical

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703 Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 68.
though it may seem, is that one transgresses one’s limits precisely by acknowledging and
heeding them, and that the limits of one’s own “standpoint” are in fact not “limits” at all in the
traditional sense, for rather than completely sequester one from others, they are precisely what
afford one access to others and, moreover, are always already embedded with and within other
standpoints. The point, then, is (or ought to be) to resist the common tendency to reify the notion
that one’s own standpoint is the central, universal, originary, “pure,” “natural,” or essential
standard of knowledge, being, and meaning, as well as to resist the suppression of other
standpoints that such a reification tacitly entails yet conceals. To refuse to essentialize or
universalize one’s own particularity is the condition that makes responsive and responsible
relations with alterities or other particularities – other beings, other standpoints, other
communities – possible.

So, on the one hand, we must reject the idea of truth, knowledge, and objectivity as
Absolute, that is, as accessible from a “view from nowhere,” and must regard them as
constitutively perspectival and carnal. We need to rethink the meaning of objectivity such that
we understand any instance of objective truth or knowledge as tied to a situated, embodied
standpoint. On the other hand, though thinking can never disavow or wish to extricate itself
entirely from such a standpoint or situated site of appearances – though thinking must
acknowledge its own embodied standpoint as an inescapable, inalienable, always already given
condition of its own possibility – it must not lapse into the equally false abstraction of a kind of
solipsism or subjectivism that would only be the reactionary counterpart to the sort of
Absolutism just mentioned. Though thinking is always grounded in and by a particular
standpoint that it will never be able to transcend completely, it is also never completely
imprisoned within such a standpoint; if such a standpoint were purely both its point of departure
and *terminus ad quem*, thinking would be forever trapped within itself, as if in a lucid nightmare from which it could never awaken or in vicious, ouroboric circularity. Moreover, thinking would in fact be impossible were it trapped entirely within its own standpoint for the same reason that no self can ever be aware of itself in pure, total communion or coincidence with itself. Just like the self that “occupies” it, no standpoint can ever be entirely self-enclosed but must also already be an opening to and amidst other standpoints. This is exactly why Merleau-Ponty states that philosophy must “confront human artifice with its outside, with Nature” and suggests that “thinking cannot live in an exclusively human and artificial universe.”704 “Humanity” cannot exist in a world constructed solely in its own image any more so than an ego can exist in a world constructed solely in its own image; both notions are equally solipsistic.

So, I must always register the standpoint through which I access the world and others, yet I must also register the fact that this standpoint is my access to a world and to others, that my standpoint is already in contact with other standpoints, that my standpoint already carries me outside itself and exposes me to others and to a world it can never, as such, totalize, appropriate, or reinscribe in its own image, that my standpoint is from the start constituted by its exposure to what is irreducibly Other. No philosophy and certainly no phenomenology worthy of the name can be the mere projection, repetition, or reinscription – and certainly not the egoistic or imperialistic imposition – of the standpoint from which it begins and of which it must always bear the trace or signature, but rather must be a continually renewed overture to what is other than itself, a perpetual openness to an exteriority that it cannot assimilate or recuperate as a mere extension of itself yet which is also, paradoxically, constitutive of itself. In recognizing one’s own standpoint as inherently implicated in what is irreducibly other than itself, we precisely

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704 *Nature*, p. 85.
cannot conceive of such a standpoint as an isolated, autonomous, immobile, pure origin; we must rather acknowledge it as something whose nature is never settled, decidable, or transparently intelligible, or as something whose nature is never properly a “nature.” What is true of the subjectivity of an individual is true of that individual’s epistemic standpoint in the world, of the intersecting axes of identity that structure his/her perspectival access to truth, knowledge, and other subjectivities. I cannot totally step outside my own subjectivity, but I know better than to conclude from this fact that my subjectivity is something utterly atomistic, autonomous, self-enclosed, or transparent. We know that the essential, inescapable first-personal givenness of experience does not entail solipsism, since after all it is precisely solipsism that makes experience impossible. We know that subjectivity is constituted by intersubjectivity and that, therefore, there is no contradiction in affirming that I am always inescapably myself yet also other than myself, that I am a self only because I am ensconced in relations with other selves. The same is true with respect to any epistemic standpoint or marker of identity. The same is therefore true even with respect to “humanity.” No, we cannot shed our human perspective, but we can and must also realize that our human perspective is constitutively intertwined with, hence unsettled, decentered, and displaced by, other-than-human perspectives or alterities.

There is, in principle, no such thing as a “view from nowhere,” yet far from being inconsistent with the demand to decenter one’s own standpoint, this truth precisely impresses such a demand upon us, for it forces us to acknowledge the irreducible plurality of standpoints amidst which our own stands and without which it would have no standing at all. Decentering one’s own standpoint does not mean abolishing or transcending it but recognizing it as one of many and not according it any special privilege in the order of existence or meaning; it in fact entails radically taking one’s own standpoint seriously rather than repressing or seeking to
eradicate it. Indeed, it is precisely the (usually unreflective) notion that one’s own standpoint is somehow “special” or “central” that involves its repression: when one regards one’s own standpoint as the default standard of all meaning and value, or when one reifies one’s own standpoint as the universal and essential fount of all conceivable truths and forms of knowledge, that is exactly when one ceases to regard one’s own standpoint as a “standpoint” at all; that is exactly when one comes to regard one’s own perspective as perspective-less, as not a perspective at all but as a view sub specie aeternitatis; it is this that leads to the repression of the standpoint-ness of one’s own standpoint, to the projection of it as a locus of universal and essential truth; this is what engenders the imaginary of every false absolutism, and this is what underlies or reinforces every form of colonialism. So, one can see and appreciate other perspectives or “visions” even if one cannot strictly see through or from them; one can hear and listen to other voices even if one cannot (and should not) speak in or for them; one can do the hard work of attempting to understand and “do justice to” other perspectives – of not just making sense of them but also of learning how they already tacitly constitute one’s very own sense of things – even if one cannot “know” or live them “from the inside.” One may not be able to know another perspective from the “inside out,” but one can know it (at least partially) from the “outside in,” because we know that “inside” and “outside” are not opposites but two co-dependent aspects (or “leaves”) of every form of subjectivity, two entwined aspects of every bodily orientation in and toward the world, two compresent aspects of every world.

Thus, the effort to critique, suspend, distance, or decenter our human-centered standpoint cannot mean to seek to transcend or erase it (were we to attempt to do so, its erasure – like every erasure – would unavoidably leave traces); on the contrary, it means to open such a standpoint to, or rather to illuminate the ways in which it is already open to and constituted as such by its
openness to, other standpoints, other alterities it otherwise suppresses insofar as it does not acknowledge itself as a “standpoint” at all. We tend to forget that selfhood and alterity are mutually constitutive: others can appear to me only if I am a distinct self, only if I “have” a distinct identity or only if I occupy a distinct, individuated standpoint, and reciprocally I “have” no such selfhood, identity, or standpoint at all if I am not differentiated from, hence already exposed to, others. Thus, in just the same way that we must reject solipsism yet not abolish the existence of the self or of “individuality” altogether, so too must the same be the case regarding our “human” standpoint: human and non-human standpoints are already paired, or already mutually constitutive, in just the same way that “self” and “Other” are already paired or mutually constitutive: each is different from yet also already invaded by the other. Anthropocentrism elevates the human standpoint to the exclusion of any non-human standpoint, or rather isolates humanity entirely from animality, and that is why it is strictly analogous to solipsism. As I argued in the previous chapter, anthropocentrism is simply solipsism at another, higher or broader ontological level. So, we will never extricate ourselves from our human standpoint, but such a standpoint is also, like every standpoint, already a point of partial ingress into other standpoints (or a point of partial egress from itself).

The real problem, then, is not that we attempt to distance ourselves from our “human” standpoint in order to take up, however partially or imperfectly, a non-human one. The problem is that we hardly ever recognize our own “humanness” as a standpoint at all precisely because we tacitly regard it as the default identity-category or mode of being with respect to which everything else is derivatively or comparatively definable, intelligible, or valuable (such an attitude, of course, is analogous to the manner in which “whiteness” is regarded in a white supremacist society or to the manner in which maleness/masculinity is regarded in a patriarchal
society). Furthermore, the problem is that we regard our “human” standpoint as not already constitutively enmeshed with other-than-human standpoints. There will always be something “all-too-human” about the perspective from which we think about or experience the world, but nevertheless the true task of human thought is to decenter, as much as possible, its very anthropocentricity, to see what might and does reveal itself when we “suspend” or “bracket” (as much as possible) our human vantage point; or rather, to put the point more accurately, the task is not so much to decenter our own human standpoint but to realize that it has never been “centered” or “central” in the first place. The supremely difficult, surely infinite and perhaps aporetic task of philosophy – the fundamental, proper task of any epistemology, ontology, ethics, or political philosophy worthy of the name – is to realize the already decentered standing or constitutive displacement (that is, the “ambiguity”) of our own “humanity” and, more generally, to decolonize our own standpoints in the world.

We saw in chapter two that the horizons that circumscribe one’s own perspectival standpoint in the world are – like, for example, the horizons that literally enable visual perception – precisely what enable knowledge of the world in the first place. A “view from nowhere” is, in fact, blind, for it is no point of view at all. As Merleau-Ponty insists (following the insights of Gestalt psychology), without a background amid which things appear, without the (itself non-foregroundable) differentiation of foreground and background (which he calls écart), or without some position from which one perceives things, nothing would “appear” or be perceptible at all. A perspectival or phenomenological account of truth and “objectivity” is thus below or beyond the false dichotomy of “reality” and “mere appearance,” hence also the false dilemma of absolutism and relativism. Any concept of objectivity abstracted from the very horizons and markers of identity that let things emerge into presence and intelligibility and as
matters of attentive concern in the first place is not a concept of objectivity “worthy of the name,” or rather is just as much of an imperious absurdity as anything that contradicts or pretends to transcend its own conditions of possibility. The pertinent point here is that no perspective or standpoint in the world is ever utterly isolated from others; no matter how distant or different from other perspectives or standpoints my own may be, it is from the very beginning open to and entwined with them, just as the perspectives on an object I do not presently occupy and even those I may never be able to occupy – whether the underside of the table on which I am typing this sentence yet which I might see if I were to change my perceptual orientation toward it, or a night enshrouded landscape perceived through eyes and ears that will never be mine, such as those of a bat – tacitly enable, shape, line, envelop, trespass upon, even “haunt” those that I do or can occupy, those that are open to and actualized through my body and all the “encumbrances” – whether physiological, cognitive, or historical and cultural – it bears in its bearings and in its joints, in its plastic sensitivities and potentialities. The point here is more compellingly and dramatically demonstrated by the fact that every perspective or standpoint is indeed one that is embodied. To repudiate Enlightenment epistemology is precisely to repudiate the notion that knowledge, truth, or objectivity may be divested of the rich, fundamental materiality of lived experience(s), that the production of knowledge – like the constitution of being, experience, or meaning – can ever be fleshless. And again, there are no bodily, enfleshed standpoints in the world – whether human or non-human – that are ever utterly severed from one another and that are not already (yet to varying degrees) implicated in one another. Simply put, no standpoint or form of subjectivity is an island. “The” world is not a collection of worlds that are utterly self-enclosed or cut off from one another, for “it is the same world that contains our bodies and our minds, provided that we understand by world not only the sum of things that fall
or could fall under our eyes, but also the locus of their compossibility, the irvariable style they observe, which connects our perspectives, [and] permits transition from one to the other…”.

What, then, does it mean to attain an “objective” perspective upon the world? It means nothing else than making the “intersubjective rounds,” so to speak, that is, taking stock of how the world can and does appear to every being to whom it does or may appear, attempting to perceive it from the angle of every being who inhabits it; thus, it means nothing less than the infinite task of fleshing out all of the possible and actual perspectives of which the world is composed, all of the possible ways in which the world may appear or offer itself “in the flesh” and to flesh. In all of our overtures to one another and to others, in especially all of our efforts to know and to elaborate the worlds in which we and others dwell, there is only ever an infinite conversation between bodies and worlds, only ever “flesh responding to flesh.”

We are now in a position to appreciate what we might call the radical “communitarianism” of phenomenology. For Husserl, intersubjectivity is truly foundational, and it is foundational in ways we have not yet fully appreciated. For Husserl (and for Merleau-Ponty), not only subjectivity but also “objectivity” is constituted by intersubjectivity, by a primordial “we-subjectivity.” What Husserl means by this is not the crude relativistic thesis that truth is somehow determined by consensus or that reality is nothing more than a social convention, nor does he mean to repeat something like Berkeley’s idealist thesis that esse est percipi. We have seen that Husserl (and that phenomenology in general) rejects the classical metaphysical distinction between appearance and reality, but to reject the distinction between appearance and reality is not to say that reality collapses into “mere” appearances, for the very

706 ibid., p. 209.
notion of a “mere appearance” is the counterpart to that of a reality absolutely beyond all appearances, and it is precisely this whole appearance/reality binary, and the concomitant dilemma of relativism and absolutism, that Husserl means to reject. If we truly reject one term of a conceptual dyad, so too must we reject the other. As Nietzsche proclaims: “The real world – we have done away with it: what world is left? The apparent one, perhaps?...But no! With the real world we have also done away with the apparent one!”\textsuperscript{708} So, to reject the idea that fundamental reality is a “second-world” forever veiled “behind the scenes” of subjective appearances is also to reject the concept of a (“mere”) scene of subjective appearances that only veils or dissembles a more fundamental or transcendent reality, a screen of phenomena that stands between subjectivity and “objective” Being.

What, then, is “objective” reality for Husserl, or what does Husserl mean when he argues that objectivity is intersubjectively constituted? The being of a thing, and the objective world in general, is not something radically separate from the ways in which it can appear, but neither is it merely reducible to any single way in which does or can appear; rather, the objective being of a thing, or the fundamental nature of the world as such, consists of all of the ways in which it does or can appear, and appearances are always indexed to actual or potential perceivers, to those \textit{to whom} such appearances actually or may appear. Thus, Husserl states that the “intersubjective constitution of the world” means that “…the world as it is for us becomes understandable as a structure of meaning formed out of elementary intentionalities.”\textsuperscript{709} So, as we have seen, for Husserl the objective being of a thing (or of the world itself) is an ensemble – or what he often a calls a “horizon,” a delimited yet ever open, in principle inexhaustible range – of overlapping

\textsuperscript{709} \textit{Crisis,} §49, p. 168.
actual and possible modes of appearance. “Objective” reality is “…always, and for everyone, a unity for consciousness of the openly endless multiplicity of changing experiences and experienced things, one’s own and those of others.”

This is the first sense in which the objective world, for Husserl, is intersubjectively constituted: it is intersubjectively constituted insofar as it is composed of all of the ways – of the infinite number of ways – in which it can appear. What, sense, indeed, would it be to speak of something that could never experientially present itself in any conceivable way? Something that could never show itself – whether in the strict perceptual sense or otherwise – is precisely nothing at all or is, at any rate, inconceivable and nothing that may count as a meaningful object of thought, discourse, or knowledge. It is for this reason that we must jettison the traditional opposition between “reality” and “appearance,” between noumena and phenomena. As Nietzsche dramatically puts this point:

What is ‘appearance’ to me now! Certainly not the opposite of some essence – what could I say about any essence except name the predicates of its appearance! Certainly not a dead mask that one could put on an unknown x and also take off x.

The relationship between Kant and Husserl is a complicated issue, and it is not one that I am going to pursue here. However, here it will suffice to say that, no matter how much his transcendental philosophy may borrow from Kant’s, Husserl is quite clear in his repudiation of the Kantian construct of a noumenon (though perhaps not as clear as Nietzsche is on this point):

Every imaginable sense, every imaginable being, whether the latter is called immanent or transcendent, falls within the domain of transcendent subjunctivity, as the subjunctivity that constitutes sense and being. The attempt to conceive the universe of true being as something lying outside the universe of possible consciousness, possible knowledge, possible evidence…is nonsense…If transcendent subjunctivity is the universe of possible sense, then an outside is precisely – nonsense. But even nonsense is always a mode of sense and has its nonsensicalness within the sphere of possible insight.

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710 Ibid., §47, p. 163-164.
712 Cartesian Meditations, §41, p.84.
Setting aside the problems we may have with the concept of a transcendental subjectivity that constitutes the meaning of all conceivably meaningful things, Husserl here clearly rejects the notion of a “reality behind the scenes”; that is, he rejects the intelligibility of a thing absolutely shorn of all possible manners of appearance, a thing that would be utterly outside the purview of possible experience (broadly construed). For Husserl (as for Nietzsche), then, the Kantian concept of the “noumenon” is the sort of thing that, like the concept of a square circle, we think is intelligible or thinkable because we can verbalize it even though it is in fact incoherent or vacuous. No sense whatsoever attaches to a thing that can never appear at all, for all “sense” or meaning is, of course, precisely a mode of appearance. For Husserl, then, to be is not to be perceived, but it is — in a maximally broad sense of the term — to be perceptible, and therefore the being of any-thing consists in all of the ways in which it can appear, in all of its possible modes of presentation (whether these be sensual or mental). And this is not necessarily to say that reality is reducible to presence. For Husserl, reality is phenomenality, and this includes, as we have seen, not only phenomena but also the structures that make phenomena or presence possible, and such structures can never themselves be made fully present; as conditions of presence, they will always be radically absent, yet (perhaps paradoxically) their absence is something to which we can meaningfully, albeit imperfectly or obliquely, attend, something at the periphery of lived experience to which we can gesture yet never quite glimpse, something we can express in thought and language yet never quite capture.

Merleau-Ponty follows Husserl in similarly defining “the real” as “the sensible”: “there is no intelligible world, there is the sensible world.” In Merleau-Ponty, this definition of “the real” as “the sensible” does not express a commitment to crude empiricism or positivism but

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simply a commitment to *radical immanence*, or a repudiation of any dualistic ("two-world") or supernaturalist ontology. Thus, Merleau-Ponty affirms that "ideas can no longer be considered a second positivity or second world which puts its riches on display beneath a second sun."\(^7\)\(^1\)\(^4\) For Merleau-Ponty, there are such things as "universals," but "the universal is not the concept but this perception in flesh and blood,"\(^7\)\(^1\)\(^5\) "a transtemporal and transpatial element of which we do not take account by supposing an essence outside of time."\(^7\)\(^1\)\(^6\) There are such things as "universals," but they are not transcendent(al) objects and must therefore be entirely rethought (beyond the classical alternatives of Platonism and nominalism); they are sense-directions that radiate from my living body and its pre-reflective orientations toward the world, "ideas that are already encrusted in the joints of my body,"\(^7\)\(^1\)\(^7\) "lines of force"\(^7\)\(^1\)\(^8\) or stable axes of meaning that emerge between my body and the world, or rather poles of generality or identity – what Husserl, again, calls "horizons" and what Merleau-Ponty often calls "the invisible armature"\(^7\)\(^1\)\(^9\) of the visible – that, as such, subtend, coalesce, and index distinct manifolds of perspectival presentations of the world to and through my body; they are structures of presence that precede and make intelligible any reflective, abstractive or idealizing re-presentations of things, conditions of givenness that are nevertheless immanent to the given (as well as immanent to whom the given is given); they are idealities that are not "alien to the flesh" but "that [give] it its axes, its depths, its dimensions,"\(^7\)\(^2\)\(^0\) "rays of the world"\(^7\)\(^2\)\(^1\) that are enlaced with, though not possessed by or reductively equivalent to, the flesh of the living being to whom a world appears,

\(^{714}\) Signs, "Introduction," p. 20.
\(^{716}\) Ibid., p. 176.
\(^{717}\) Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 114; wording slightly modified.
\(^{719}\) Merleau-Ponty uses this expression in many places. See e.g., *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 149 and *Nature*, p. 224.
\(^{721}\) Ibid., p. 146, 218, 240-242, 265.
that are threaded through the flesh of the perceiving body as well as through the flesh of all of
the appearances it perceives, for indeed both are incarnations of a common, underlying, more
basic flesh, and it is this that constitutes, or which rather expresses itself through, anything like
what Kant understood as an “I think that must be able to accompany all our experiences.”
Thus, for Merleau-Ponty “it is naïve to seek solidity in a heaven of ideas or in a ground (fond) of
meaning – it is neither above nor beneath the appearances, but at their joints. It is the tie that
secretly connects an experience to its variants.”

Now, Merleau-Ponty’s concept of “universals” or of “the invisible” and its relationship
with “the visible” – or rather his re-conceptualization of the traditional distinction between
‘essence’ and ‘existence’/‘fact’ – is beyond the scope of the present discussion, but I have
mentioned it here simply to draw attention to the important point that, for Merleau-Ponty, a
phenomenological understanding (broadly construed) of truth and Being repudiates Platonism
yet does not resolve into an “anything-goes” kind of subjectivism or nominalism; it does not
plunge experience into a “blooming, buzzing confusion” or “wandering troop of sensations,”
and therefore it does not abolish meaningful differences between and among things and beings in
the world; rather, it affirms that structures of intelligibility are endemic to the perceived, carnal
world itself and that they reveal themselves as such in and through our perceptual, carnal
engagements with it. As we have seen, for Merleau-Ponty this means that Being itself is
relationality, or rather the differentiation at the heart of every particular, empirical relation. The
crucial point for the topic at hand is that Merleau-Ponty’s repudiation of dualism or
supernaturalism is not a reversion to a sort of reductive naturalism or to classical empiricism, yet

722 Ibid., p. 145.
723 Ibid., p. 116.
724 Ibid., p. 123.
clearly neither is it a reversion to any sort of idealism, or neither is it to conceptualize
“immanence” as mere immanence to consciousness (as Husserl arguably does); rather, to think
“the real” as “the sensible” (or perceptible) is, for Merleau-Ponty, to conceptualize it below the
traditional (Platonic) distinction between “the sensible” (visible) and the “intelligible”
(invisible), to think it as an intertwining or cross-contamination of immanence and
transcendence, to think it as Flesh. This – not some reversion to a kind of empiricism, positivism,
reductive naturalism, or metaphysics of presence – is what Merleau-Ponty ultimately means
when he proclaims that the “perceptual world is at bottom Being in Heidegger’s sense.”

To think Being as “Flesh” is certainly not to think it as an object of or for a conscious
subject but is to think it, like the flesh of the lived/living body, as precisely below – as logically
and ontologically prior to – the very distinction between subject and object and, therefore, as
quite other than a “substance” (whether mental or material) and therefore as more fundamental
and quite other than “flesh” as it is traditionally conceived and as more fundamental than even
the flesh of the ‘body-subject’ itself; it is to think it as certainly not transcendent(al) ideality but
also “nowise as matter” and, for that reason, as “something that has no name in any
philosophy”; it is neither a substance nor a “union of substances.” As I have suggested in a
number of places, we might say that Merleau-Ponty’s ontology is not so much a break from

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725 Ibid., p. 170.
726 Ibid., p. 274.
727 Ibid., p. 147. To be fair, I do think that Merleau-Ponty’s remark here that his concept of “Flesh” is utterly original
or unprecedented in philosophy is rather hyperbolic, for it certainly has parallels with other philosophical concepts.
As I mentioned in an earlier footnote, I think a case can be made that it is anticipated by or quite similar to Plato’s
concept of the khôra, and it is essentially a different way of articulating what Heidegger means by Being. I think it
may also be fruitfully compared with Hegel’s concept of Geist, Nietzsche’s concept of becoming, Whitehead’s
concept of process, William James’ concept of “pure experience,” natura naturans in Spinoza (or at least in
Deleuze’s reading of Spinoza, for Merleau-Ponty clearly rejects all substance-ontologies), and even perhaps the Dao
in Daoism. I also am not sure that we adequately appreciate how indebted Merleau-Ponty is to Bergson. Each of
these comparisons surely warrants its own separate treatment, so I will not pursue them any further here.
728 Ibid., p. 140, 147.
Husserl’s phenomenology as it is a radicalization of it to the extent that he liberates immanence from transcendental ideality so as to better account for the relational and thoroughly corporeal genesis of truth, being, and meaning. We have seen that the “flesh of the world,” for Merleau-Ponty, is precisely the relational space constitutive of everything that is, hence of everything that does and can be meaningful or known, of everything (inter)subjective but also of everything “objective”; it is the “inner framework of intersubjectivity”\(^{729}\) – that is, the more basic structure and genesis of relationality and difference of which intersubjectivity is but one (albeit an exemplary) site and effect – in virtue of which all things, including the world as such, emerges into meaning and presence in the only way it ever can: as a world for us all, as a world constituted and disclosed in common to and by every body – to and by the literal, material flesh of every being – at home in it. The point that is most relevant to the present discussion is that, for Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, knowing the world or knowing “what something is” is the infinite task of elaborating all of the ways in which it can appear, a task that is infinite because it is radically communal. To say that objectivity is intersubjective or perspectival is precisely to say that, if we wish to know what is objectively real or true, we must, to as great of an extent as possible, take stock of all of the perspectives through which things or the world may emerge into presence. If what Merleau-Ponty calls “the flesh of the world” (rather than the a priori structures of a transcendental ego) weaves our experiences of the world into coherent, meaningful wholes, then so too does everything that comes along with that flesh, including the flesh of others, including all other sense-making corporealities.

Furthermore, there is a second, related reason Husserl claims that objectivity is intersubjectively founded, and that is the essential publicity of objective truth and reality. What it

\(^{729}\) Ibid., p. 234.
means for something to be “real” – *really* real – is that it is, at least *in principle*, available to the perspectives of others:

Prescientifically, in everyday sense-experience, the world is given in a subjectively relative way. Each of us has his own appearances; and for each of us they count as that which actually is…But we do not think that, because of this, there are many worlds. Necessarily, we believe in *the* world, whose things only appear to us differently but are the same.730

In everyday life (or in what Husserl calls the “natural attitude”) we all come to the world with a unique, individuated and inalienable perspective. My experiences of the world are, of course, inescapably *mine*. As we have already discussed, it is logically absurd to suppose that I may ever quit my own consciousness so as to inhabit the consciousness of another. That is, I can never experience the world precisely as others do. I can no more see the world precisely through the eyes of another any more than I can conceive of a square circle, and this, as we saw in chapter one, is what Merleau-Ponty calls “the truth of solipsism.” We each “have our own appearances,” and yet, as Husserl notes, we nevertheless do not believe that solipsism is strictly true. We do not believe that we each occupy our own isolated worlds; we do not take the world in which we dwell to be a private theatre of appearances. Even though we each have our own appearances, we take these appearances to be appearances *of* a common, “objective” world. My appearances are immediately given not only as singularly and irrecusably “mine” but also as *public*, as appearances of a reality that transcends or always outruns my consciousness of it and that I can meaningfully communicate to others. In short, we do not think that our own perspectives constitute self-enclosed worlds unto themselves, but rather we think that every particular perspective is polarized toward one and the same, shared and abiding world, that every point of view is a point of view on *the* world. When, for example, I see something, I assume that others do or would be able to see it too. If I see something (say, a pink elephant) cross my path and I

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730 Husserl, *Crisis*, §9, p. 23.
point it out to others, it is only and precisely when others claim not to see it that I naturally doubt the veracity of my perception. Something that appears to me yet does not and, in principle, \textit{cannot} appear to anyone else is exactly the sort of thing that we regard as \textit{not} real in any objective manner.

I think Husserl’s point here parallels Wittgenstein’s argument concerning the impossibility of a private language, so a brief comparison of the two may be instructive. Wittgenstein argues that there can be no such thing as a truly private language, for a language whose terms and rules are intelligible in principle only to one person – that is, a language understood and used by only one person and that absolutely cannot be translated into terms that would be comprehensible to anyone else – would have to be one that lacks any stable meanings or consistent rules of usage (in Derridean terms, it would be a language devoid of \textit{iterability}), yet a language that lacks stable meanings or consistent rules of usage is one that cannot be understood or used by \textit{anyone}, including the single, solitary person who supposedly understands and uses it. Husserl’s point, similarly, is that there can be no such thing as an utterly private appearance: a thing that can in principle only appear to one person is just as meaningless as a word that can only be understood by one person, and it is surely not something that may count as “real”; such a thing does not have any place in our inventory of objective things, for in order to be “objective” it is necessary that something be, \textit{at least possibly}, available to other perspectives. In chapters three and four I discussed the fact that when I perceive an object I immediately perceive not only the profiles of it that are given to me “directly” – not only those aspects of it that are frontally or presently present to me – but also those profiles that these conceal, those aspects of it that are presently absent from me as well (such as its back or underside). Now we can add that the absent profiles or aspects of an object that I immediately perceive are not only
those that are available to me but also those that are available to others. Everything I perceive is pervaded by the absences not only of other possible perspectives for me but also of the possible perspectives of (actual or hypothetical) others, of other perspectives given in the mode of “available-to-others.” Therefore, “even what is straightforwardly perceptual is communalized.”731 Every object of perception is necessarily shot through with the alterities or absent perspectives of every being to whom it may be given; it is always already a nexus of intersubjectivity, a terminus of multiple and in principle indefinite intentionalities and standpoints. This, then, is why for Husserl truth, reality, or “objectivity” is inherently public or communal, inherently embedded in webs of perspectival, intersubjective relations; it is why “…we, in living together, have the world pregiven in this “together,” as the world valid as existing for us and to which we, together, belong…”.732

So, for Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, the world is something one can only inhabit with others, and likewise it is something one can know or think only with others. For Husserl, objectivity is constituted by intersubjectivity. For Merleau-Ponty, likewise, Being is constituted by the relational envelopment of everything within everything – and by the correlative differentiation of everything from everything – that he calls “the flesh” or “the chiasm” and that I have proposed we call radical community. In any case, for both Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, the “objective” world is something we only constitute or usher into expression together, something in an endless, ever creatively open process of communalization; it is not an object or possession of any particular embodied perspective nor even the mere aggregate of all embodied perspectives but is the organic, ever efflorescent lattice of interstices between all bodies and perspectives, that which blooms in the spaces and intervals in and through which all bodies encounter one another

731 Husserl, ibid., §47, p.163.
and their milieus. The (“objective”) world, for Merleau-Ponty, is “an open and indefinite multiplicity of relationships which are of reciprocal implication.” Thus, “objectivity” or worldhood does not preexist or absolutely transcend the situated, bodily perspectives that are necessarily polarized toward it but is constituted by all of them in concert; it is continually made, unmade, and remade, continually formed and reconfigured through the differentiation and compresence of every bodily being and perspective. The objective world is not a static object of knowledge and is not, indeed, an “object” at all but is quite analogous to a conversation, for it is something whose being or meaning, like that of every conversation, cannot be divorced from the contributions (or “views”) of each of its participants but is at the same time not reducible to any single one of them, for it rather emerges in and through the exchanges of each, in and through all of the perspectives spoken (and unspoken) in response to one another and to the subject of conversation that gathers them. The objective world is, indeed, always, in some way, the subject of “conversation” – and is something that comes to presence only through “conversation” – between all who share it; yet, unlike ordinary conversations, that concerning “the world” – or rather that which is the world – is one whose participants cannot be counted, and one that will never be finished until there are no bodies left to express it. This is why, as Merleau-Ponty remarks, “expressing what exists is an endless task.” However, the most important lesson here is that if we are to learn about what “the world” is, if we are to work continually to bring the world to its fullest, richest possible expression, we must listen to every being who has, or who may have, something to say about it, and every living being – every being whose body encounters, perceives, or “makes sense” of it in its own way, every being who either thrives or

733 Phenomenology of Perception, p. 61.
suffers in it in its own way – indisputably does. Thus, if we truly are to learn about the world, we will especially have to allow to be heard those beings who have traditionally been denied “a voice” in our discourses, we will have to allow to be seen those bodies that have traditionally been denied visibility in our lives, and that will mean learning anew how to listen and how to see.

Heidegger notoriously argues that animals are “poor in world” whereas human beings are “world-forming” or “rich in world.” Heidegger is wrong, though to demonstrate this satisfactorily would require a separate, elaborate treatment of the texts in which he develops his argument for this claim, and that would take me too far afield from the present discussion. Here, it will suffice to state not only that denying “richness” in world to animals is, ultimately, founded on humanist prejudices of the sort Heidegger himself repudiates elsewhere, and not only that Heidegger is easily guilty of what Derrida calls the “asininity” of supposing that all non-human beings may be meaningfully grouped together a priori in such a monolithic, homogenizing, or totalizing way, but also that there is simply no way to establish a categorical distinction between Dasein and non-Dasein – that is, between human and non-human manners of being-in-the-world – without reinstating the very dualism Heidegger otherwise critiques and which we know better than to accept. The most important point I wish to make here, though, is this: if it is true that objectivity is constituted by intersubjectivity, then the world we inhabit – the “objective” world – is precisely constituted by all of the perspectives that do and may have a home in it, or by all of ways in which it can appear to all possible perceptual, bodily orientations toward it, including

736 In the passage in which Heidegger claims that apes “do not have hands,” he asserts that the (human) hand is “infinitely different from all grasping organs – paws, claws, or fangs – different by an abyss of essence” (What is Called Thinking, p.16). Even on the most charitable reading, I think it is difficult to maintain that the claim that human hands are different from non-human “grasping organs” by an “abyss of essence” is anything but a regression to dualism.
those of humans and non-humans alike. The world is a tapestry of all of the possible perspectives through which it may come presence, and the more of these perspectives one can, if not inhabit, at least affirm and appreciate in respectful, humble curiosity, the more of these perspectives in which one may delight in rapt wonder, the more of these perspectives or vectors of bodily being one threads into, or acknowledges as already thoroughly woven into, one’s own small patch of this tapestry, the more fleshted out, the richer will one’s sense of the world be.

As Nietzsche argues, the perspectival constitution of what we call the “objective” world means that “the more affects we allow to speak about a thing…the more complete will be our ‘concept’ of the thing, our ‘objectivity.’” I think this captures the fundamental epistemological, ontological, and finally ethical lesson of phenomenology: in order to inhabit the world in the richest, most lucid and responsive ways we can, we must surrender ourselves to as many other perspectives or affects through which the world expresses itself as we can; we must learn how to see and hear, or rather we must learn how to let be seen and heard, as many visions and voices besides our own as we can; conversely, we must do the hard work of unlearning the habits of thinking and dwelling, the conceptual constructs and schemas of interpretation, that invisibilize or silence various others, especially non-human others. This is why, later in his career, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes that “the transcendental reduction” – the suspension of one’s immediate (“natural”) attitudes toward the world so as to bring the essential structures of those attitudes to light that, for Husserl, defined the method of phenomenology – needs to be radicalized in ways Husserl was perhaps not able to accomplish, for if it is a suspension of one’s own attitudes toward the world, this must not simply involve a regression to one’s own self or ego, because (as Husserl himself demonstrated) one’s self or ego is already constituted by its

relationships with others, relationships with others and with a world that far outstrip oneself. Thus, the “reduction” must have as its aim not the illumination of any radically solitary or inward domain of experience, but rather the illumination of everything outside or other than oneself that already shapes one’s self, even if such illumination means respecting the opacity into which such things must withdraw. The “bracketing” of the “natural attitude” must not be a regression to a transcendental ego but rather a bracketing of the very notion that one fundamentally is a transcendental ego in the first place. Merleau-Ponty also suggests, yet more radically still, that one must “bracket” the tacit “humanity” of one’s ego as well. In short, the “phenomenological reduction” must aim to let those others with whom one is already enmeshed show or speak for themselves, to liberate the “voices” of those others through whom my world already speaks to me just as it likewise already speaks to them through me, others many of whom are not and never have been only human. This is why Merleau-Ponty comes to think (as Nietzsche did before him) that in order for philosophical or phenomenological reflection to realize its aim, it would have to let the world speak in as many ways or voices or through as many carnal perspectives as possible, that in order for philosophy or phenomenology to fulfill its “task of wakefulness” it must “step back only in order to see the world and Being, or simply put them between quotation marks as one does with the remarks of another, to let them speak, to listen in…”

This means that those who shut their eyes and ears to alterities of every kind – human and non-human alike – are those who are precisely “impoverished” in their worldhood. This means that those who think it is only from within the parochial parameters of their own familiar ways of ‘being-in-the-world’ that Being or the world as such is best, most fully, truly, or “objectively”

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disclosed are those to whom so much is precisely *foreclosed*. We know that those who have never truly had intimate relations with their fellow humans – that those who have never truly known the bonds of family, friendship, or love, that those who live amidst other humans yet nevertheless are alone in their midst – are lamentably lacking in their worldly being, or rather are those whose worldly being is lamentably lacking in meaning. Likewise, human beings inescapably live *amidst* non-human animals as well as other humans, but those who do not or have never lived *with* any animals – those who have never had a pet, those who have never really gotten to known a non-human other, those who have never truly formed or at least opened themselves to affective bonds with non-human others, those who have never cared for, or who have themselves never been cared for by, a being outside one’s own species, or those who have never risked letting a truly *other* Other into one’s life – are deprived of the full measure of knowledge and experience, of joy and sorrow, of wonder, surprise, and meaning available to them.

The ways in which a table may appear to me are no more constitutive of the being of the table, or are no more integral to the objective truth of the table, than those that may appear to my partner from the other side of the room, than those that may appear to my partner’s cat prowling around it in pursuit of his favorite ball, than those that may appear to a pigeon who glimpses it through our window, or than those that may appear to a spider that crawls along its surface. If Husserl and Merleau-Ponty teach us anything, it is that the world is constituted by *all* perspectives, and “all” means *all*. Therefore, if I wish to know what, say, a table is, I must seek to know it from every potential perspective or according to its every potential mode of presentation: I must walk around it, view it from above and below, palpate and auscultate it, smell and perhaps even taste it, consider it geometrically as well as artistically, consider the
social or political context of its production, and so on. But, moreover, I must also consider how
the table may appear to other beings, even those whose manner of being I can never (at least not
*fully*) inhabit: how it may look or smell to a dog or a cat, to a bird or an ant, how it may figure in
the behavioral, perceptual, and conceptual schemas of other animals, for these too are as much
extensions of its objective nature as anything else; if such standpoints or schemas are absent to
me – if such standpoints or schemas are ones I can never truly adopt as my own – then their
absence nevertheless must count, and indeed is always already implicitly felt, in my own sense
or understanding of the table. Some perspectives I can take up, some I can only intuit partially or
very imperfectly, and some I may never take up at all. But if the perspectives of certain non-
human others elude me, that is no reason to dismiss their significance or even deny their
presence, no reason to ignore or disclaim their place in the ontological, experiential, and semiotic
composition of things. If the elusiveness or transcendence – the irrecuperable alterity – of a non-
human being’s perspective upon the world should motivate any feeling or attitude in me, it
should be humility, wonder, and perhaps even (cognitive, epistemic, or existential) *pain*. I should
feel – indeed *suffer* – the proliferate excessiveness of the world. I should register, even if
painfully, those objective dimensions of my world – those other worlds within my world – that
outrun me, those aspects of the world allusively revealed through animal bodies that will forever
elude me. I should feel that there is much of interest and value I am missing out on, much that is
being said behind my back, much that is being seen, heard, tasted, or smelled that I will never
see, hear, taste, or smell, much that is being felt or enjoyed that I will never feel or enjoy, much
truth I will never attain, much about my world I will never know.

But again, the lesson here is not defeatist or quietist resignation; it is not to ratify an
excuse to retreat ever further inward into one’s own subjectivity or circle of familiar experience.
Human beings are, as Heidegger says, “world-making” beings, yet non-human beings have always been part of any world we humans have ever made for ourselves, and they always will be. The better I can understand and appreciate, even from an appropriate, sometimes great distance, the ways in which the world may appear to various non-human others, the more I respect non-human alterities enough to let them show themselves on their own terms and the more that I thereby allow them to show me (even if at best obliquely) aspects of the world and even of my own experiences of it that I would not be able to sense or appreciate in any other way – or the more that I at least include non-human perspectives (no matter how foreign to my own they may be) in my sense and knowledge of the world, or the more I let such perspectives challenge, interrupt, inform, complicate, humble, and in some cases transform the sedimented “human” assumptions, sensibilities, and concepts that make the world familiar to me and that indeed often keep me from genuinely thinking about the world at all – the more enriched will my understanding of the world be, the more “rich in world” will I be. On the other hand, insofar as I dismiss, suppress, ignore, marginalize, or silence non-human perspectives and voices, indeed insofar as I disavow my in fact irrecusable corporeal, affective relations with non-human others, or insofar, moreover, as I refuse to explore the corporeal, affective relations with non-human others of which my living body may be capable – insofar as I shut myself off (or pretend to shut myself off) entirely from other worlds, even those to which I do not completely or rightly belong – the poorer is my understanding of “the” world, the more “poor in world” I am. If Heidegger thinks that animal perspectives on the world disclose nothing of much positive value or significance about “the world,” if, that is to say, Heidegger thinks that animal styles of being-in-the-world only disclose the world privatively, in mere contrast to our own human manner of being-in-the-world thus posited as the default and essential “measure of things,” or if Heidegger
thinks that only the human manner of being-in-the-world discloses all that is most worth
knowing, all that most calls for thinking or all that is fundamentally true, then it is precisely
Heidegger who is “poor is world.”

So, one can never abandon one’s own situated perspective in the world in order to adopt a
“God’s eye” view from nowhere. One can never extricate oneself from one’s own particular,
embodied standpoint in order to soar to the rarefied firmament of Platonic ideality or fleshless
universality, nor can one, therefore, completely transpose oneself into another’s standpoint. One
can never shed one’s skin in order to ascend to a plane of ethereal, disembodied truths or in order
to don another’s, but at the same time one’s standpoint is never utterly isolated, for indeed one’s
own standpoint has substance and intelligibility only because it exists amidst and overlaps with
others. One can never take leave of one’s skin, but one’s “skin” is already labile, porous, and
ecstatic, already in contact with other skins and bodies, already enmeshed with other flesh,
already open to other surfaces of sensibility or subjectivity. As Merleau-Ponty argues, what is
true of the boundary that is the skin is true of every boundary. We have seen that, for Merleau-
Ponty, the lived body and its (auto)-affectivity disclose a more basic ontological truth and
generative process at work in the world, or rather it simply discloses the nature of Being as such;
it reveals the relationality in virtue of which any-thing or any-body is, the non-oppositional or
non-exclusionary, fluid and liminal spaces or boundaries between things – the fissures and
intervals, differences and deferrals between things – that lets them be and constitutes them as the
things they are, that distinguishes or “individuates” them as such yet does not absolutely isolate
or segregate them, that indeed distinguishes or individuates them only because it does not
absolutely isolate or segregate them. Again, this is why Merleau-Ponty extends the kind of
relationship demonstrated between the living body and itself (that is, by living body’s reflexivity
or self-othering auto-affection), as well as the kind of relationship demonstrated between living bodies (that is, by intercorporeity), to the basic constitution of every being, phenomenon, and empirical relationship. For Merleau-Ponty, the kind of relationship that constitutes the existence of all things (the only kind of relationship “worthy of the name”) is neither an opposition (an ‘either/or’ dualism) nor a reductive unity or simple (analytic) identity, but difference, and this is why one may understand the nature of Being by attending to the literal skin of the living body, for the skin is precisely a boundary that imparts shape or identity to a living body while never utterly isolating it, that indeed is already necessarily an exposure to, or already a site of contact with and passage into, that which is outside itself, and no living body would be what it is – no living body would even be alive – if it did not have this access to an “outside.” As I mentioned earlier, this is one reason that Merleau-Ponty claims that “carnal being” is a “prototype of Being,”739 for it demonstrates precisely the overlapping-through-difference that constitutes all things, the involution of “inner” and “outer” that is endemic not only to the literal skin of the living body but also to the formation of any distinct identity or being. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, “the very pulp of the sensible, what is indefinable in it, is nothing else than the union of the “inside” with the “outside,” the contact in thickness of self with self.”740 So, it is just as accurate (if not more accurate) to say that the skin of a living body is a “prototype of Being.” In any case, what is true of a living body is necessarily true of anything that has any kind of meaning or identity at all, including especially what we call a “community,” namely that it is constituted as such only in virtue of its differentiation from, hence at the same time enmeshment with, what is “other” than or “outside” it. In Phenomenology of Perception, Merleau-Ponty demonstrates that the lived body precedes and institutes the distinction between subject and object; in his later

739 Ibid., p. 136.
740 Ibid., p. 268.
writings, he demonstrates that the lived body discloses a more basic “flesh of the world” that similarly precedes and institutes the distinction between every “inside” and every “outside” and which is, therefore, a kind of community from which every particular community arises, a “radical community” that, as such, includes every particular community, yet is below the traditional opposition between “inclusion” and “exclusion.”

The ontological lesson that the living body and its skin teaches us is precisely what community as such is and that nothing exists apart from one. Every living body must be embedded in community with other bodies (living and non-living alike), and even the living body itself, composed as it is by tens of thousands of other organisms within and on it, composed indeed so much by other forms of life that most of the genes that make it what it is are, paradoxically, not “its own,” is already itself a community, already itself a community within other communities, already itself a community of communities, already itself a community of communities within a community of communities. As Alphonso Lingis articulates this point:

The number of microbes that colonize our bodies exceeds the number of cells in our bodies by up to a hundredfold. Macrophages in our bloodstream hunt and devour trillions of bacteria and viruses entering our porous bodies continually. They replicate with their own DNA and RNA and not ours; they are the agents that maintain our borders. They, and not some Aristotelian form, are true agencies of our individuation as organisms…We also live in symbiosis with rice, wheat, and corn fields, with berry thickets and vegetable patches, and also with nitrogen-fixing bacteria in the soil…We also move and feel in symbiosis with other mammals, birds, reptiles, and fish…The form and substance of our bodies are not clay shaped by Jehovah and then driven by his breath; they are coral reefs full of polyps, sponges, gorgonians, and free-swimming macrophages continually stirred by monsoon climates of moist air, blood, and bile.

I cannot elaborate this point better than Lingis has done here, so I will not attempt to do so. This point discloses what, I think, the basic thesis of Merleau-Ponty’s ontology. This prodigious multiplicity of forms of life in community with one another – this irreducible menagerie of

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organisms in complex webs of interdependence, this synergy even between living and non-living entities alike – that constitutes a “human” or “animal” body is, of course, an empirical fact concerning the nature of life, indeed a microcosm of the complex, holistically integrated, ecological structure of any biome or lifeworld, yet it is not just an empirical fact. It is not simply an accident that wherever we find a living being so too do we find a being that is not only in a community but that is also itself a community. Every “empirical” (or what Heidegger calls “ontic”) fact or phenomenon rests upon and discloses a foundational ontological truth that it is the job of philosophers to extrapolate and clarify, and the empirical fact that Lingis describes here discloses the basic ontological thesis of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy (especially as he develops it in his later writings). The basic thesis of Merleau-Ponty’s whole philosophy is that community goes all the way down, that Being is radical community. Properly understood, no community – like no individual being or form of life – can ever be purely insulated from any other, and this more basic relational or differentiational matrix, or rather this founding medium and process of communalization, that underlies and engenders any particular community and that (properly understood) entwines all particular communities with one another – just as it underlies, engenders, and entwines all particular phenomena and embodied beings with one another – is, again, what Merleau-Ponty calls “Flesh.” There is, of course, no “self” without others, or no “I” outside of a “We,” but likewise there are no “We’s” without other “We’s” and, moreover, there are no “We’s” outside of a fundamental (radical) “We” in and through which they are each simultaneously distinguished from and in perpetual contact with one another, a space or dimension of being that – like, again, the literal skin of a body – simultaneously separates and joins them, or in other words non-oppositionally distances them. It is this Flesh or “radical
community/communalization” – this “Umwelt of Umwelten,”\textsuperscript{742} or what Merleau-Ponty calls the “Urgemeinschaftung [Ur/originary-community] of our intentional life,”\textsuperscript{743} – that institutes the very distinction between “inside” and “outside” itself and consequently defies the often tacitly supposed “purity” or autonomy of both of those indices in opposition to one another, that couples the “inside” of every particular community with its “outside(s)” (that is, with other communities) just as it couples the interiority of every self with its exteriority (its body) and, in virtue of that, every embodied self with embodied others (within a particular intersubjective community). In short, if individual living bodies are constituted intercorporeally, so too are particular intercorporeal communities; just as intercorporeity obtains between and constitutes living bodies within a particular community, so too does it obtain between and constitute particular communities of living bodies; reciprocally, just as living bodies together constitute a particular intercorporeal community, so too do particular intercorporeal communities together constitute (or rather disclose) a radical community, an intercorporeal community of intercorporeal communities.

So, as I already hope to have indicated, Merleau-Ponty’s ontology has profound consequences for how we understand what it is to be and to be together: to be is always to be together with others, yet this togetherness is not the contrary of difference or distance from others, but is in fact constituted by it. One’s sphere of lived experience is inseverably tethered to other lives or carnalities; one’s distinctive, yet always bodily or affective, manner of being-in-the-world is grounded in and through bonds of variable lengths, strengths, and tensions with other bodies and affects, other beings and worlds, and our task is simply to extrapolate the

\textsuperscript{742} Nature, p. 177. This phrase comes from Jakob von Uexküll, which Merleau-Ponty cites approvingly.

\textsuperscript{743} The Visible and the Invisible, p. 180.
implications of this fundamental truth rigorously, “to study what the world and truth and being are, in terms of the complicity we have with them.”\textsuperscript{744}

Though I already critiqued Thomas Nagel’s famous essay, “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?”, in the previous chapter, I mentioned there that I would reserve my full response to it for this chapter, and now we have come to our final answer to the provocation of this essay. Merleau-Ponty himself affirmed that our human perspective is inexpugnable and consequently worried about its “limitations.” “If we try to describe the real as it appears to us in perceptual experience,” Merleau-Ponty writes, “we find it overlaid with anthropological predicates.”\textsuperscript{745} Yet, Merleau-Ponty’s later concept of the “flesh of the world” not only decents our human perspective (or our human flesh) in the constitution of meaning, being, and worldhood, it also accounts for how it is possible in general for different forms of flesh to be accessible to one another, and indeed entails that all forms of flesh always already, at least to some extent, overlap and interpenetrate one another. Thus, to recall a relevant remark from a passage cited earlier in this chapter, “when we speak of the flesh of the visible, we do not mean to do anthropology, to describe a world covered over with all our own projections….\textsuperscript{746} Fundamental ontology necessarily decents the human perspective, and in doing so demonstrates the intertwining of that perspective with non-human perspectives (and with “Nature”). With “the flesh of the visible,” “the flesh of the world,” or simply “Flesh,” Merleau-Ponty designates and finally brings to its fullest explication what was always implicit in everything he ever wrote about intersubjectivity (or intercorporeity), namely a more basic element or ontological structure that makes all intersubjective, intercorporeal relationships possible and of which such relationships

\textsuperscript{744} Ibid., p. 107.  
\textsuperscript{745} Phenomenology of Perception, p. 320.  
\textsuperscript{746} Merleau-Ponty, The Visible and the Invisible, p. 136.
are “remarkable variants,” a primordial, universal “Flesh” in which all forms of flesh – especially our own and those of other animals – participate and thus through which all forms of flesh participate in, or always already “encroach upon,”747 one another. Thus, “it is already the flesh of things that speaks to us of our own flesh, and that speaks to us of the flesh of the other.”748 It is already the flesh of the world that speaks to me of my own flesh and that affords passage – or that is already passage or “transitivity”749 – between different forms of flesh, whether between the flesh of human bodies or between the flesh of human and non-human bodies (including the bodies of bats).

...This flesh that one sees and touches is not all there is to flesh, nor this massive corporeity all there is to the body. The reversibility that defines the flesh exists in other fields; it is even incomparably more agile there and capable of weaving relations between bodies that this time will not only enlarge, but will pass definitively beyond the circle of the visible... there are... those strange movements of the mouth and throat that form the cry and the voice. Those movements end in sounds and I hear them. Like crystal, like metal and many other substances, I am a sonorous being, but I hear my own vibration from within... I hear myself in my throat. My voice is bound to the mass of my own life as is the voice of no one else. But if I am close enough to the other who speaks to hear his breath and his effervescence and his fatigue, I almost witness, in him as in myself, the awesome birth of vociferation. As there is a reflexivity of the touch, of sight, and of the touch-vision system, there is a reflexivity of the movements of phonation and of hearing; they have their sonorous inscription, the vociferations have in me in their motor echo.750

Since Nagel’s essay specifically addresses the alterity of bat-subjectivity, and since bats primarily inhabit their world through sound, I have chosen to highlight this passage due to its discussion of phonation and hearing, or due to Merleau-Ponty’s claim here that other “vociferations have in me their motor echo,” that all beings who are capable of hearing are open to a common sonorous world and, at least to that extent, open to (or sonorously inscribed in) one another. Of course, humans and bats are both incarnate subjectivities, and as such they belong to the same fundamental, carnal world. We can see the world only because we share its visibility,
we can touch the world only because we share its tangibility, and likewise we can hear the world only because we share its sonorosity, or only because we inhabit not only a commonvisible and tangible world but a common sonorous one as well. Humans and bats may have very different ways of perceiving and navigating their environments, and bats surely rely upon their sense of hearing in ways humans will never be able to know in a *fully* lived, experiential way, yet we all nevertheless inhabit a sonorous reality.\(^{751}\) I too inhabit a world whose vibrations ripple through my flesh as sound. The world bellows through my body as well; it murmurs and sings, clamors and screams, even speaks through my body. The “push and shove of being”\(^{752}\) in which my body is caught up is also a chorus of sounds and voices, of phonations and reverberations, of percussions and amplitudes. Bats surely think with and through their ears in the same way that dogs can be said to think with and through their noses, and I will never completely be able to think with and through my ears in the manner of a bat. Yet, I *do* think with and through my ears whenever I discern meaning in the manifold noises of the world,\(^{753}\) whenever I pick up a specific meaning amidst the chatter or cacophony of my environment. Moreover, as Derrida discusses extensively, even my consciousness of myself and of time – even self-presence – is continually instituted and unfurled through the reflexivity and diachrony of hearing myself speak: whether in literal phonation or in internal monologue, whether through outer voice or through inner voice, even thought and temporality – even auto-affection or a sense-of-self – is founded by the

\(^{751}\) This is not to exclude deaf people, but is simply to say that we all inhabit a world that is capable of disclosing itself to us through sound. Moreover, given the fact that all sensory modes of disclosure overlap, or that relations of reversibility obtain between all of the senses, deaf people too inhabit the world sonorously, though not in the same way as hearing-capable people do. Sound or sonorousness very clearly overlaps with touch, for instance, in that there could be no sense of sound any more than there could be a sense of touch if I were not myself tangible, and this is revealed by the fact that we are able to “feel” and not just “hear” sound, as we do when we feel the vibrations of noises.


\(^{753}\) Indeed, as Heidegger argues, I never “just” hear noises: every noise I hear is always already meaningful. I immediately hear the backfire of a car, the alarm of an ambulance, the thumps and cadence of footsteps down the hall, and so on.
irreducible hiatus between speaking and hearing oneself speak. “The speaking-listening duality remains at the heart of the I,”754 and this “duality” or reflexivity is one that I share with any beings who experience and cope with their world through phonation and auscultation, and it is but one form of that reflexivity that defines any sentient body. Thought and temporality are “mutually entangled,”755 yet both are also, in a sense, entangled with auditory, auscultatory perception, with a sonorous just as well as with a visible and tactile world.

There are innumerably many different forms of flesh in the world, but every form of flesh in the world is a form of the flesh of the world. Different forms of flesh may never completely coincide with one another – “what it is like” to be one form of flesh will never totally coincide with “what it is like” to be another, and one may never be completely transposable or perfectly translatable into another – yet nevertheless all flesh is continuous, and since all minds are enfleshed, so too are all minds continuous. So, Nietzsche is right to insist that “we behold all things with the human head and cannot cut off this head,”756 yet what we can do is recognize that we are more than just our “heads,” that our “minds” are not “contained” within our heads or brains but diffused throughout our whole bodies and thus already extended into the world and into other bodies, that we are living bodies whose affects and intentionalities are, as such, already entangled with those of other living bodies, already embedded with other sentient flesh. As Merleau-Ponty claims, “my perception is not in my head, but it has “attachments” with it.”757 So no, we cannot cut off our heads, but we are not just our heads: we are our living bodies and

everything that sustains them, we are flesh and our flesh already belongs to everything else that
is also flesh.

We may indeed differ quite significantly from other kinds of living bodies, and thus we
may not be able to understand very well what it is like to exist as those bodies, but no living
body is ever utterly divorced from any other, no form of flesh is ever categorically or
ontologically isolated from any other. In short, since the mind is necessarily embodied, or since
to be a mind is to be a living body (and vice versa), it follows that continuity of sentient flesh or
embodiment is continuity of sentience or mindedness, and of course all flesh is continuous. Thus,
“there are no substantial differences between physical Nature, life, and mind.” Merleau-Ponty
is often critical of Darwin, but one of the most profound insights that follows from Darwin’s
theory of evolution (and one that Merleau-Ponty embraces and elaborates) is that continuity of
living flesh is continuity of mind; certainly after Darwin there is no question of denying this
thesis. And as Merleau-Ponty underscores time and again, this continuity must be understood as
not the contrary of difference but as “deeply consonant” or “synonymous” with it; it is a
continuity that is already irreducible difference. The point here is that we should neither
emphasize continuity at the expense of difference nor emphasize difference at the expense of
continuity; we should neither construct continuity as homogeneity nor construct discontinuity or
difference as binary opposition or mutual exclusion: this is just what difference “worthy of
name” is. To think properly the differences between living beings, or to think the differences
between human and non-human beings, is neither to cleave such differences into oppositions
(dyads of mutually exclusive terms) nor to collapse them into monolithic, totalizing unities
(identities that leave standing only one term or into which every supposedly distinct term would

758 Ibid., p. 212.
become absorbed). This is what Leonard Lawlor means when he urges us to conceptualize the “human-animal” relationship beyond the contrary, equally false alternatives of “metaphysical separationism” and “biological continuism.” As Lawlor writes, “…biological continuism makes the two one; metaphysical separationism keeps the two two….Metaphysical separationism is Platonism (or Cartesianism); biological continuism, in a word, biologism, is the mere reversal Platonism,” and neither of these alternatives correctly describes the relationship between “the human” and “the animal”; indeed, they do not correctly describe any ontologically fundamental relationship at all. As I hope to have already demonstrated, Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of Flesh is a genuine ontology of difference, and as such it is exactly a third alternative beyond the two that Lawlor defines here, that is, an alternative to Platonism (or Cartesianism) that is not merely a reversal of Platonism (that is, a reductive, totalizing materialism or “biologism”).

The “Flesh” designates a kind of continuity that does homogenize, totalize, or subsume as well as a discontinuity (or distance) that does not divide, negate, or exclude. This is also what Merleau-Ponty means by a “strange kinship,” and Merleau-Ponty’s notion of a strange kinship between “the human” and “the animal” – that is, his notion of an intertwining of “humanity” and “animality” – designates what Lawlor calls a “staggered analogy” between the two, for a staggered analogy is not an “analogy of proportion, in which one of the terms of the comparison is determinate, well defined so that it is able to determine the other term”; rather, in a staggered analogy “both terms are fundamentally indeterminate, which means that the analogy is always a

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760 Ibid., p. 72.
bit off center, inaccurate, and incorrect— in a word, insufficient." That there is a “strange kinship” between “humanity” and “animality” precisely means that they cannot be conceptualized as either identical or opposed to one another, and this, in turn, means that they are intertwined, that neither is determinate independently of the other and that both are therefore, fundamentally, indeterminate or “ambiguous,” intermingled in such a way that equally deprives both of any essential, self-enclosed, autonomous, or transparent positive determinacy. On Merleau-Ponty’s account, “humanity” and “animality” are never positive determinacies but are rather positive indeterminacies (that is, indeterminacies that are not merely privations or derivations of some already established or presupposed, self-standing positive determinacy, since in fact no such positive determinacy ever exists). Thus, Merleau-Ponty’s notion of an “intertwining” of “humanity” and “animality” precisely dismantles or unsettles, rather than reinstates or leaves untouched, a dualism in which those terms would designate fixed, self-contained, transparent, or exclusionary identities, natures, or essences.

It is not an accident that “animality” tends to be traditionally coded as anything that is (“merely”) “bodily.” As I will mention again soon, for Merleau-Ponty “the human” is to “the animal” not only as self is to Other but also as mind is to body, and given the manner in which Merleau-Ponty conceptualizes the latter, the radical implications of such a claim should be clear. We can no more separate humanity from animality than we can separate mind from body (or self from Other), and this means we have to rethink the human-animal relation just as radically as we have to rethink the mind-body relation. As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, and as I will now proceed to elaborate before bringing this discussion to a close, the basic point here comes down to understanding correctly what Husserl means by the “pairing” of self and Other and then to

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761 Ibid., p. 79.
apply the meaning of this consistently to the relationship between “the human” and “the animal,” since the latter are “paired” in precisely the same way. That we need to think the human and the animal together means that we need to think them radically otherwise than they have hitherto been thought, for it is to think them outside any binary logic of identity and negation, sameness and (absolute) transcendence; it is to think them, as Lawlor (following Derrida) insists we must, beyond the alternatives of (Platonic/Cartesian) dualism and (reductive) “continuism.”

We have seen that Merleau-Ponty’s insights into intersubjectivity lead him to rethink what it means to be that specific kind of embodied being that “we” are, namely a “human” being. Merleau-Ponty comes to understand the relationship between ‘humanity’ and ‘animality’ in just the same way that he, following Husserl, understands the relationship between self and Other: not as oppositional or hierarchical or reductively identical, but as primordially “paired” (or “lateral”). Thus, Merleau-Ponty argues that humanity and animality are co-constituting in just the same way as self and Other: the sense and being of each are instituted only together; they are distinct yet inseparable, which is to say coupled through reciprocal differentiation. This coupling or overlapping through differentiation is, of course, chiasmatic be(com)ing: foundationally, “the human” and “the animal” are intertwined in and through a constitutive fission – a “divergence that is not an ontological void,” hence also a shared “flesh” – between them. Merleau-Ponty is clear that we must conceptualize the “human-animal” relation as strictly analogous to the “self-Other” relation. For Merleau-Ponty, we must “[think] not the animal-human, not the human-animal, but truly the one being the alter ego for the other....” In short, Merleau-Ponty

maintains that *as the self is to “the Other”* (or to others), *so is “the human” to “the animal”*: each are necessarily paired or co-constituting, and this means we radically have to rethink both, for no longer can they be understood (as they traditionally have been) as categorically separate rather than inseparable, as mutually exclusive rather than reciprocally constitutive, as opposed rather than coupled. Whatever it is we mean by “the human,” it can no more emerge from, or be shut up entirely within, an impenetrable chrysalis of being than a “self” can emerge from, or be shut up entirely within, a condition of utterly asocial, solipsistic seclusion. Humans can no more come to presence to themselves as such without relationships with other-than-human others (and with “nature”) than any individual human can acquire “human” self-consciousness without relationships with other humans. “Humanity” can no more constitute or understand itself in isolation from “animality” than “one can pull oneself up into existence by the hair, out of the swamps of nothingness.”

Of course, it is clearly the case that a human being cannot achieve full “human” subjectivity without the affirmations or “gracious acts of attention” of human others. Feral children attest to this fact: infants who develop outside of a human community – infants who only “pair” with animals – do not become fully “human,” and Merleau-Ponty acknowledges this. We only achieve full human subjectivity by pairing with other human beings, and while the very existence of feral children already demonstrates the fluidity or ambiguity of the border between “the human” and “the non-human,” it is still the case that “human” infants possess a potentiality for “human subjectivity” that, say, rocks, trees, and dogs do not. So, we need to recognize that Merleau-Ponty’s claim here is one that is deeper than any claim concerning the

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psychosocial development of an individual human being: it is a claim concerning the ontological condition of “being-human” (or of the sense of “humanness”) in the first place (which any account of psychosocial human development presupposes). Merleau-Ponty’s implicit question, then, is this: how is it that anything originally comes to be (or to mean) “human” in the first place? That is to say, how does any being acquire the sense of “being human” such that we can make any observations concerning the psychosocial development of “human beings” in the first place? Yes, human infants require the attention of human Others in order to achieve full human subjectivity, but how does such a claim or observation “make sense”? How are we to account for the sense of the term “human” that we are using here? We only become human in a community of humans, but how does such a community itself become “human”? If we say that such a community becomes a human community by “pairing” with other human communities – in just the same way that a human infant becomes fully human by pairing with a human adult – then we have only pushed the question farther back, and we confront an infinite regress. Merleau-Ponty’s answer, of course, is that there is a primordial Ineinander (intertwining) of “the human” and “the animal” that constitutes the human as such and that therefore subtends the constitution of any distinct human self or community. The primal differentiation and consequent overlapping of “the human” and “the animal” – the dehiscence between them that also envelops them in one another – is what enables any specific being or community of beings to appear as “human” or, correlatively, as “animal.” We only become “human” in community with other humans, but a human community itself only becomes human in a larger, “radical” community with other-than-human others and communities. Our sense of ourselves as human is necessarily – again, we might say “quasi-transcendentally” – structured by our relationships with non-human forms of life. And we must always recall that this means that neither “humanity” nor “animality” can be
conceptualized as pure, self-contained positive determinacies, for they are always already infested by one another, or defined as such by a liminal space between them that renders them irreducibly ambiguous, different yet continuous. Again, the relationship between humanity and animality – just like the relationship between self and Other – does not conform to a classical, dualistic logic of identity and negation. Thus, contrary to Heidegger’s view on the matter, Merleau-Ponty insists that there is no “ontological abyss” between human beings and other animals; or, if we say that there is an “abyss” between them, then we must also recognize, along with Merleau-Ponty, that “an abyss is not nothing,” for it has its “environs and edges.”

To be clear, all of this means that what we (usually very inadequately and thoughtlessly) designate as “animality” cannot be understood by mere privative contrast to “humanity,” or as that which is simply what “we” are not, since the claim here is precisely that there is no positive human identity or nature – no human “we” or “humanity” – prior to, or independently of, non-human beings. To begin with a positive concept of what is “human” and then proceed to define “the animal” in negative, derivative, oppositional contrast to it is not merely to adopt, as I have already mentioned, an arbitrary yardstick with which to understand and assess other forms of life, it is also to assume such a thing as a “humanity” that may define itself on its own terms independently of other forms of life, or a humanity whose being and meaning originates autonomously, that is, conceptually or ontologically prior to, or apart from, other forms of life, yet this is precisely what Merleau-Ponty denies. To define or interpret other forms of life in such a way that derives their being from our own case – that defines or interprets them as either more or less similar to who or what “we” are, hence in negative terms relative to “us” – is already to assume a humanity, or already to assume such a thing as a “human” “We” or “Us,” that royalty

bootstraps itself into being and meaning first so that everything else may be defined or understood relative to it secondarily, but the assumed primacy of such a “humanity” or “human” We” is precisely what Merleau-Ponty calls into question; it is precisely one of the foundational assumptions of Western philosophy to which, Merleau-Ponty urges, we are never entitled.

In short, if there is nothing we may assume or refer to as “human” in positive terms independently of relations with non-humans – if only being with other forms of life inflates our own to meaning – then neither may we assume or refer to anything as “animal” in negative, derivative contrast to what is “human.” We therefore cannot understand what “we” are in hierarchical opposition to “animals” (or to any supposed “them”):

The human cannot appear in its qualitative difference by the mere addition of reason to the animal (body)…The relation of the animal to the human will not be a simple hierarchy founded on an addition…We study the human through its body in order to see it emerge as different from the animal, not by the addition of reason, but rather, in short, in the Ineinander with the animal…

For Merleau-Ponty, the moment we begin from some assumed understanding of ourselves as clearly and distinctly “human” and proceed to use that as the measure according to which we compare and contrast other forms of life – the moment we begin to interpret other forms of life relative to our own thus assumed as a primary or central locus or standard of meaning – we have already erred. We cannot think the “human-animal” relation either in such a way that ascribes a transparent, self-contained, or autonomous “positive” identity or determinacy to “humanity” or in such a way that denies “animality” any positive identity or determinacy of its own, or that would merely conceive “animality” as the opposite or privation of “humanity.” If humanity and animality are intertwined, then the latter cannot be understood as the mere privation of the former, for to do so is to assume the former as a primary and immediate given or autonomous source of its own identity or intelligibility as such, which is precisely contrary to a chiasmatic

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relationship; in a chiasmatic relationship, neither term precedes or unilaterally founds the other, for each reciprocally constitute one another and are thus only ever given together.

So, Merleau-Ponty’s view is not that we know what we (humans) are by contrasting ourselves with “animals” or with beings we supposedly “are not,” for this assumes a false oppositional or hierarchical relationship between “humanity” and “animality.” The relationship between the two cannot be conceptualized as hierarchical because, again, they only come to presence or meaning together, or co-constitutively. To regard “animality” as the negation of “humanity” – as what humanity “is not” – is to think beginning from humanity as an already established positive determinacy, rather than to think beginning from humanity as a positive indeterminacy, or rather than to think beginning from the positive indeterminacy that is the very divergence and co-constitution of humanity and animality. This why Merleau-Ponty claims (as he alludes in the above passage) that “humanity is not animality (in the sense of mechanism) + reason.” We cannot conceptualize “humanity” as merely the addition of some property (or perhaps of some set of properties) to “animality,” for that is to conceptualize the latter derivatively or privatively relative to the former, and that is to conceptualize the former as a central, autonomous, or privileged source of the intelligibility of its own and of other forms of life, when in fact the intelligibility of its own and of other forms of life is founded by their primordial intertwinnings with one another, or in the reciprocal divergencies and exchanges of sense between them. So, if, for example, “humanity” is not “animality plus reason,” then “animality” is not “humanity minus reason.” In other words, “animality” is not the privation of some sort of presupposed (and usually unaccounted for) “properly human” characteristic or capacity. The claim that “humanity is not animality + reason” is simply another way of

768 Ibid., p. 208.
articulating the point that animality must be thought otherwise than as the mere negation or privation of humanity, or that animality cannot be defined derivatively relative to humanity, that is, in terms of the extent to which it lacks already positively determined human qualities or valences of being. This is the only way to think appropriately the difference between “the human” and “the animal,” and indeed it is the only way to think difference “worthy of the name” at all.

Merleau-Ponty even suggests in this context that we should dispense altogether with attempting to assess human beings and animals according to a scale of “intelligence” (which, of course, usually means assessing other forms of life according to some sort of standard of “human” intelligence). Thus, Merleau-Ponty radically suggests that we should abandon the very concept of human/animal “intelligence” altogether, because such a notion “encounters the distinction machine-intelligence.” Merleau-Ponty’s point here is that invariably anything one conceptualizes as “intelligent” behavior is always contrasted with those behaviors that are “merely” instinctual, reactive, conditioned, or “mechanical.” So, conceptualizing the distinction between humanity and animality according to distinctions in “intelligence” not only illicitly conceptualizes animality as the mere negation or absence of an already assumed positive “human nature” – it not only defines “the animal” only to the extent that it either approaches or lacks already assumed characteristically “human” cognitive capacities – but, moreover, the concept of (human or animal) “intelligence” ultimately presupposes or reproduces a classical opposition between “reason” and “non-reason”, logos and mechanicity that is not only unstable and untenable on its own terms but that itself is founded upon, or that itself reproduces, the very Cartesian mind/body, human/animal dualism Merleau-Ponty has already thoroughly refuted. As

769 Ibid., p. 214.
we saw in chapter three, there is no way to understand the body as a mere “machine” (or behavior as merely “mechanistic”) without, in fact, assuming or reinscribing classical mind/body dualism, for the body can only be conceptualized as such in opposition to an absolutely extra-mechanistic (hence disembodied) mind or soul: again, if we give up the idea that the mind is a “ghost in the machine,” so too must we give up the concomitant idea of the body as a mere (“mindless”) machine. Descartes advanced a mechanistic understanding of the body (and of materiality in general) because it was precisely the counterpart to his supernaturalist understanding of consciousness. Merleau-Ponty’s point here, then, is that one can only ever conceptualize “rationality” or “intelligence” in opposition to putatively “non-rational” or mechanical forms of behavior, but to do so is ultimately to resuscitate a Platonic/Cartesian opposition between logos and mechanicity, hence between spirit and matter, mind and body.

Setting aside even all of the hidden anthropocentric biases through which such a concept of “intelligence” would be inflected, it is nevertheless the case that any concept of “intelligence” – regardless of whether one conceptualizes it as differentiated across forms of life in a gradated rather than discontinuous manner – will only ever be intelligible in contradistinction to merely “reflexive,” “mimetic,” “instinctive,” “appetitive,” “blind,” or “mechanical” behaviors, and therefore such a concept is indeed that of a “spiritual” faculty in disguise, or the concept of a kind of thought, interiority, intentionality, self-presence, or sense-constituting agency that would “inhabit” and animate an inherently, utterly thought-less, interior-less, non-intentional, sense-less body. Thus, inasmuch as the concept of “intelligent” behavior is inevitably contrasted with the concept of merely “mechanistic” behavior, there is no way to understand or deploy either concept in a manner that does not conjure the old “ghost in the machine,” or in a manner that does not reinstate the very sort of dualistic conceptual framework we know to be just as dead or
“dumb” as the mechanistic body imagined within such a framework. For this reason, Merleau-Ponty suggests that there is no notion of “intelligence” that is not tacitly committed to an untenable opposition between “logos” and “nature”/“mechanicity” or that, in other words, does not tacitly insulate “intelligence,” logos, or “self-presence” from its “outside” or its “other,” that is, from (a reductively, abstractly conceived) materiality. In short, Merleau-Ponty is suggesting here that there is no concept of “intelligence” – or at any rate no notion of a “scale” or “spectrum” of intelligence according to which forms of life may be ranked – that is not inherently logocentric. And to the extent that such a notion of (human/animal) “intelligence” holds sway even today in the sciences that study human and animal behavior, we see, as we do time and again, that so much of what passes itself off as “science” is in reality theology or bad metaphysics (not to mention bad ethics and oppressive politics) in disguise.

Thus, if we interpret Merleau-Ponty’s thesis as affirming that we come to understand our humanity by merely contrasting it with what our humanity “is not,” then we fail to understand what he means when he speaks of an intertwining between “the human” and “the animal,” or what he means when he speaks of a positive (“fecund”) indeterminacy – an irreducible differentiation – that subtends and founds any supposed positive determinations of being, identity, or meaning. To regard “animality” as the privation of “humanity” is not only to ascribe an erroneous ontological primacy to the latter, it is also to conceptualize both as opposed rather than, in fact, intertwined or coupled. To regard animality as the mere negation of humanity is, in fact, to regard both as mutually exclusive (i.e., A and not-A are mutually exclusive or contradictory terms), yet this fails to understand the relationship between them as chiasmatic, or fails to understand the relationship between them as analogous to that between “self” and “Other.” In short, opposition is mutual exclusion, not co-constitution, so if Merleau-Ponty is
right, it is no longer permissible to conceptualize “the human” in isolation from “the animal,” and this also means it is no longer permissible to conceptualize “the animal” in a merely negative or derivative way relative to “the human.” If we cannot conceptualize the “Other” as the mere privation or contradictory of “the self,” or if we cannot accord any kind of ontological primacy or autonomy to the self, then neither can we conceptualize “the animal” as the mere privation or contradictory of “the human,” or neither can we accord any kind of ontological primacy or autonomy – any “special” or “central” station in the order of Being – to “the human”; the egocentricity of the former conception of the self-Other relation is analogous to the anthropocentricity of the latter conception of the human-animal relation.

Moreover, what it truly means to be “Other-than-us” cannot be defined negatively relative to “us” (as the term “non-human” already problematically suggests), for that is to make of “the Other” but a satellite in our orbit, which is not, of course, to be genuinely “Other” at all. Merleau-Ponty is consistently committed to the phenomenological or ontological and not only ethical imperative to honor alterity:

Do we have the right to comprehend the time, the space of the child as an undifferentiation of our time, of our space, etc….? This is to reduce the child’s experience to our own, at the very moment one is trying to respect the phenomena. For it is to think it as the negation of our differentiations. It would be necessary to go all the way to thinking it positively, unto phenomenology. But the same question arises with regard to every other, to the alter ego in particular….Solution: recapture the child, the alter ego, the unreflected within myself by a lateral, pre-analytic participation, which is perception…intentional transgression. When I perceive the child, he is given precisely in a certain divergence (écart)…and the same for my alter ego, and the same for the pre-analytic thing.\footnote{The Visible and the Invisible, p. 203.}

As Merleau-Ponty clearly argues here, we will never correctly understand the being of an “Other” – whether such an “Other” is a child, another adult human, a cultural other, an “animal” other, or even a thing – if we proceed to do so relative to our own standpoint as the default comparative, contrastive, or otherwise evaluative measure, for that, indeed, is to “reduce the
Other” to ourselves, or to construct the Other as derived from our own familiar manner or sphere of being. The “Other” can never be properly regarded as the mere “negation” of “the self.” Yet, in respecting the irreducibility of “Others” to ourselves, Merleau-Ponty also makes clear here this does not mean that we posit such Others as opposed to or radically exterior to ourselves; on the contrary, “Others” are not “reducible” to “me” or to “us” precisely because we are intertwined from the very beginning (that is, in virtue of our “lateral pre-analytic participation” in one another), or precisely because there is no “me” or “us” prior to or independent of “them” to which they may be reduced or in terms of which their being may be derivatively or negatively defined.

So, on the one hand, there are living beings (i.e., “animals”) that are “other” than “us” (humans), but these other-than-human-others are also, paradoxically, “us,” or are nonetheless endemic to who “we” are from the very start. Animal Others are not identical to us, but they are not the negation of us; rather, as Merleau-Ponty suggests, they are “non-different” from us. Animal Others are not “us,” but they are also not not “us.” However difficult or paradoxical it may seem, the point is to accept and think through both of these claims at once, and to do so is to think a deeper, more radical “We” (or “Us”) that founds – and that confounds or overspills – any neat delineations one may draw between any “we” or “us” and any “them,” a “We” that does not resolve into a mere aggregate of isolated, self-enclosed beings, identities, or communities, nor one that dissolves all differences into an amorphous, all-consuming totality or “night of identity.”  Again – and this is perhaps the most difficult point in Merleau-Ponty – chiasmatic relationality (or radical community) is defined by a “both/and” logic that both founds and disrupts the constructs of our later “either/or” conceptual frameworks: “animals” are not “us,”

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771 Merleau-Ponty, ibid., p. 75.
and they are “us” (or are not not us). This may appear to be a formal contradiction at first glance, but the conjunction as a whole is supposed to indicate that the “not” here is not the “not” of classical logic: it signifies not negation, contradiction, or absolute non-identity, but otherness (or difference), and otherness (or difference) as such simply cannot be accommodated by any classical, strictly bivalent or disjunctive framework of logic. Genuine otherness (or difference) cannot be accommodated by any framework of logic that takes the “law of the excluded middle” to be an exceptionless axiom that governs thought and reality (that is, to be a law), for in a sense otherness (or difference) is precisely the “middle” that is thus excluded.

This fundamental, radical “We” is, then, a “we” that is always in question, or one whose boundaries, though real, are always undecidable precisely because it is the “We” that “we” and everything else are before we ever take to distinguish between ourselves and anything else, the “We” in the midst of which anything has being or meaning, the “We” that underlies and envelops all thought and that cannot, therefore, be pinned down or policed by its categories; it is a kind of community that cannot be thought as some object in opposition to one’s own “subject-position” in the world, because one’s own “subject-position” in the world is already embedded in it, already instituted only in and through it. It is necessary to confront the fact that one exists only together with others who constitute, along with oneself, this primal, radical “We,” others who thus cannot be conceptualized as “other” in a traditional, oppositional or merely contrastive way, for to do so is, again, to take for granted the false notion that one’s own selfhood, identity, subject-position, standpoint, or circle of existence in the world has been determined in advance or independently of them. This is why Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the laterality of the “human-animal” relationship: “The relation of the human to animality is not a hierarchical relation, but
lateral, an overcoming that does not abolish kinship.”\textsuperscript{772} There is much to unpack here, but we may begin by noting that Merleau-Ponty’s reference to the “laterality” of the human-animal relationship is clearly intended to evoke the reciprocal, bilateral (or equiprimordial) constitution of self and Other, and thus it is intended to repudiate or displace any oppositional, “frontal” (unidirectional), and hierarchical conception of the ontological relationship or exchange of meaning between them. To say that humanity and animality are related "laterally" (non-oppositionally and non-hierarchically) is to say that they are related chiasmatically, that the institution of the distinction between "humanity" and "animality" is just one instance (though an exemplary instance) among others of dehiscence in Being/Nature, and like all such instances it entails a kind of “strange kinship” or "encroachment" between its relata. Since this dehiscence or opening between “the human” and “the animal” is not an opposition or ontological vacuum but is filled by a common carnality and carnal world, it entails (or simply is) their intertwining and compresence, and thus it indeed compels us to rethink the signifiers “human” and “animal,” for they no longer signify anything like clearly demarcated and disjunct essences or “natures”; and yet, even though “the human” and “the animal” are continuous with one another, and even though there is a sense in which the former “arises” from the latter, we cannot conceive of the former as having “descended” from the latter (as if from some pure origin or some sort of homogenous and inert background), for each can only arise in sense – they can only ever be(come) – together. Self and Other only emerge into meaning and presence together, and the same is true with respect to “humanity” and “animality.” Humanity “arises” from animality, then, simply in the sense that it is constituted as such through a process of differentiation from other-than-human alterities (and reciprocally, other-than-human beings are constituted as such

\textsuperscript{772} Nature, p. 268.
through their differentiation from human and *other* other-than-human alterities). The fundamental “lateral” relationship – or what I have been calling the “radical community” – between human and non-human beings instantiates the coupling-through-differentiation or the “identity-within-difference” constitutive of all forms of life, identity, and meaning.

For Merleau-Ponty, “humanity” is constituted as such only with or in the midst of “animal” others. This means that animality always already envelops and infests our humanity such that it simultaneously distinguishes “us” as the kinds of beings we are – hence constitutes the human “we” to which we belong – and undermines all of the ordinary ways in which we displace “animality” outside ourselves, that is, any of the ways in which we displace it onto others typically labeled “animals” or any of the ways in which we “otherize” it as the negation of who or what “we” are or as signifying a strictly antithetical “them.” If we are to develop a lucid conception of our “humanity,” we must think it always in the midst of other-than-human alterities, and this, again, requires that we unlearn most of the ways in which we typically conceptualize or categorize the world. To say that the relationship between ‘the human’ and ‘the animal’ is “lateral” is to say that humanity is constituted by animality in precisely the same way that selfhood is constituted by otherness; it is to say that humanity is of animality in precisely the same way that subjectivity is of flesh or of the world, that “being-human” is a distinct expression or particular incarnation of “being-animal,” that being-human and being-animal are (like “self” and “Other”) two indissociably entangled moments of a process of differentiation (and communalization) in Being, and that they are therefore defined as such by a limit between them that renders them intrinsically “promiscuous” or ambiguous. This limit that constitutes the identity or being of any distinct being or body, as well as the limit that constitutes any distinct

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community of beings or bodies, is what Leonard Lawlor describes as a point of both intersection and diffraction, the “halfway point in the middle of the X, the mi-lieu…” 774 It is impossible to understand either “being-human” or “being-animal” apart from one another, and this means that we have to unlearn our tendency to think of one beginning solely from the standpoint or identity of the other, that is, our tendency to assume, say, a “human” standpoint or identity with reference to which we would then proceed to compare and contrast “animals.” In order to think properly any terms that are truly constituted in and through their intertwining one another, one has to try to think them not from the side of one term or the other but from a standpoint between them, or from the sides of both at once. In other words, if terms truly are related to one another chiasmatically, one will unavoidably distort or violate them unless one thinks them truly together, or from precisely that metaxic threshold, in-between place, or “mi-lieu” (that center of the “X” or chi-as) where they simultaneously overlap and diverge from one another. This is why Merleau-Ponty claims that we must “gradually approach the Ineinander from two ends.” 775 The logic of the chiasm displaces and repudiates every supposed “centricity” we might take as the point of departure for our thinking; it demands a thinking of and, more importantly, from “the between.” Thus, the “Ineinander of animality-humanity” 776 incessantly disrupts, deceters, or defers anthropocentricity in just the same way that the intertwining (Ineinander) of self and Other incessantly disrupts, deceters, and defers egocentricity.

As Merleau-Ponty profoundly asks, “where are we to put the limit between the body and the world, since the world is flesh?” 777 Of course, Merleau-Ponty’s point is not that there is no

776 Ibid., p. 208.
777 The Visible and the Invisible, p. 138.
limit between the body and the world, for if the world truly, utterly engulfed the body, there
would be no such thing as sentience and no such thing as a distinct body in the first place; rather,
his point is that there is no sharply determinable limit between the body and the world, that the
body and the world are neither identical nor absolutely separate but *intertwined*, that the limit
that individuates any individual living body is also necessarily a “frontier surface” through
which the world passes into it and through which it, reversibly, passes into the world. If there
were no distinction between myself and the world, I would not be a “self” or would not exist at
all, yet nonetheless I am also not outside the world: I am thoroughly immersed in it, I am
essentially *of* it. Now, what is true concerning the limit between the body and the world is true
concerning every “limit,” that is, every boundary through which things are differentiated from
one another (including, of course, the limit between “the human” and “the animal”). What is true
concerning the limit between the body and the world is true concerning the limits that distinguish
all beings – and all *communities* of beings – from one another. No limit or boundary is ever a
sharp division. Every limit is analogous to “the zero of pressure between two solids that makes
them adhere to one another,” or “...a surface of separation” that is also a “place
of...union.” “Limits” are real because differences are real, but every limit is fluid, blurry, and
porous.

In a word, all limits are intrinsically ambiguous, and therefore so too are the things or
beings they differentiate. This is why Merleau-Ponty claims that the “limits” through which
distinct beings are constituted as such are positive or productive (“fecund”) indeterminacies (or
“negativities”), that is, interstitial spaces (or “mi-lieus”) through which any and all “positive,”

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778 Ibid., p. 263.
779 Ibid., p. 148
780 Ibid., p. 234.
empirical determinacies or distinctions arise and in virtue of which no such positive, empirical determinacy is ever “purely” positive, ever unambiguous or ever not already intermixed with what is “other” than itself. This is precisely how we must understand the “limit” between “humanity” and “animality,” or is another way to understand what Merleau-Ponty means when he speaks of a “lateral” relationship or “chiasm” between them. Merleau-Ponty writes that “our own body is in the world as the heart is in the organism,”\textsuperscript{781} and one may replace “body” and “world” here with “humanity” and “animality”, respectively, and the claim would be equally true. There is a “limit” between “human” beings and other-than-human beings, but just like the limit between body and world or between self and Other, it is not one that ever allows us to determine with precision where one ends and where the other begins, and such an indeterminacy is necessarily constitutive not only of “us” but of all things, beings, and phenomena; such an indeterminacy (or “negativity”) is, again, endemic to Being as such. As we saw earlier (and contrary especially to Sartre), Merleau-Ponty thus affirms that Being is “interiorly woven with negation.”\textsuperscript{782}

I have invoked Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the “fecund negative,” and he explicitly equates this with what he elsewhere refers to as “Flesh” and “dehiscence” (or “écart”), writing that “this fecund negative…is instituted by the flesh, by its dehiscence…”\textsuperscript{783} Notably, Merleau-Ponty’s later concept of the “fecund negative” recalls his injunction in \textit{Phenomenology of Perception} (in the context of his discussion of the famous Müller-Lyer illusion) to “recognize the indeterminate as a positive phenomenon.”\textsuperscript{784} For Merleau-Ponty, there is a crucible of indeterminacy that necessarily precedes and generates every “determinacy” (that is, any distinct

\textsuperscript{781} \textit{Phenomenology of Perception}, p. 203.  
\textsuperscript{782} \textit{Nature}, p. 212.  
\textsuperscript{783} \textit{The Visible and the Invisible}, p. 263.  
\textsuperscript{784} \textit{Phenomenology of Perception}, p. 6.
empirical being, identity, phenomenon, or form of meaning), and since such an indeterminacy is the source of any determinacy, it cannot conceptualized as merely a negative indeterminacy, that is, as an indeterminacy that would be a mere lack of determinacy, for that would posit some sort of determinacy as ontologically primary, or would posit the indeterminacy in question as derivative relative to an already constituted determinacy. Such a foundational indeterminacy, then, must be, in a sense, a “positive” and generative (i.e., “fecund”) indeterminacy, an indeterminacy from which all determinacies (and consequently all negative indeterminacies, or ordinary privations) arise. In his later writings, Merleau-Ponty simply realizes that the positive indeterminacy that he earlier identified at the heart of perception – the sort of indeterminacy through which anything comes to perceptual presence – is also operative at the heart of Being. So, for Merleau-Ponty the “fecund negative” is precisely the limit or site of difference (the “frontier surface”) through which all things are relationally engendered, or the (mid-)place where the very distinction between “inside” and “outside,” “self” and “other” is instituted. This is why he compares the “fecund negative” to “the finger of the glove that is turned inside out.”785 This “fecund” or parturitive, positive negativity is, as we saw earlier, a “negativity that is not nothing,” for it is the non-figurable or non-presentable limit between things that constitutes them as the distinct things that they are yet which is also (like the literal skin of the body or, as Merleau-Ponty suggests here, like the surface of a glove) a site of interchange (or “reversibility”) between them, a “hinge”786 about which they fold or “rock into one another,”787 or rather a separation between them that does not divorce them from one another but precisely brings them together. Thus, “the only “place where the negative would really be is the fold, the application of

785 The Visible and the Invisible, p. 263.
786 Ibid., p. 205, 225, 234.
787 Ibid., p. 234.
the inside and the outside to one another, the turning point.”788 The “fecund negative,” the “Flesh (of the world),” “écart”, and the “chiasm” are all different names for (or different valences of) one and the same thing: Being as difference (or differentiation), which is also radical community (or communalization).

We see, then, that “fecund negativity” designates a kind of difference that is not a mere lack or negation of some identity, not the mere absence or privation of some determinacy; rather, it is the productive source of every identity or the genesis of every determinacy. A difference that is prior to, and constitutive of, identity cannot simply be a negation or lack of identity, for that conceptualizes difference as difference from some assumed or already given identity, and to regard it in such a way is to assume the given identity in question as fundamental when in fact it is not, when in fact such an identity is an effect of difference rather than the source of it; it is to regard difference as derived from identity when in fact the truth is the reverse: every identity is fundamentally produced by difference; likewise, a process of determination that precedes and founds every determinacy is in a sense an “indeterminacy,” but it cannot be understood as simply a negation of determinacy, for again, to regard it as such is to regard it as derived from a prior, positive, already established or given determinacy, which gets the order of being precisely backwards: it is not positive determinacies that are fundamental but rather the process of determination through which they emerge. Thus, if we call this process of determination that antecedes and founds every positive determination in the world an originary indeterminacy, it cannot be a negative indeterminacy – not an indeterminacy that is a mere privation of determinacy – but a positive indeterminacy. So, here we see that Merleau-Ponty already articulates Being as what Deleuze defines as “difference in-itself”: not as “diversity” or as

788 Ibid., p. 264.
empirically given difference, but as “that by which the given is given, that by which the given is given as diverse.”

“Fecund negativity” is simply another way that Merleau-Ponty designates a kind of difference that is not oppositional or dualistic, a kind of difference, therefore, that entails the overlapping and “ambiguity” of its relata, and such is the only kind of difference “worthy of the name.”

Similar to the question he poses above, then, Merleau-Ponty also might as well have asked (and implicitly invites us to ask) the following one: “where are we to put the limit between “the human” and “the animal,” since they (or since their world) is flesh?” This is why Merleau-Ponty claims that we need to see “humanity emerge just like Being in the manner of a watermark, not as another substance, but as interbeing…”

That is to say, a watermark is a real, distinct thing or phenomenon, yet – like waves in the ocean, clouds in the sky, or an area of illumination within a darkened theater – it is also necessarily blended into its surroundings; it is differentiated from the element wherein it emerges as such, yet in such a way that it is never sharply separated from it: it is a particular incarnation of its element, and that is why we can never say precisely where it ends and where the element in the midst of which it arises begins; its being exfoliates into the world beyond and all around it, a world that thus invades it from every direction without thereby obliterating it. Likewise, humanity “emerges” only through and in the midst of “animality,” “Nature,” or the “flesh of the world” in such a way that it is never dissolved or fused entirely into it yet also never sharply delineated from it. This point clarifies Merleau-Ponty’s remark that the relationship between humanity and animality is an

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790 Nature, p. 208. See also Merleau-Ponty’s similar remarks that “…global reality is delineated like a watermark…” and that “Alltäglichkeit is always in the in-between world, always as a watermark…” (Nature, p. 207).
“overcoming” or “surpassing” (dépassement) that “does not abolish kinship.” Given that Merleau-Ponty insists that this relationship is essentially lateral (i.e., a non-hierarchical relationship of “pairing”), he certainly does not mean that humanity “overcomes” animality in the sense of superseding, mastering, or absolutely transcending or “rising above” it; rather, “overcoming laterally” just means “the work from within to without, by growth and differentiation”; it simply means transcendence through differentiation, or the constitution of identity through becoming-other. Of course, in a sense any distinct being “surpasses” or “exceeds” Being insofar as it is distinguished from Being, but it does not do so in the sense of absolutely transcending or raising itself to a position beyond or outside of Being: again, lateral “overcoming” is an overcoming that does not abolish kinship. Similarly, I escape or, in a sense, “transcend” the world inasmuch as I am distinct from it, and reciprocally the world escapes or, in a sense, “transcends” me, yet nevertheless “the world and I are within one another…” I am other than the world, yet (paradoxically) there is no aspect of my being that is separable from it, and (paradoxically) I only become other than it by means of my endless “detour” through it. This is what Merleau-Ponty means by “lateral overcoming.”

Thus, “lateral overcoming” designates something’s differentiation from the elemental condition and setting of its being, or something’s differentiation from something other than itself that is, at the same time, its embeddedness with that other. This is why Merleau-Ponty frequently suggests that a relationship of “lateral overcoming” is exemplified by the relationship between self and Other as Husserl understood it:

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791 See, again, ibid., p. 268.
792 Ibid., p. 227. Emphasis mine.
793 Ibid., p. 182. In context, Merleau-Ponty is describing the relationship between form and matter in an organism, but his statement here also describes exactly what he elsewhere refers to as “lateral overcoming,” which characterizes relationships between all kinds of things and not just that between “humanity” and “animality.”
795 Nature, p. 211.
What do I bring to the problem of the same and the other? This: that the same be the other of the other, and identity difference of difference…this 1) does not realize a surpassing, a dialectic in the Hegelian sense; 2) is realized on the spot, by encroachment, thickness, *spatiality*…

The relationship between self and Other is one of difference (or of differentiation) that does not resolve into a binary, hierarchy, or sublative unity, and as such it describes exactly what Merleau-Ponty elsewhere describes as “lateral overcoming.” In other words, “lateral overcoming” signifies a kind of “transcendence” that is not the contrary of “immanence”; it signifies “transcendence as being-at-a-distance,” a “that-is-openness to things, with participation on their part, or which carries them in its circuit…” And in case the concept of “lateral overcoming” is still not sufficiently clear, Merleau-Ponty explicitly compares the lateral relationship (or *Ineinander*) that constitutes intersubjectivity to the “rigorous simultaneity between the body and its reflection.” That is, the lateral relationship between self and Other (and of course, by extension, the lateral relationship between humanity and animality) is comparable to the relationship between the objective and phenomenal “sides” of the living body, or to the relationship between those two compresent aspects (or “leaves”) of the living, self-reflexive body that are instituted as such through an irreducible dehiscence or hiatus between them. The implication here, then, is that “the human” and “the animal” are (like self and Other) no more related to one another hierarchically (or oppositionally) than are the objective and phenomenal aspects of a living body, or that “humanity” no more “overcomes” “animality” than the phenomenal body “overcomes” the “objective body” in the movement of the living body’s

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796 *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 264.
797 Ibid., p. 208.
799 Ibid., p. 273. Also compare this remark with the following passage, which also illuminates what Merleau-Ponty means by “lateral overcoming”:

“A body which of itself desires something other than itself or its similars…a perceived thing that perceives itself, and thereby inserts the world between self and self – a mass of pleasures and pains that are not closed in on themselves, but is used by us to please and to suffer from the world and from others…there is not a frontal overcoming here, but a lateral one, by detour.” (Ibid., p. 210-211).
reflection upon itself. More simply put, self and Other, “human” and “animal” are differentiated from yet intertwined with one another through the “flesh of the world” in precisely the same way that “subject” and “object,” “mind” and “body” are differentiated from yet intertwined with one another in the lived body; there is a sense in which they are “incompossible,” yet their “unity is irrecusible.”

We can now appreciate even more clearly why Merleau-Ponty insists upon the “laterality” of not only our primary relations with the world but also of our primary relations with others (human and non-human alike). If community is (like Being) the very element in which one dwells, that means one must understand one’s relationships with communal others primarily as lateral and never merely as “frontal” or “hierarchical,” only as those with whom one is and of whom one is; and if “the animal” is “the Other” of “the human,” it follows that we must understand the relationship between them as lateral as well, that we cannot understand the relationship of the latter to the former as merely “frontal” (that is, as a relationship between a subject over and against an object, or as a unilateral relationship between one term posited as primary and another posited as secondary or derivative relative to it). In other words, being-human is being-animal, but this copula is not to be interpreted as one of strict (analytic) identity (again, as Merleau-Ponty suggests, we should say that it is a relation not of identity but of “non-difference”): humanity is not to be equated with animality as such, for it is but a distinctive expression or incarnation of animality, but a particular manner of being (sentient) flesh, or “first another manner of being a body” (as is, indeed, every form of life). The style of fleshy being-in-the-world that is “humanity” is but an articulation of the flesh that is “animality,” and the flesh that is animality – the flesh that is shared by every living being – is an articulation of the flesh of

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800 Ibid., p. 223.  
801 Ibid., p. 208.
the world, an articulation of the Flesh that is Being or the world, an articulation, then, of the flesh that is mine, too, an articulation of the flesh that is mine but, at the same time, other than mine, too.

We must learn not to see a formal contradiction in the notion, for example, that I am not the bacteria that colonize my gut yet these bacteria are “me” all the same, for there is no “me” without them, as there is no “them” without “me”: what “I” am is, indeed, this organic community of different organisms, or rather there is no “me” above and beyond the flesh that extends between “me” and living others, between what is human and what is other-than-human. There is no “self” and no “humanity” above and beyond this space within and through which self and other(s), humans and non-humans come into relation with one another, this space that makes everything, including all living beings, different yet inseparable from one another. I am a community; indeed, as I mentioned earlier and as Alphonso Lingis argues, I am a community in the midst of communities, a community of communities within a community of communities. There is never anything but community – or rather, there is never anything but communalization – all the way down, never anything but “fields in intersection, in a field of fields wherein the “subjectivities” are integrated.”\footnote{Merleau-Ponty, \textit{The Visible and the Invisible}, p. 227.} I and my “humanity” are nothing but an ensemble of intercorporeal relationships, a site where the overlapping of things and bodies in nature comes to a certain kind of fruition or reflexive expression, and it is one that, like any “body” or community of bodies, certainly has limits (for otherwise it would truly be nothing), but these limits – like all limits worthy of the name – are intrinsically undecidable or, again, what Merleau-Ponty frequently calls “ambiguous”: not “either/or” fault-lines, but “both/and” double-binds; not absolutely exclusionary partitions, but simultaneously disjunctive and conjunctive
“hinges”\textsuperscript{803} or “ pivots”\textsuperscript{804} of Being; they are, in a word, what Merleau-Ponty calls \textit{chiasms}, or sites of intertwining.

Thus, Merleau-Ponty argues that there is nothing we may speak of as “human” that is not already intertwined with what is other-than-human, that the presentation of any “human” style of being is at once a composition and “appresentation” of innumerable other bodily (“animal”) styles of being, a particular expression, say, of canine affection, playfulness, and loyalty, of feline curiosity, poise, tenderness, and even cruelty, of elephantine nurturance, joy, and sorrow, of vulpine cunning and mischief, of taurine stubbornness and perseverance, of cervine vulnerability and timidity, of corvine cleverness and deceptiveness, of octopean inventiveness and dexterity, of equine grace and strength, of ursine reclusiveness and ferocity, of cetacean sociality and loquacity, of strigine perceptiveness and vigilance, of murine empathy, of leonine courage, of formicine solidarity, of testudine torpor, of porcine voraciousness, of oscine canorousness, and so on. As there is no “self” or individual that is not fundamentally, \textit{all the way down} an ensemble of relations with others, or as there is no self that is not a distinctive expression of an already operative intersubjectivity, so is there no “humanity” that is not a distinctive expression of an already operative “\textit{interanimality,}” or of an intercorporeity that inherently overflows essentialist constructions and taxonomies of identity, including those of “species.” Every living body, and every kind of living body, arises from a prior togetherness with innumerable other living bodies that is not the effacement of differences between them but that is, in fact, entailed by their differences. Togetherness is the “other side” of difference; communalization is simultaneously differentiation. In short, there is nothing in existence – no

\textsuperscript{803} Ibid., p. 205, 225, 236.
\textsuperscript{804} Ibid., p. 205, 226, 260.
“self” or form of life, no human or other-than-human being – that is not an expression of a
primal chiasmic mélange of carnalities, or that is not a member of a radical community.

We know it is not the case that a “self” first comes onto the scene and then extends itself
to an “Other,” for they both emerge and exist in the world – each arises in sense – only as a
“pair,” only together. Likewise, there is no “human” who first comes onto the scene, knows what
he/she is “qua human,” and only then begins to notice and compare him/herself to other beings
“qua animals,” or in other words there is no “humanity” that arises in the world first and then
extends itself to (or refuses to extend itself to) something it constructs as “animality”: neither
term is opposed to, isolated from, or prior to (hence “higher” or “lower” than) the other, nor are
they ever simply fused into a union that dissolves the distinction between them. Perhaps it will
help to remember that the same chiasmatic relationship that obtains between the “phenomenal
body” and the “objective body” and that, as such, constitutes the lived/living body is the same (in
its basic structure) as the one that characterizes the relationship between ‘self’ and ‘Other’ (since,
indeed, all chiasmatic relationships have the same basic structure). In just the same way that
there is no “mind and a body” but only a “mind with a body”\(^\text{805}\) (or only an embodied mind) –
only “a being of two leaves, from one side a thing among things and otherwise what sees and
touches them”\(^\text{806}\) – and in the same sense that, in virtue of its embodiment, there is no embodied
mind and a world but only an embodied in or of or intermixed inextricably with a world, only a
consciousness that, through its flesh, is “meshed into the visible world,”\(^\text{807}\) so too is it the case
that there is no self and others but only a self with others, only ever a self that is “an-Other-to-
others,” only ever an already “othered” self that exists amid and through other (also already

\(^{805}\) Merleau-Ponty, The World of Perception, p. 56.
\(^{806}\) Merleau-Ponty, The Visible and the Invisible, p. 137.
othered) selves, only ever (to put it somewhat inelegantly) a “selfothers” whole (or Gestalt), which is to say a primary, indecomposable compresence of distinct living beings. Likewise, there are no human beings and “animal” beings, no “humanity” and “animality,” but only ever “humans” with “animals,” only ever “humanity” with and through “animality”: only ever a “humanimal” being, only ever a “humanimality.” In other terms, just as the “invisible,” for Merleau-Ponty, is “in-visible,” that is, immanent yet not reducible to “the visible,” so is the “inhuman” alterity of “the animal” “in-human”: immanent yet irreducible to “the human,” constitutively entwined yet not coincident with “humanity.”

Merleau-Ponty himself draws precisely the analogy I have just suggested between the “mind-body” relation and the “self-Other” or “human-animal” relation, affirming that “the use of the life teaches us not only the union of our soul and our body, but also the lateral union of animality and humanity.” In just the same way that it is only later, through a reflective act of abstraction, that we come to divorce mind from body/behavior or self from Other(s), so too is it only later, through a similar act of abstraction (one that is of course motivated and reinforced by contingent social and political infrastructures), that we come to divorce “humanity” from “animality” and thereby come to regard the former as having some kind of meaning or rigorously determinable manner of being on its own from which the latter may then be oppositionally, derivatively, or privatively defined, that is, from which the latter may be understood only as either lacking characteristics already assumed and defined as “human” or something into which such characteristics may at best be inferentially transposed. Merleau-Ponty’s basic point here is the one he makes consistently throughout his entire career, namely that all dualisms (and therefore also all reductionisms, since every reductionism is patristic upon some sort of prior

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dualism) commit the same error, the same fallacy of reifying as separate or autonomous things that are foundationally compresent and interdependent, things that are, as Husserl puts it, “primally instituted” in an “original pairing”\(^809\) such that the presentation of each is already infested with the “appresentation” of the other, which is to say given only together, only as a whole (or Gestalt) that cannot, as such, be decomposed into any of its constitutive elements, or as a phenomenon that defies all of the ways we typically speak or think about it provided our tendency to do so in ways that illicitly compartmentalize – that atomize, autonomize, or “purify” – its constituents.

So, for Merleau-Ponty (and also for Husserl) there is a ‘being-together’ or co-givenness of living beings that is irreducible to any of them considered apart from one another and that is also lived by each of them as precisely the condition of their own sense-of-self or distinct existence: in a word, all living beings, or all identities and communities, are moments of a *Gestalt* genesis of sense, or what Merleau-Ponty otherwise calls “écart” or a movement of “dehiscence”: a differentiation or spacing that does not divide or isolate but rather weaves together beings and phenomena, an opening between things that is at the same time “a being by proximity.”\(^810\) Thus, Merleau-Ponty maintains that what applies to mind/body, subject/object, self/Other, or individual/community dualism equally applies to any (explicit or implicit) human/animal dualism, and indeed all of these dualisms are just as intertwined with one another as are the terms of which they are composed. Just as there is the phenomenon of the “lived body” that defies categorization as either purely, exclusively subject or object because it is an intertwining of both and is, as such, the very source of the distinction between the two in the first place, so too, Merleau-Ponty argues, is there an intertwining of “humanity” and “animality” – a

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\(^810\) Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 234.
“humanality,” we might say – that antecedes, institutes, and disrupts any opposition between the two. Again, just as it is only later, through an act of abstraction – through a violent incision made by the gaze of reflective, analytical, conceptual thought – that we come to divorce and regard as opposed mind and body or self and Other(s), so too is it through a similar, violent abstraction that we divide “humanity” from “animality” and thereby come to regard them as unproblematically clear, pure, isolated, and monolithic in meaning, or as not already tangled up and contaminated with one another in such a way that defies any sharp determination of one in opposition to the other. Just as there is the phenomenon of intersubjectivity (or intercorporeity) that precedes and institutes any supposed opposition between “self” and “Other(s)” or that founds at once our very sense of both – just as there is an irreducible entanglement of self with others that comes, logically and experientially, before any reflective diremption of the two, hence before any question of “solipsism” or “problem of other minds” – so too, Merleau-Ponty suggests, is there an “interanimality” that precedes and institutes any supposed opposition between “the human” and “the animal” (or any supposed oppositions between “species”), an intersubjectivity (or intercorporeity) not only between members of a single species but one that obtains between and constitutes the living bodies of all species, an inter-specific intercorporeity or background of life-in-common that, therefore, knows no essential species barriers and that is, in fact, the tacit source of any intra-specific relations or lifeworld.

We will recall that the term “écart” (which Merleau-Ponty borrows from Gestalt psychology) originally refers to the spacing between foreground and background that lets things appear to consciousness, yet in his later writings Merleau-Ponty also deploys this term to refer

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811 It is important to note here that Merleau-Ponty’s concept of écart is not only indebted to Gestalt psychology but also to structuralist linguistics. In many places, Merleau-Ponty explicitly compares the difference between foreground and background that enables perception (or perceptual meaning) to the diacritical difference between
to the differentiation through which all things come into being and meaning (thus, it comes to be synonymous with “dehiscence” and to designate an important valence of “Flesh” and chiasmatic relationality). As Merleau-Ponty writes, “to be conscious = to have a figure on a ground – one cannot go back any further,” and though here he is only referring to the account we must give of consciousness, in his later writings it is also clear that there is another sense in which we cannot “go back any further” than the “perceptual separation (écart)” of figure and ground: we cannot go back any further because this originary separation (or differentiation) of figure and ground expresses Being as such; it is that non-presentable differing-deferring movement through which anything comes to meaning or presence (and thus, as we saw in chapter two, it is that paradoxical “originating presentation of the unpresentable”). So, as we have repeatedly seen, Merleau-Ponty realizes that what initially presents itself as a structure of perception is not just a structure of perception but also a structure of Being (or a structure that discloses the nature of Being), and that “it is to experience therefore that the ultimate ontological power belongs…”.

The differentiation and attendant intertwining (or reversibility) of foreground and background in perception instantiates the differentiation and attendant intertwining of any “chiasmatically” instituted terms, and so it may help clarify the chiasmatic relationship between “humanity” and “animality” and especially why Merleau-Ponty insists such a relationship must be “lateral” rather than hierarchical.

signs that enables linguistic meaning. In any case, “écart” always refers to the difference or differentiation that constitutes any form of meaning. For Merleau-Ponty, meaning (and being) is never “in” things but only between them. In fact, I think we may accurately describe Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy as a whole as a philosophy of “the between” (which, of course, is simply another way of describing it as a philosophy of ambiguity).

812 Ibid., p. 191.
813 Ibid., p. 191.
814 Ibid., p. 203.
815 Ibid., p. 110.
It is obvious that “foreground” and “background” are necessarily co-given and co-constitutive (or “paired” in Husserl’s sense of the term) yet also irreducibly different, and it is precisely the irreducible difference between them that enables anything to appear or have a distinct, intelligible existence at all (i.e., as we have seen, in order for something to be a “thing,” it must be distanced from other things and come to presence amid a global background or horizon). Foreground and background, then, are “chiasmatically” (or “reversibly”) related, for they are irreducibly different yet also inseparable, non-coincident yet also co-constitutive, hence intertwined or blended into one another; they are different, yet the difference between them is itself a non-presentable or non-figurable limit, or a spatiality (prior to any empirically discernible or delineable “space”) through which they emerge as such and enfold one another. Now, this intertwining or “reversibility” of foreground and background means not only that foreground and background are interdependent, overlapping moments in the unfolding of phenomena and genesis of sense, it also means that what is now “foregrounded” can always shift into the background, that what is now part of the background can shift and become foregrounded, that foreground and background can always slip into or displace one another, and that indeed Being as such is this ceaseless, creative reconfiguration and mutual encroachment of the two through which beings and meanings, phenomena and styles of existence emerge in the world.

“There is no other meaning than carnal,”816 and (like any Gestalt) carnal meaning fundamentally emerges through the “gravitation”817 of foreground and background round about one another, as well as through their “dislocation” from one another and “leakage”818 into one another. The truth concerning what it means to be “human” is also the truth concerning what it

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816 Ibid., p. 265.
817 Ibid., p. 265.
818 Ibid., p. 265.
means for *anything to be* or for *anything to mean*, namely that it be instituted through an ever-open process of becoming-other-than-others that is, at the same time, a process of coming-together with others, that it be separated from yet at the same time blended into a world and Others, that it becomes (and is always becoming) what it is through its indissoluble yet ever malleable ties to its “Other(s),” that the reflexivity through which it comes to sense for itself as such is never a purely solitary or autonomous communion with itself but what we thus might call a kind of *pas de deux*: a synergetic, co-production of meaning, or a relational movement whose relata are certainly distinct yet interdependent moments. As Merleau-Ponty writes, “to have the experience of a *Gestalt* is not to sense by coincidence…” 819 “Human” and “animal” – like “self” and “Other” – are two inseparable moments (two “leaves”) of an originary and continual dehiscence in nature, two aspects of a primordial and restless inflorescence of life, subjectivity, and community, or two aspects of an “écart” through which certain living beings come to be distinguished from one another yet, at the same time and on the same condition, swept into a carnal life-in-common with one another; before they designate “aggregate[s] of things or of external beings,” “humanity” and “animality” designate “determinate indetermination[s],” 820 horizons of being and meaning that, as such, are not nothing yet are ever open, that necessarily cross into or osculate one another, that always transgress the limit between them, and “in this transgression, one does not know who is engulfing and who is engulfed.” 821

It is this very dialectical movement in which we and everything are caught up, and this fact demonstrates to the fullest extent Merleau-Ponty’s early remark (which is, of course, a not-

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819 Ibid., p. 205.
821 Ibid., p. 63.
so-subtle criticism of Sartre) that we are “condemned to meaning.” Simply put, for Merleau-Ponty the “meaning of Being” is the being of meaning, which is to say: difference (or differentiation). When one properly thinks the nature (or meaning) of Being, one must not think it as an object over and against one’s gaze, for it is the primordial, elemental condition of any thought or “gaze,” and one must also not think it as absolutely removed from lived experience or the perceptual world, since likewise it is the primordial, elemental condition of perceptibility and intelligibility, or the source of all appearances and meanings. To think Being properly is to think it as the process through which beings, appearances, and meanings arise or, in a word, to think it as “écart” (or as chiasmatic rationality or Flesh), which is also to think it as both “immanent” to and “different from” beings, or which is also to think it as both “immanence” and “difference” as such (in Deleuze’s senses of those terms), as the “other side” of every body, thought, experience, and perceived or spoken meaning. Thus, when one “renounces the affirmation of an absolute exterior, of a world or Being that would be a massive individual,” one “turns toward that Being that doubles our thoughts along their whole extension, since they are thoughts of something and since they themselves are not nothing – a Being therefore that is meaning, and meaning of meaning.”

We often speak of an “exchange of meaning” between, say, self and Other, self and world, or perhaps “human” and “animal,” but at heart this notion is in fact redundant and potentially misleading, for meaning as such is nothing but the differentiation and attendant overlapping of heterogenous beings or phenomena, that is, nothing but the creative, dialogical

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822 Phenomenology of Perception, p. xix.
823 Merleau-Ponty frequently uses this phrase to convey non-dualistic or lateral (that is, chiasmatic) relationships between certain kinds of things and phenomena. See e.g., Nature, p. 268, where Merleau-Ponty writes that “the world is not an inaccessible in-itself, but the “other side” of [the human] body.” Merleau-Ponty conceptualizes the relationships between humanity and animality in exactly the saw way in which he conceptualizes the relationship between the human body and the world (and also between mind and body, which I discussed above).
exchange between terms that are constituted as such in and through that very exchange. To speak of an “exchange of meaning” between terms (say, again, between “self” and “Other”) is perhaps to suppose that each such term fully possesses a certain meaning or identity on its own which it simply “transmits” to the other, or rather that each term is what it is somehow independently of the other, but fundamentally meaning is never on one side or the other of a relationship: meaning is only ever between the terms of any relationship, or rather meaning is simply the relationship – simply relationality – itself. “Meaning” is that “exchange” between terms that makes them what they are, that exchange wherein terms reciprocally constitute one another. Husserl only described the relationship between ego and alter-ego as one of “pairing,” yet for Merleau-Ponty we can say that “pairing,” in a sense, constitutes every relationship and instance of meaning and that it is therefore operative at every level of reality, that Being just is an infinite plane of what he prefers to call “chiasms”, “folds,” or “reversibilities,” a field of things that exist and acquire meaning as such only through their intertwining with one another through that very field itself in which they are commonly embedded. The fundamental meaning of “meaning” – which is also the meaning of Being – is the endless relational genesis of things, beings, phenomena, or identities, hence the genesis of difference, hence also the genesis of community. There is never anything but a universal unfolding-enfolding of beings and phenomena, never anything but a “never finished differentiation,” never anything but “meaning in genesis,” never anything but “one sole explosion of Being which is forever.” In a word, there is never anything but, or nothing further back than, “écart.”

825 Ibid., p. 153.
As I have been suggesting, in Merleau-Ponty the relationship between “humanity” and “animality” may be considered analogous not only to the relationship between “self” and “Other” but also to the relationship between “foreground” and “background.” Properly understood, this means that neither has any sort of ontological primacy or autonomy, that one does not unilaterally ground the other, that one is not the pure and privileged source of the other, or that one cannot function as some sort of pure, self-contained center of meaning with reference to which the other may only be peripherally defined; rather, both only emerge in the world as such through that dehiscence between them that also couples them. We must always keep in mind that “foreground” and “background,” though different, are also intertwined and reversible, or are different in virtue of a non-figurable limit or space between them that is, as such, intrinsically undecidable, a limit that brings them together just as much as it differentiates them from one another (since differentiation that does not resolve into dualism is also, necessarily, communalization) and that, therefore, imparts to them its own undecidability at the same time that it imparts to them their being and intelligibility. And moreover, we must also, finally, keep in mind that neither “foreground” nor “background” are ontologically primary, for what is truly primary is the non-foregroundable differentiation through which they come to presence as such. Thus, chiasms can never truly be hierarchies because they are intertwinnings through difference and because there is never anything “further back” than difference, that is, never a simple, undifferentiated origin from which “things” might arise, or never a transcendental, itself ungrounded ground that would ground everything else in existence. At the most fundamental level, there are only things that inter-constitute and overlap one another in and through their differentiation from one another. In short, there is no hierarchical ontological ordering of
foreground and background or of “self” and “Other,” and therefore so too is there no hierarchical ordering of “humanity” and “animality” (or of any forms of life).

Since meaning or being is essentially relational, and since every genuine, foundational relationship entails the overlapping of its relata, it follows that in order for anything to be, or in order for anything to have any kind of identity, “selfhood,” “substance,” or meaning, it must be defined by a limit or “frontier surface” between itself and everything other than itself that denies it anything like an “essence” (in the classical sense of the term) and anything like the privileged position of either an origin or a telos (of either a first or final position in what would thus be imagined as a hierarchy of meaning or “ladder of Being”), yet such a limit also must not deny it “individuality,” “identity,” or distinct existence altogether. This is exactly why Merleau-Ponty rejects teleology and the correlative idea of a pure origin of being or meaning. As Merleau-Ponty proclaims, “I am not a finalist because there is dehiscence.”828 The implications of this for how we conceptualize something like the relationship between “humanity” and “animality” ought to be clear (as they were for Merleau-Ponty). Given his repudiation of first and final causes, or given his consistent insistence (following Husserl and Gestalt psychology) upon the laterality of every fundamental ontological and semiotic relationship, that is, given his insistence that it is neither opposition nor coincidence but rather difference that inflates everything to being and meaning, Merleau-Ponty even goes so far as to say that he “call[s] the evolutionist perspective into question,”829 by which of course he does not mean to reject the core scientific tenets of Darwinism, but rather means to challenge the notion that the development of life – at the fundamental ontological level – is the “descent” of ever increasingly complex (or “higher”) organisms from “simpler,” “lower” ones, which ultimately imposes the false construct of a

828 Ibid., p. 265.
829 Ibid., p. 265.
hierarchical understanding of Being, an understanding of Being that is, ironically enough, theological inasmuch as it reinstates the notion of either a telos toward which life is headed or a pure, simple origin from whence it arose. For this reason, Merleau-Ponty suggests the need to conceptualize evolution “otherwise than as empirical “filiation””\textsuperscript{830} and claims that we “must not derive human life as an in-itself, or conceive evolution as without an inside or as a theory of descent.”\textsuperscript{831} What Merleau-Ponty means here is that the appearance of any form of life – just like the appearance of anything – is not a mere object (an “in-itself”) and is, moreover, the result of a process of differentiation (a process that may be said to have an “inside” or a kind of “interiority” insofar as it involves the very same kind of dehiscence or opening between things and phenomena that constitutes all forms of reflexivity, identity, and meaning). Such a process of differentiation cannot be properly conceptualized as any kind of hierarchy, since to do so would be to presuppose some already fully formed, ready-made “thing,” being, or identity from which or toward which it would proceed, and that would precisely be to conceptualize such a “thing,” being, or identity rather than the process of differentiation itself as fundamental or originary. Thus, Merleau-Ponty writes that his next major philosophical work (the one that \textit{The Visible and the Invisible} presumably would have become, yet which unfortunately he did not live to accomplish) “must be presented without any compromise with humanism, nor moreover with naturalism, nor finally with theology,” since “precisely what has to be done is to show that philosophy can no longer think according to this cleavage: God, man, creatures…” \textsuperscript{832}

\textsuperscript{830} \textit{Nature}, p. 213.
\textsuperscript{831} Ibid., p. 271.
\textsuperscript{832} \textit{The Visible and the Invisible}, p. 274. Merleau-Ponty is so committed to dismantling hierarchical ways of thinking about the relationships between human and non-human forms of life that he remarkably even suggests that any notion of a “natural” or “objective” hierarchical ordering of forms of life is just as problematic or fallacious as any notion of a natural or objective hierarchical ordering of human \textit{cultures}. That is, Merleau-Ponty suggests that we are no more entitled to categorize forms of life hierarchically than we are entitled to categorize cultures hierarchically, and so he suggests that we should critique the former notion in biology (and ontology) in a way that would be
So, there is a sense in which humanity “emerges” from animality, yet it does not do so as if animality were some homogenous ground, transcendental background, or simple origin that exists only to found or nourish humanity as some sort of teleologically supreme or “higher-order,” always foregrounded or centered site of being, meaning, and value, or as that which was destined to bring life as such into perfect fruition and relative to which all other living things are thus retrospectively revealed to be merely precursory and subordinate in their existence and value; still less is it to suggest that humanity arises from animality in the manner of some sort of Darwinian notion of filial descent, which would reinstate an onto(theo)logical hierarchy – precisely the medieval sort of scala naturae – that Merleau-Ponty argues is contrary to the nature of Be(com)ing. As I have frequently emphasized, it is crucial to take seriously Merleau-Ponty’s insistence upon the laterality of the “human-animal” relationship. Humanity and animality are interdependent moments of an open, creative movement of differentiation or of expressivity in Nature (or in “the flesh of the world”). We should always read “lateral” as “bilateral” (or as multilateral). Again, what is truly fundamental in the relationship between every foreground and background is not the background itself (and still less is it the foreground in favor of which we so often overlook the background) but is the opening between them: what is fundamental is neither the foreground nor the background but the differentiation between foreground and background itself (the écarts).833 The differentiation that engenders “humanity” (and correlative “animality”), or rather the écarts or Flesh through which “humanity” and “animality” envelop one another without appropriating or coinciding with one another, is nothing else but the incessant

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833 I wish to remind us here that, as I mentioned earlier, “écart” is synonymous with what Merleau-Ponty also calls “Flesh.” Thus, Merleau-Ponty defines “écart” in exactly the same way that he defines “Flesh,” writing that “the figure-ground distinction introduces a third term between the “subject” and the “object”” (The Visible and the Invisible, p. 197).
differentiation of different styles, valences, fields, spheres, orders, planes, or layers of existence, and if we understand correctly that this differentiation does not proceed from an origin but is already itself the origin of everything that exists and has meaning – that there is never a One prior to or above the Many, but only ever a One that is already Many (and many-ing) – then we must agree, as Merleau-Ponty asserts for that very reason, that “there is no hierarchy of orders or layers or planes…,”834 that indeed Being (as “Flesh”) is, again, outside the traditional “immanence-transcendence alternative”835 and (as is attested especially by the phenomena of the lived body and intersubjectivity) is, as such, always a “double-inscription [of] outside and inside.”836

It should be clear, then, that Merleau-Ponty’s objection to the notion of evolutionary “descent” is not an absurd or crude “anti-scientific” gesture but is a critique of the ontological framework such a notion typically presupposes. Merleau-Ponty rejects the notion of “descent” because “descent” always means ontological derivation from sort of origin, yet differentiation is never derivation from an origin because it is itself the “origin” of all things. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, “metamorphosis” is “not a beginning from zero.”837 For Merleau-Ponty, there are no simple origins: there is only differentiation all the way down, only “dehiscence” or “écart” as the “Abgrund”838 from which all things come into presence and sense. What is truly “originary” is never “an origin”: it is the singular that is always already plural (and self-pluralizing), “not a passage from the single to the Multiple, but from one type of unity to another, from a certain

834 Ibid., p. 270.
835 Ibid., p. 268.
836 Ibid., p. 261.
838 See ibid., p. 37.
relation of a multiple to another.”839 What is truly “originary,” in other words, is community and difference. So, if Being truly is differentiation (and communalization), then at the most basic level of reality there are never any oppositions or hierarchies to be found because there are no pure origins or final causes, no “essences,” Forms, substances, beings, or identities that in any manner antecede and direct the becoming of things.840 Thus, “fundamentally,” writes Merleau-Ponty, “I bring the high-low distinction into the vortex where it rejoins the side-other side distinction.”841 Merleau-Ponty consistently insists upon the laterality of every fundamental relationship, and we need to heed his insistence on that point: every fundamental relationship – including especially the one between “humanity” and “animality” – is to be understood as strictly analogous to the one that Husserl described between self and Other. The relata of every fundamental relationship are, again, moments (or “leaves”) of what Merleau-Ponty calls dehiscence (or écart): a constitutive divergence between things that immediately couples or implicates them in one another and that, as such, precisely forbids us from ordering them either in opposition to one another or as “higher” or “lower” than one another. Any genuine relationship of difference – any relationship between things that are constituted as the distinct things that they are only insofar as they are given together, or only insofar as “there is reciprocal insertion and intertwining of one in the other”842 – must be a lateral one. Just like the relationship

839 Ibid., p. 241.
840 I have, of course, been strongly insinuating here that Merleau-Ponty thus anticipates Deleuze’s critique of “arborescent” conceptions of Being/becoming in favor a “rhizomatic” one. Merleau-Ponty did not live to develop it, but it is clear that such an ontology and theory of life was the direction toward which he was heading. As Merleau-Ponty writes in a note for one of his late lecture courses on nature, “Production: Not a tree, but bushes with several roots mixed together” (Nature, p. 258).
841 The Visible and the Invisible, p. 265.
842 Ibid., p. 138.
between self and Other as Husserl understood it, “we must say: animality and human being are given only together.”

In the final working note published in *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty indicates that he was planning to provide “a description of the man-animality intertwining.” As I hope to have shown, it is clear that Merleau-Ponty came to see that “the human” and “the animal” are intertwined in precisely his technical understanding of that term, and that an account of this intertwining has a significant place in his larger ontological project. The human and the animal are two moments of a particular dehiscence in Being. Simply put, “dehiscence” is generative differentiation; it is the opening or spacing – the “écart” or the positive, “fecund” indeterminacy – through which specific relations, affects, phenomena, identities, styles of being, and meanings are engendered; it is precisely that differentiation that weaves together the skein of perceptual life and perceptible Nature, that commingling or “encroachment” through divergence that Merleau-Ponty also calls the Flesh, the chiasmatic institution and imbrication of all things. As Merleau-Ponty writes, “infinite distance or absolute proximity, negation or identification: our relationship with Being is ignored in the same way in both cases.” Neither identity nor negation, neither sameness nor opposition, neither synthesis nor antithesis, but rather overlapping through differentiation – or, in a word, genuine, radical community – constitutes life, identity, and meaning. As the living body is the dehiscence (and thus the site of an intertwining or “strange proximity”) between subject and object, so is the “flesh of the world” the dehiscence, or relational openness, between all beings and phenomena; it is that “intermundane space” or

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844 *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 274.
845 Ibid., p. 127.
846 Ibid., p. 48, 84, 62, 269.
“interbeing” – that metaxic element or medium – that, like the literal flesh or skin of a body, joins or blends the very terms it separates, or which is at once a limit and a site of passage. The “Flesh” or “the chiasm” names Being not as a monistic substance, unitary identity, simple origin, or subsumptive totality, but rather as a movement of reflexivity (or as a kind of “mirror phenomenon”), that is, as the mediation of identity through differentiation, of which the reflexivity (or auto-affection) of the sentient body is but a particular though “remarkable variant.”

In closing, human beings and non-human animals often demonstrate very different styles of existence, but these styles necessarily envelop and implicate one another. Merleau-Ponty argues that there is no such thing as a self that is not already constituted as such by its intercorporeal relations with others, and for the same reasons he argues that there is no such thing as a community that is not already constituted by its intercorporeal relations with other communities, that indeed there is no “human We” without other-than-human “We’s,” no “humanity” without “(inter)animality.” As I mentioned toward the conclusion of the previous chapter, the human body is “in a relation of intercorporeity in the biosphere with all animality and by projection-introjection…,” and thus “…we cannot understand the human organism without its external circuit, its planetarization…”. On Merleau-Ponty’s account, we are just as radically embedded in relations with other-than-human Others as we are with human Others. Conspecific community – or the constitution of a “human We” – necessarily depends upon and expresses a larger, deeper, radical inter-specific community, an ensemble of overlapping

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848 Ibid., p. 268.
849 Ibid., p. 265.
lifeworlds, horizons, and styles of being, a (mid-)place or “interworld”\textsuperscript{850} where borders are
trespassed or where “avenues are crossed”\textsuperscript{851} the very moment they materialize. The
intercorporeal differentiation and communalization of living bodies subtends any binary logic of
identity/negation or of inclusion/exclusion through which boundaries between them are later
often policed, or through which their intercorporeality is later suppressed. Such a radical
community is not established through either the dualistic expulsion or the totalizing, reductive
appropriation of what is “Other”; rather, it is “the being society of society…that \textit{Ineinander}
which nobody sees, and which is not a group-soul either, neither object nor subject, but their
connective tissue.”\textsuperscript{852} For these reasons, Merleau-Ponty affirms that selfhood, identity,
community, and especially “humanity” are already hybridities, that all kinships – and that
therefore all categories of kinship – are porous, fluid, “ambiguous,” or “strange,” that there is no
kind of relationship worthy of the name that is not, in principle and in fact, radically open. For
these reasons, I think Merleau-Ponty would also affirm that my partner, Byler, really was
parented by a cat. And for these reasons Merleau-Ponty would also affirm that not only have I
been a brother to a dog, but that I always already belong to a radical, “humanimal” community,
to a carnal world that “even in my most strictly private life, summons up within that life \textit{all other}
corporeities},”\textsuperscript{853} “quasi-companions” and “strange kin” who are also, as such, the “flesh of my
flesh.”

\textsuperscript{850} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{ibid.}, p. 210, 214.
\textsuperscript{851} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{The Visible and the Invisible}, p. 160.
\textsuperscript{852} Ibid., p. 174.
Chapter Six

Conclusion

We Are What We (Do Not) Eat
Toward an Ethics of Radical Community

“Let us say yes to who or what turns up, before any determination, before any anticipation, before any identification, whether or not it has to do with a foreigner, an immigrant, an invited guest, or an unexpected visitor, whether or not the new arrival is the citizen of another country, a human, an animal, or divine creature, a living or dead thing, male or female.”

– Derrida

“…Who was I to deny the crocodile the food of my body?”

– Val Plumwood

“…We are what we do to others…”

– Merleau-Ponty

At the beginning of *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty discusses the inherently paradoxical task of phenomenology, and elaborates the various difficulties or paradoxes with which it must it contend: “We see the things themselves, the world is what we see…but what is strange about this faith is that if we seek to articulate it into theses or statements, if we ask ourselves what is this *we*, what seeing is, and what *thing* or *world* is, we enter into a labyrinth of difficulties and contradictions.”

The effort to bring unreflective life to reflective clarity – the effort to understand thematically the pre-thematic sources of thematic knowledge – is inherently aporetic or “impossible,” yet it is not “impossible” in the traditional sense of the term; its “impossibility” is not the contradiction of “possibility” but is an altogether different kind of

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857 The Visible and the Invisible, p. 3.
possibility, one that is confirmed by lived experience itself. Indeed, as we have seen, for Merleau-Ponty the perceived world is inherently paradoxical, an ensemble of “figured enigmas” and “incompossible details.” Throughout all of his works and before the introduction of deconstruction, Merleau-Ponty labored to show that any binary, either/or logic or conceptual schema is grounded in, and disrupted or displaced by, the both/and “logic” (the double-binds, the ambiguities or “teeming incompossibilities”) of lived experience. It is the task of phenomenology – our eminently possible and urgently important task – not to undo these paradoxes or ambiguities of lived experience but to honor them, to learn how to see and listen to them, to create concepts that felicitously (even if always imperfectly) express them, to think according to rather than against them, since without them we would never be able to “think” at all, since in fact they are most worthy of thought, since their suppression is precisely thoughtlessness itself.

What I wish to underscore here is that one of these “figured enigmas” or aporias – the first one that Merleau-Ponty states in the opening passage of The Visible and the Invisible – is precisely our relations with others, or precisely the nature of the very community (the “We”) in which all forms of life are always already embedded. Merleau-Ponty registers the nature and constitution of the “We” to be just as paradoxical or questionable as the nature of perception, selfhood, and worldhood; in fact, as we have seen, he takes intersubjectivity to pose the most important aporia of lived experience, one that reveals itself to be an aporia of Being (indeed, the aporia of Being) and not just an aporia of experience. I think we can even say that Merleau-Ponty considers the question of the “We” to be what is often called “first philosophy”: the philosophical question that comes before, and that is implicated in, all other philosophical

\[^{858}\text{Ibid., p. 4.}\]
questions. Intersubjectivity, or the nature of the “We,” discloses the nature of Being as such, that is, the nature of Being as “Flesh” or as chiasmatic relationality. This is why Merleau-Ponty becomes occupied with the question of the relationship – the “strange kinship” or “radical community” – between “the human” and “the animal,” that is, with the question of human-animal difference (which is at the same time the question of human-animal togetherness). This question is an extension of Merleau-Ponty’s earlier insights into the nature of perception and intersubjectivity, and if we pursue it rigorously, it eventually reveals the ambiguity – the abiding openness or questionability – that constitutes, decenters, and attends the meaning not only of “the human” but of any being or category of identity, the being-together-through-difference that infinitely defers the closure of any community.

Thus, as I hope to have clearly indicated in the previous chapters, Merleau-Ponty demands and develops a radical reorientation of ontology, which is to say an ontology of difference, and which is also to say an ontology of radical community. Following Merleau-Ponty, one of my main aims has been to apply the aforementioned anti-dualistic, “both/and” logic of lived experience – that is, the logic of a philosophy of difference – to the question of “the We,” or to the general question concerning the constitution of communal boundaries and identity-categories, and in particular to the question concerning the constitution of what it means to be “human” and “animal.” However, there has surely always been more at stake in this “question of the We” than just ontology, for indeed there is always more at stake in ontology than just ontology. As I argued in the introduction to this project, ontological questions are always intertwined with ethical and political questions (and vice versa). This is not to say that ontological issues are reducible to normative ones (or vice versa), but it is to say that they are inseparable, that every normative or ideological framework presupposes an ontology, and that
any ontological framework or category we accept – especially if we unconsciously or uncritically accept it – informs how we think about and orient ourselves in the world, how we perceive and treat (or misperceive or mistreat) other beings in the world, and thus ineluctably has material ethical and political consequences.

There is never truly a “neutral,” non-normative way to describe or categorize the world, for even “truth” and “falsehood” themselves are values, and they – like all values – direct how we act in the world. All values inform thought and conduct, and thus there is no way to sharply separate epistemic or alethic values from ethical, political, or even aesthetic ones. In a sense, then, axiology is not a “branch” of philosophy among others but is its very trunk. Whether we are dealing with first-order predicate logic or with trolley problems, whether we are considering what constitutes the “best” among competing scientific hypotheses or whether we are considering the permissibility of consuming animal flesh, whether we are considering the merits of transcendental idealism or of rule-utilitarianism, we are always, ultimately, dealing with values, because regardless of how “abstract” some such issues may seem, or regardless of how morally detached or politically innocuous some such issues may seem, we are always, ultimately, dealing with issues that will influence how we think and perceive the world, and therefore how we live in the world, in one way or another.

This is not to say that we can directly derive normative conclusions from either ontological or empirical facts or simply from a description of the world alone, but it is to say that any rigorous, lucid attention to lived experience – that any phenomenology worthy of the name – repudiates the supposed opposition between the ontological and the normative, or the positivistic “fact”/“value,” “is”/“ought” binary; it is to say that questions of being (as well as question of knowing) are always entangled with questions of conduct, value, and power, that every question
concerning “what something is (or is not)” has implications for how we treat the thing in question, even if the thing in question is deemed to be “just a thing,” and especially if the thing in question is not “just a thing”; it is not to say that we can infer the normative from the ontological or descriptive (which will always be a fallacy), but it is to say that normativity is woven into lived experience in the same way that subjectivity is woven into flesh, and therefore just as worries about inferring “subjectivity” from a living body are misdirected, so too are worries about “inferring” normative truths from phenomenological description or investigation.

Moreover, to say that the question of the “We” is “first philosophy” is to say that the question of “the Other” is first philosophy. And since there is no relationship with an Other that is not inherently ethical in character, it seems to be the case, as Levinas argues, that ethics is “first philosophy” after all. At any rate, the question of “the We” or of “the Other” is obviously value-laden (or “loaded”), and it is at least one way that ontology reveals itself to have always already been ethics, that in fact there has never been any such thing as value-free, purely amoral (or apolitical) ontology. Yet, if “the animal” is more “Other” than any other, if “the animal” is truly or fundamentally “our” Other, then the question of “the We” or of “the Other” – hence “first philosophy,” hence not just the primary question of ontology, but the primary question of ethics (and political philosophy) as well – is, in fact, the “question of the animal,” or rather the question concerning the relationship between “humanity” and “animality.”

So, in the concluding portion of this project, I wish to make more explicit what I think has always been implicit in Merleau-Ponty’s account of intersubjectivity and Being: the ethical (and political) stakes of such an account, or the ethical and political framework that follows from it. As I mentioned in the introduction and as I have alluded throughout each of the previous chapters, my primary aim here has been to show that Merleau-Ponty’s ontology justifies (indeed
entails) a non-anthropocentric ethical (and political) framework, and moreover that it does so in ways that allow us to avoid the problems that I think beset traditional critiques of anthropocentrism. My view is that most conventional critiques of anthropocentrism, or that most proposed alternatives to anthropocentric moral and political theories, in fact reinscribe core anthropocentric presuppositions, and that Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy precisely provides us the resources to critique anthropocentrism without conceding too much to it, indeed without conceding anything to it all. That is, I think that Merleau-Ponty’s ontology offers the foundation for a thoroughly non-anthropocentric or anti-human separatist/supremacist account of moral and political community; moreover, it offers us an account of moral and political community – a kind of “communitarianism” – that avoids the (false) alternatives of assimilative universalism and relativistic (which is really, at heart, solipsistic) isolationism or atomism; it avoids (or deconstructs) the false dilemma of what Leonard Lawlor calls a “continuism” that erases difference and a “separationism” that cleaves difference into opposition, the false dilemma of either appropriative inclusion or binary exclusion. Of course, much more will have to remain to be developed here. I do not intend to formulate every detail of such a non-anthropocentric, “radically communitarian” moral and political framework, nor to extrapolate exhaustively all of the normative implications of such a framework. I wish to demonstrate, in broad terms, the ethical and political implications of Merleau-Ponty’s ontology and to indicate the avenues for further radical reconsiderations of ethical and political concepts and questions it paves for us, avenues for further, better thinking – and thus for better, more wakeful, responsive, and compassionate living – that justice already demands we follow, and that the justice of “doing justice to the things themselves” has tacitly been about from the very start.
It is often assumed or alleged that phenomenological reflection is merely a descriptive (that is, “value-free”) undertaking, and its supposed aloofness from matters of ethics or politics often seems to motivate attitudes of suspicion and even hostility toward it. Surely nothing pertaining to human experience or being-in-the-world is ever purely value-free or apolitical, and so if phenomenology were to pretend otherwise, that would be a good reason to critique and even reject it. However, as I have just suggested, the notion that phenomenology is inherently just a matter of describing how the world appears to us and is, therefore, inherently non-normative (or at any rate incapable of revealing or grounding normative truths) reflects a profound misconception of phenomenology as well as, most likely, a profound (yet common) misconception of the relationship between “the descriptive” and “the normative,” “fact” and “value.” Naturally, one relevant yet rather banal point to mention here is that phenomenology endeavors to describe rigorously all aspects of lived experience, and since morality and politics are undeniably constitutive and pervasive features human experience, since indeed no concept that structures how we think about or perceive the world is ahistorical or without its own complex genealogy, phenomenology clearly must involve, and certainly cannot a priori exclude, an examination of social, cultural, historical, moral, and political phenomena.

Of course, “merely” describing social, cultural, historical, moral, and political aspects of lived experience is not equivalent to justifying or critiquing them or to providing normative directives for how we should live. However, not only has it always been the case that a sober understanding of the social, cultural, historical, moral, and political conditions of lived experience has always been a necessary component of any critique of those conditions, to suppose that there ever truly is such a thing as “merely” or “purely” describing such conditions or phenomena is to suppose a dichotomy between “the descriptive” and “the normative,”
between “facts” and “values” that phenomenology repudiates, since such a dichotomy simply fails to comport with lived experience and is, in fact, a holdover from dualism and positivism. So, the important point here is that phenomenological “description” is never purely descriptive because no account of reality or experience is ever purely descriptive, and no phenomenologist has ever pretended otherwise. Indeed, a core phenomenological insight is that lived experience is always already imbued with values, that values are already “part of the woven stuff of phenomena.” As I will proceed to elaborate, phenomenology reveals that values necessarily condition and arise from any interactions between a living body and other living bodies and a milieu, that values are not “projected” onto “things,” experiences, or the world any more so than meaning is “projected” upon a word or any more so than happiness is “projected” into a smile (or any more so than subjectivity is projected into a behaving body in general).

Phenomenology does not attempt to reduce “values” to “facts” or to infer normative judgments from purely ontological or empirical premises, but rejects the supposed divorce between “fact” and “value,” “the real” and “the normative” altogether, or rather demonstrates the intertwining of the two such that there is never truly any such thing as a purely ontological or empirical premise, or such that there is no problem of “inferring” values from the perceptible, already communalized or intersubjectively constituted world for the same reason there is no problem of “inferring,” say, consciousness from behavior. As we saw in chapters two and four, “meaning is not on the phrase like the butter on the bread...” and the same is true concerning the relationship between the perceived world and those salient meanings we encounter in it called “values.” We do not “have” experiences and then add values to them post factum; rather,

859 Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, p. xii.
lived experience is always already, constitutively value-laden, and Husserl, for example, knew this:

In my waking consciousness I find myself...at all times, and without ever being able to alter the fact, in relation to the world that remains one and the same, though changing with respect to the composition of its contents. It is continually “on hand” for me and I myself and am a member of it. Moreover, this world is there for me not only as the world of mere things, but also with the same immediacy as a world of objects with values, a world of goods, a practical world. I simply find the physical things in front of me furnished not only with merely material determinations but also with value-characteristics, as beautiful or ugly, pleasant and unpleasant, agreeable and disagreeable, and the like. Immediately, physical things stand there as Objects of use, the “table” with its “books,” the “drinking glass,” the “vase” and the “piano,” etc. These value-characteristics and practical characteristics also belong constitutively to the Objects “on hand” as Objects...Naturally this applies not only in the case of the “mere physical things,” but also in the case of humans and brute animals belonging to my surroundings. They are there as “friends” or “enemies,” my “servants” or “superiors,” “strangers” or “relatives,” etc.861

As Husserl claims here, the world presents itself to me as value-laden with the same immediacy that it presents itself me as a world of “mere things,” which of course is to say that the world never quite appears to me immediately as just a world of “mere things” (blosse Sachen) at all. It takes a rather focused, strenuous effort to see things as mere blosse Sachen for the same reason it does so to “see” them as aggregates of atomic “sense-data.” In fact, when I experience the world, I no more immediately experience “brute,” value-less “facts” or “things” than I experience raw, atomic sense-data. We do not “project” values onto things any more so than we mentally construct and project meaningful “wholes” into the world from discrete units of sense-data. The separation of sense-data from perceptual wholes is an abstraction on par with the separation of values from them, for both abstractions conceptualize phenomena as not already meaningful and context-dependent, as “prime matter” (or what Husserl calls “hyletic data”) that is only later impressed with some sort of “form.”

The horizons or contexts of meaning (or Gestalts) amid which things appear to us are

already horizons of value-meanings, already situations suffused with affective, prudential, cultural, ethical, and political valences. This is, of course, entailed by the fact that lived experience – and that even (as Husserl argues) our very notion of “objective” reality – is always already constituted communally, for the moment one inhabits a world with others (that is, the very moment one inhabit a world at all), so too does one inhabit a moral and political world: relations with others obviously can never be amoral or apolitical, and thus no intersubjective phenomena, or nothing whose intelligibility is at all structured intersubjectively, can be truly amoral or apolitical either. There is no such thing as a community that is not a moral and political community, and, as I have been suggesting, this is why no inquiry into the nature of community can ever be amoral or apolitical (or purely ontological). But if there is no such thing as an amoral or apolitical community, then nothing that is in any way “communalized” is amoral or apolitical either. Thus, if appearances are already structured intersubjectively, so too are they already structured morally and politically, or so too are they already, broadly speaking, infused with values.Appearances could only be purely “value-neutral” in a solipsistic reality, but of course nothing may appear at all in a solipsistic reality, because such a reality is not a possible sphere of experience. Values are necessary modes of appearance, necessary ways that things or phenomena present themselves to us as things or phenomena. Even if I find myself practically indifferent to something, or even if a matter appears as morally trivial to me, or even if an issue appears to me as politically irrelevant, such characteristics – (practical) “indifference,” (moral) “triviality,” and (political) “irrelevance” – are themselves modes of (prudential, moral, and political) value. Whether, for example, I always choose to tie my right shoe before I tie my left one might be a matter of no moral significance whatsoever, but even such a lack of moral significance is itself a mode of moral significance, a way in which something may show up for
me only if a horizon of moral meaning is already in place, and the same point applies to any other modes of value. Whether such values be practical, epistemic, cultural, moral, political, or aesthetic, nothing in perceptible reality can be perceived without them. Similar to conceptualizing an object of experience as a collection of sense-data, to conceptualize appearances or “facts” as not already charged with values requires a quite sophisticated and concerted effort, or the performance of a highly contrived reflective analysis, in order to accomplish; meaning-less and value-free “facts” or phenomena are simply not primary or immediate givens. The presence (or presencing) of the world is inseparable from my living body – from its affects and needs, from its schemas and potentialities of perception, attunement, and comportment – and from my living body’s relations with other living bodies, and this alone demonstrates that a value-free world is just as inconceivable as a world devoid of others or of meaning in general.

Thus, for Husserl and for phenomenology in general, it is not the case that our experiences flow “value-lessly” and that we retrospectively tack values onto them (or “project” values into them) later, and still less is it the case that there are only certain special, discrete situations (like runaway trolley or lifeboat scenarios, for example) in which morality and politics are at play, and which therefore punctuate an otherwise amoral or apolitical procession of existence: every “situation” is a moral and political situation, and experience is value-laden all the way down. Values – whether epistemic, prudential, moral, political, or aesthetic – are already basic modes of perceptual givenness, or are already immanent to any given appearances of the world, already immanent to the dialectical relations between living bodies and between living bodies and the world. For example, I do not see the shadow cast by the branches of an old tree upon my bedroom wall at night and project “spookiness” onto it: I see it as spooky; I do not see
Freddy Krueger and project scariness or evil onto him: I see him as scary or evil; I do not see a blurry, magnified and partial image of the “Mona Lisa” and then infer that such an image of it “is too close” or not taken from an “apt” distance or angle: I see the image as too close, or as taken from an inapt distance or angle; I do not see a sofa and project “comfortableness” onto it; I see it as comfortable; I do not see Monet’s “Water Lilies,” watch a film such as 2001: A Space Odyssey, hear Beethoven’s “Moonlight Sonata,” read a sonnet of Shakespeare, or play a video game featuring shifting, vibrant, meticulously crafted water-color tableaus intended to symbolize the stages of grief, and tack the value of “beauty” onto them later: I experience them as beautiful; likewise, if my partner bakes cookies for me in order to help relieve my stress from writing a dissertation, I do not “project” kindness or love into the gesture: I experience the gesture as kind and loving, I see its kindness or lovingness; if I see children bullying one of their peers, or if I see a person torturing a dog for amusement, I do not see these acts and then later impart cruelty to them: I see them as cruel, I see their cruelty.

And the very moment a living, behaving body enters my field of experience, I also see a body that can flourish or suffer, a body with needs and desires, a body that is vulnerable. I see a body different from yet like unto my own, one that I can either assist, ignore, or harm, but one to which I cannot fail to respond in some manner, one that cannot fail to appeal to me in some manner. Quite some time ago, I was walking my dog, Sammy, and noticed frantic chirping that seemed to be coming from across the street. I eventually discovered a baby bird on the ground with an apparently injured wing. I rushed to inform my parents, and we carefully placed the bird in a shoebox and drove it to a local emergency animal hospital. Such an encounter was one in which an ethical demand was unavoidably impressed upon me, one that is not essentially different from that of any ethical encounter with a human Other. If a homeless person asks me
for money or food, an unavoidable ethical demand is presented to me: whether I choose to give
or withhold assistance, I cannot fail but to respond in some way; I may choose not to help this
person, but I cannot choose not respond to his/her appeal for help; I may pretend to ignore such
an appeal, but to ignore it is thus only a pretension: even to “ignore” a beggar is to choose to do
so and is thus to respond to him/her in some manner. The case was no different with respect to
the bird whose life I tried to rescue. As Alphonso Lingis claims, “the cries of the fledgling bird
fallen from the nest appeals to us.” The injured wing of a bird appeals to me, or impresses a
demand upon me, just as much as any outstretched hand; its chirping calls for my response just
as much as any human voice or gesture, as do all kinds of non-human bodies, gestures, and
expressions. Thus, Christine Korsgaard argues that it is just as impossible – or, at any rate, just as

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862 Of course, what is even worse than this are those institutions and systems of power that disappear or make
invisible others who merit or urgently demand our moral attention, such that we do not even so much as have the
“choice” to ignore them because they (or their needs and plights) do not even show up for us at all; or rather, these
others are there for us in experience, but political institutions, frameworks, and systems of privilege cause us to
overlook them, to fail to “see” them even when we do “see” them. It is obvious that various social systems collude
to make various human beings or human problems invisible, but it is also pertinent to notice the deep extent to
which they make non-human beings invisible as well. There is an entrenched, systemic effort to invisibilize, for
example, the horrors of factory farming. Indeed, there are laws in the United States designed solely to keep people
from ever seeing where the meat on their tables really comes from. One walks into a supermarket and sees
meticulously, cleanly presented packages of meat (say, a round piece of beef neatly wrapped in cellophane) on the
shelf, yet one surely does not see everything that had to be done to a cow, everything that a cow had to suffer, in
order for its flesh to appear on the shelf in that manner; in this case, the way in which something appears in fact
disappears more than it actually brings to appearance. Phenomenologically, those aspects of lived experience that
we do not “see” are just as important – indeed, are often more important – than those we do see; those hidden
structures that shape lived experience are often ethically and politically urgent for us to see, for they themselves are
ethical and political structures, and our failure to see them – or rather their inbuilt self-concealment – necessarily has
ethical and political consequences. All of this only further proves the deep extent to which political systems and
institutions shape lived experience, or how even ordinary human perception is already political, and thus I think it
also further proves the already political (and ethical) character of phenomenological reflection. Merleau-Ponty
frequently remarks that phenomenology is about “learning how to see” the world, yet he also makes it clear that
“seeing” can also be (and often is) failing “to see”; thus, “learning how to see” is also unlearning the habits of
thought and perception that lead us not to see, and given that what we often fail to see are moral and political matters
that demand our attention, and given that the habits of thought and perception that lead us to fail to see such matters
are themselves implicated in background ethical and political systems and frameworks, “learning how to see” has
always been an ethical and political project. As I have discussed, the primary aim of radical, phenomenological
reflection is to let appear, to let be seen and heard, those things or others that various frameworks (whether
ontological, epistemological, ethical, or political) would otherwise dis-appear, invisibilize, or silence, and is thus
inherently committed to the critique and abolition of such frameworks.

863 “Doubles,” in Itinerant Philosophy: On Alphonso Lingis. Eds. Bobby George and Tom Sparrow (Brooklyn, NY: 
much of an artifice and false abstraction – not to perceive directly in the cries of an animal an expression of needs and interests, or the impingement of an ethical demand, as it is to perceive the words spoken to me by another human being as mere noise:

An animal’s cries express pain, and they mean that there is a reason, a reason to change its condition. And you can no more hear the cries of an animal as mere noise than you can hear the words of a person. Another animal can obligate you in exactly the same way another person can. It is a way of being someone that you share. So of course we have obligations to animals.864

Any suppression of an animal’s alterity is an abstraction as logically absurd and ethically violent as the suppression of a fellow human’s alterity, and given the fact that the very category of “the animal” has traditionally been deployed in order precisely to suppress the alterities of those beings we call “animals,” it is not an accident, as Adorno observes, that we tend to find it deployed in order to oppress, exploit, and perpetrate cruelty against humans and so-called “animals” alike:

The constantly encountered assertion that savages, blacks, Japanese are like animals, monkeys for example, is the key to the pogrom. The possibility of the pogrom is decided in the moment when the gaze of a fatally-wounded animal falls on a human being. The defiance with which he repels this gaze – ‘after all, it’s only an animal’ – reappears irresistibly in cruelties done to human beings, the perpetrators having again and again to reassure themselves that it is ‘only an animal’, because they could never fully believe this even of animals.865

If subjectivity is necessarily embodied and thus directly expressed in and through behavior, then to regard the living, behaving body as a mere machine or object – as a thing whose movements are taken to be mere mechanical reactions to causes rather than responsive, intentional comportments toward meanings – is not only (as I discussed in chapters three and four) to adopt the sort of reductionism one might otherwise repudiate with respect to human behavior, and is not only to reproduce the very dualism one might (and should) otherwise repudiate in general,

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but is also simply to choose to suppress that body’s subjectivity or alterity; such a perspective toward a non-human being is a willful suppression of its subjectivity, and all suppressions of subjectivity are alike in their fundamental, phenomenological structure. This objectification or de-subjectification of non-human beings is logically analogous to the objectification or de-subjectification of human beings that is implicated in every form of human oppression; it is a form of “otherization” in the bad sense of that term, for it is that form of otherization that precisely denies rather than affirms otherness, that form of otherization that relegates others beyond the bounds of community or of intersubjective affirmation and respect, that form of otherization that is precisely the suppression or erasure of otherness. Of course, once otherness is encountered, it can never truly be erased; it can only either be affirmed and welcomed or marginalized and repressed. The oppression of others always begins with the disingenuous, self-undermining repression of their otherness, with the objectification of what is not merely an object, with the de-subjectification of what is truly a subjectivity. As Adorno suggests, it is for this reason that we can indeed understand a lot about the horrific, needless forms of violence we inflict upon one another from those we inflict upon animals, from the violence of even simply referring to animals as “just animals.”

Thus, we anthropocentrically tend to equate oppression with “dehumanization,” but we forget that this means that oppression already begins – that the pretext for it has already been established, that its machinery has already been set into motion – with prior processes or apparatuses of “humanization,” that is, with the construction and imposition of a “human” subject-position or identity-category relative to which, or in service to which, others will be ranked, policed, subjugated, exploited, brutalized, or excluded from the scope of full moral and political considerability. “Animalization” coincides with, or is synonymous with, every
oppressive otherization. As I have mentioned, “the animal” is certainly not a “natural kind”; there is, in fact, no such thing as “the animal,” for, as Derrida remarks, there are only animals; there is only ever “an irreducible living multiplicity of mortals.”866 Indeed, the category of “the animal” is no more a natural kind, and no less a political construct, than, say, that of “the barbarian” (with which it is historically and conceptually aligned). In short, “the animal” is an empty placeholder to which we consign any being or “other” we wish to exploit or dominate. Since there is no “animalization” – no “dehumanization” – without a prior, correlative “humanization,” the hard truth we are thus forced to confront is that oppression, exploitation, or domination already begin with every “humanization,” or already begin with any fixed determination of “the human” in opposition to “the animal.” This is why we should never uncritically deploy the categories of “humanity” and “animality,” and it is perhaps why, in the end, we should jettison them from our thinking altogether. It is certainly why I admittedly have always been uneasy about Merleau-Ponty’s own usage of these categories, and it is why I think we may have to move beyond Merleau-Ponty in refusing to use them in our thinking at all; indeed, I am not sure that these categories do anything else but keep us from wakeful thinking. Nevertheless, it is important to appreciate that Merleau-Ponty intends to transform radically how we think about these categories. As I hope to have already made clear, when Merleau-Ponty speaks of the intertwining of “the human” and “the animal,” if we truly understand what he means by “intertwining,” we must understand that he means that no oppositional understanding of their relationship, hence no fixed or essential delimitation of the being or meaning of either of them, can ever hold. If we understand what he means by the “intertwining” of “humanity” and “animality,” and if he is right, then it follows that we precisely need to problematize and rethink

866 Derrida, The Animal That Therefore I Am, p. 41.
these categories in ways that disrupt, now and forever, those traditional conceptualizations and deployments of them that underlie every oppressive ethical or political scheme of categorization or “otherization,” every caste system, every “centrism,” separatism, or supremacism.

To recall an encounter similar to yet more recent than the one I had with an injured bird, this past winter I encountered a very large, elaborate spider web that had been spun across two pillars that stand in front of the entrance to my partner’s building. Such an encounter likewise presented me with an ethical choice, or the demand for some sort of ethical response: I could have found some means to destroy the web so as to have unobstructed entry into my partner’s building, or I could have chosen to find an alternative means of entry, say by simply walking around it or by entering from the back of the apartment complex; I chose to walk around it. In this encounter, a spider’s web appealed or “spoke” to me in just the same manner as the injured wing and distressed chirps of a bird; it was just as much of a moral experience as any other, and indeed it was an experience that was inherently moral: my experience of the spider web simply could not be dissociated from the moral possibilities and qualities that accompany it any more so than from any of its visible or tactile qualities. I am addressed by wings and spider webs, by gills and feelers, by paws and tails, by chirps and barks, by hissing and panting, by bee hives and ant hills just as much as I am addressed by human hands and words, by human laughter and groans, by human tears and cheers, by human frowns and smiles, by human visages, words, and behaviors.

Morality is simply endemic to our lived, Gestalt experiences of the world and, in particular, to our lived experiences of others, that is, to our experiences of other living, behaving bodies. Every vulnerable body is an Other whose needs or goods directly address me, and every living body is a vulnerable body. To be a living body is to “have,” or to be oriented toward, a
good, or to possess and express needs and desires (whether physiological or otherwise) the satisfaction of which is necessary for the realization of its good, necessary for it to flourish as the living body it is. When confronted with a living body, I cannot but respond to the appeals it inherently expresses to me in some manner: I may attempt to suppress its subjectivity or alterity – that is, to regard it as either “just an animal” or as a mere object (*blosse Sache*) – so that I need not be bothered by having to respond to it, or perhaps so that I may harm or exploit it with an untroubled conscience, but doing so will always be a hypocritical or self-undermining abstraction (to say the least), for my objectification (or “otherization”) of such an Other is itself already a response to its subjectivity or alterity; that is, such an attitude on my part could only be motivated by an encounter with something I know is not truly “just” a thing, an encounter with something that is a genuine “Other” – a “way of being someone” that I share, as Korsgaard puts it – rather than an “other” that is *so other* as to be not truly an “Other” at all. As Freud knew, repression is never absolute erasure: what we repress always reemerges in our lives in other ways. Repression (like self-deception more generally) is always self-undermining (or self-deconstructing) because it always involves a disavowal at one level what one knows to be true at another. Whether I attempt to suppress (or repress) the alterity of a living human or non-human being, I am, self-defeatingly, disavowing at one level what I in fact already know by direct acquaintance, namely that such a being is indeed an Other, one that demands a response from me, one to which I am already responsive, and indeed therefore one with whom my own body is already entangled, one with whom I am already, radically in community.

Thus, when I perceive a living body I perceive its “good” and its needs – or at any rate I perceive the fact that it has a good along with needs that must be fulfilled in order for its good to be realized – just as directly as I perceive its subjectivity in general; indeed, to perceive any
subjectivity at all is already to be addressed by its needs and desires, its possibilities of either flourishing or failing to flourish, and this is why, as Levinas argues, any experience of alterity is inherently ethical experience. However, as Levinas does not argue (and even often seems to argue against, as I will further discuss below), experiences of alterity are not restricted to experiences of other humans. Any experience of a living body is an experience of alterity; all living bodies are alterities. All living bodies are vulnerable bodies: to be a living body is to be a vulnerable body; and so to perceive directly a body as a living body is to perceive directly its vulnerabilities, which is also, of course, to perceive its needs and goods. As Lingis writes:

...To see something is to see what it requires to exist. If I see a tree, I also see that it requires earth and sunlight...We do see needs and wants directly. And then to see what it requires is to sense the kind of action that would supply this requirement. For example, if I see a deer, which has been caught in branches in the flooding river, I see that it needs to be freed from these branches or that it will drown. And at the same time I see that I could do that. Or somebody could do that, if not me, maybe somebody else. I experience myself as different motor possibilities to rescue something or protect it, or restore, or repair it. That’s true just of our ordinary perception. Just when we walk around, what we see are not just shapes and forms and colours. There are distinct and independent beings, that we see what they require. And if we get active, we sense the sorts of actions that could supply their needs.\textsuperscript{667}

Birds (like spiders and deer) are different from humans, yet they appeal to us, and the appeals of avian others are not essentially, transcendentally different (as Levinas, for example, claims) from the appeals of human others; their appeals span the differences between us, as all appeals do, because such differences are never divides, because true differences are never divides; their appeals surge across the continuity between us, because this continuity is also already difference, also already flesh. Whether it comes from a human or other-than-human Other, an “appeal” is an overture across difference; there are irreducible differences between all kinds of beings – between humans, between humans and non-humans, and between innumerable many non-humans – yet these are always differences in and of flesh, and so they are also always circuits and confluences of meaning between them, courses along which course their common affects

\textsuperscript{667} “Interview with Alphonso Lingis” (conducted by Jonas Skačkauskas), in ibid., p. 159.
and needs, their appeals and responses to one another. There are infinitely many irreducible differences in the world. Difference as such is irreducible difference; yet difference is also (in Deleuze’s sense of the term) univocal: all beings are irreducibly different, yet all differences are, as we have seen, differences “of the same stuff,”

“extreme divergencies of one same something”

differences do not resolve into dualism, nor do they dissolve into Parmenidean monism or Absolute idealism. All differences are differences in and of flesh, and are therefore already relationships between forms of flesh, even already “appeals” of one form of flesh to another. Through that reflexivity or affectivity that defines every living body, a transference of affects between living bodies always takes place, one in which the needs and flourishings of others are immediately impressed upon, indeed already inscribed into, my own flesh and joints, my own corporeal schema and “motor possibilities.”

In short, we “see” values – especially corporeal needs and desires, benefits and harms – in the same way that we “see” minds (or alterities), emotions, intentions, meanings, or any of those “in-visible” features of the world that inflate the world to “visibility” and meaning. As we discussed in chapter two, “there are certainly more things in the world and in us than what is perceptible in the narrow sense of the term,”

and among these are what we call values. Values are not real in the way that ordinary physical objects are, but it does not follow they are not real at all or that they must be either “purely” mental or “supernatural”: not only does the latter notion not follow logically, but an ontology that only admits physical objects (or “mere things”) as real – or a kind of materialism whose conception of “materiality” is restricted to that of physics or to the “data” directly available only to the “five senses” – is so patently false that it

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869 Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 84.
nearly does not even merit criticism. As we have already extensively seen (and as any cursory phenomenological reflection reveals), there are many “things” that are deep and pervasive, even structural features of lived experience that are not “mere things,” or that are not reducible to phenomena presentable to the “five senses” alone and that are even conditions for the formulation and intelligibility of any scientific explanation or model of the world (even the lived body and Being as such, though constitutive of experience, and though obliquely experienced, are not “objects”). Moreover, there are social constructs and so-called “abstractions” that are absolutely real and that have concrete, material effects in the world even though they will never be encountered in experience as ordinary physical objects. For example, one will never trip over or stub one’s toe on “generosity,” “cruelty,” “sorrow,” “courage,” “tragedy,” “culture,” “history,” “art,” “truth,” “belief,” “knowledge,” “number,” the Pythagorean theorem, linguistic denotation, “race,” “gender,” “freedom,” “equality,” “democracy,” or even consciousness and otherness – one will never “see” or “touch” such things as one “sees” or “touches” an ordinary material thing – yet these are all clearly very real, even necessarily thoroughly “material,” things indeed, and there is no sound, non-arbitrary reason to regard values any differently. If we attend to lived experience, it is clear that ethical, political, and even aesthetic values are just as real as any of the “things” I just enumerated, even though they are not real like tables or rocks. I (ap)perceive values in the same way I (ap)perceive anything. “Goodness” or “justice,” for example, are undeniably not equivalent or reducible to factual appearances or states of affairs, but it does not logically follow that they are divorced from them: to varying degrees and in various modes of manifestation, “goodness” and “justice” are nonetheless ways in which a world inhabited corporeally and communally always already shows itself.
So, values are already built into our involvements with others and into the ways in which the world immediately appears to us in and through our engagements with it: we do not impart them to things later. If we separate the moral or political dimensions of a situation from its other material or phenomenal elements, or if in general we divorce values from “facts,” *that is* precisely what we do later: *that is* an abstraction or incision made by reflective thought rather than primally, immediately given reality. Values are not idealities that hover above and beyond the world, nor are they mere mental constructs or projections, nor are they “things” in any positivistic or reductively materialistic sense of the term; they are not ordinary material objects or “bodies,” yet they are not without flesh; they are not *absolutely* extra-subjective (or “objective” in the classical sense of the term), yet they are not purely “subjective” either. It should already be clear that any such dilemma between (reductive) materialism and idealism, or between “objectivism” and “subjectivism,” is a false one, and indeed Merleau-Ponty devoted his efforts to demonstrating its falsity. The notion that something must either be a “mere,” “brute” thing or otherwise either a “purely” subjective or supernatural entity is a commitment to the sort of dualism we have long since discarded and that any rigorous account of lived experience or Being necessarily dismantles. The notion that there are such things as “value-free” facts (hence value-free descriptions of the world), and the correlative notion that values (if there truly are any) must either be supernatural objects or *purely* mental constructs, that is, things that somehow float outside carnal existence or that are “freed from all inherence”871 (and which would thus truly be, as J.L. Mackie famously describes them in his argument for moral anti-realism, “queer” things indeed), are notions rooted in the very positivism and dualism to which phenomenology is emphatically opposed.

871 Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. xii.
In the end, the supposed “fact/value” or “is/ought” dichotomy is nothing but an iteration or corollary of classical body/mind or object/subject dualism, and thus it is impossible to reject the latter without also rejecting the former. It is not an accident that, traditionally, “facts” are aligned with “objectivity” and “values” are aligned with “subjectivity”: the supposed opposition between “fact” and “value,” “is” and “ought,” “the descriptive” and “the prescriptive,” “ontology” and “normativity” corresponds directly to the classical opposition between “the objective” and “the subjective,” “body” and “mind,” “immanence” and “transcendence,” “materiality” and “ideality,” and we have already seen where the latter dualisms lead us and why they are not tenable. The idea of value-free facts and the idea of fleshless, supernatural or purely subjective values are mutually entailed, logical counterparts: one cannot accept one without accepting the other, and one cannot reject one without rejecting the other. Fact/value dualism is simply parasitic upon body/mind dualism or, more generally, a dualism between the empirical and the ideal/transcendent(al), the “natural” and the super-natural. To repudiate subject/object or mind/body dualism is also, necessarily, to repudiate “value/fact” dualism, and indeed one must repudiate the latter in order to make sense of the moral and political aspects of experience, that is, to make sense of the fact that such values are neither real in the manner of ordinary objects of sensory perception nor as disembodied, supernatural entities or mental projections. It follows that only an ontology that demonstrates the intertwining of “object(ivity)” and “subject(ivity),” of “body/nature” and “mind,” or of “materiality” and “ideality” – only an ontology that can “recognize an ideality that is not alien to the flesh”872 – can provide a “moral realism” worthy of the name, which is to say a kind of “moral naturalism” that would not be a contradiction in terms.

872 Merleau-Ponty, The Visible and the Invisible, p. 152.
For all of these reasons, a phenomenological ethics is certainly not a category mistake; nor does such an approach to ethics collapse into crude subjectivism, and still less does it involve “naturalizing” or normatively legitimating all appearances; it is no more a “naïve” moral realism than it is a “naïve realism” in general. We have seen that appearances can be “true” or “false” (or that certain appearances can be more or less close to the truth than others), yet we also know better than to consider truth and falsehood as absolutely beyond all appearances, and the same is true concerning moral or political phenomena and truths. “Goods” (and “bads”) are also things that appear, and like anything else, they are composed of all the ways in which they can appear, or are constituted by all of the embodied perspectives to whom they may appear. Some goods may be more distant from others, many goods will not exactly coincide with one another, and some appearances of goods and bads, rights and wrongs, justices and injustices may be quite far removed from what is truly good (or bad), right (or wrong), or just (or unjust), or such appearances may appear from partial, obstructed, askew, inapt or inappropriate vantage points (analogous to the manner in which a painting would present itself to me if I were to view it one inch from my face or from a sideways angle), but nonetheless all goods – just like everything else in perceptible, carnal reality – overlap, and thus every appearance of a good is an appearance of “the Good” in the same way that every appearance of a thing is an appearance of “the thing itself,” or in the same way that, in general, all appearances are appearances of the world. A point to which I will return is that though there exists a plurality of goods, and though often these goods may be in tension with one another, nevertheless there is no such thing as an isolated, purely self-contained good for the same reasons that there is no such a thing as an isolated, self-contained self or community. Moral solipsism/relativism vanishes along with every other form of solipsism. In just the same way that all communities or worlds are embedded
within and co-constitute an objective, common world, so too is it the case that all goods are
embedded within and co-constitute an objective, common Good.

Moreover, given phenomenology’s vigilance against reification and commitment to
developing a maximally lucid conception of the world in which we dwell, given
phenomenology’s commitment to dismantling those abstractions and frameworks that precisely
suppress (or lead us to repress) what we live, or given phenomenology’s commitment to making
“visible” precisely those integral aspects of our lives that certain schemas of knowledge and
ideologies render invisible or marginalize, it follows that phenomenological “description” is
never truly a non-normative endeavor, or that phenomenology is always already critique. To put
this point another way or to be more specific, I think it is accurate to say that, at an ethical and
political register, phenomenology’s vigilance against reification and obscurantism – that is, its
vigilance against all abstractions and frameworks that occlude or distort what we in fact live or
know by direct acquaintance, or its vigilance against anything that would invisibilize or silence
our experiences of the world and of others, and that would especially invisibilize or silence
certain others – may be understood as a vigilance against certain prevalent, even systemic forms
of gaslighting. When certain abstractions or conceptual frameworks – especially those embedded
within our social institutions – motivate one to deny, doubt, or repress one’s lived experiences,
what else is that but a kind of gaslighting? It is in this sense that “doing justice” to the “things
themselves” is a kind of ethical and political justice, for it means honoring all of the ways in
which the world is experienced corporeally and communally, especially from traditionally
marginalized bodies and communities; it does not just mean taking an inventory of “the way
things are” but also means letting appear or letting be heard testimonies of or against “the way
things are” from perspectives that entrenched, hegemonic abstractions and frameworks
invisibilize or silence. In general, since the world is filled with so much “asinanity,” since widely accepted understandings of reality are so infested with all kinds of reifications, metaphysical mystifications, and ideological mythologizations (especially those that serve the interests of dominant groups and oppressive power-hierarchies), or since our conceptions of “the world” and of “ourselves” tend to be shaped so deeply by illicit exclusions, unstable binaries, or hardly inevitable or \textit{a priori} necessary constructs, it follows that describing the world as lucidly as one can, and especially that describing (or letting be “seen” and “heard”) lived experiences that dominant narratives and conceptual frameworks would have us repress, is a radical, liberatory act.

To describe lived experience is not necessarily to naturalize or essentialize what is described: social constructs and contingent, historically emergent institutions and relations of power can be, and of course are, materially, experientially real even though they are not “natural” or “essential” aspects of the world, and as I mentioned earlier, developing a lucid understanding of the world – especially doing justice to others’ lived experiences of the world – is the necessary first step toward any cogent critique of the world. Consider race, for example. To describe how a black person appears to a racist, white gaze is not to legitimate or naturalize such a gaze but to describe accurately, hence “do justice to,” the lived experience of black identity in a racist, white supremacist world. It is not to justify normatively how a black person appears to a white gaze under white supremacy, but to confront the fact that appearing in such a manner constitutes what it means to be black under conditions of racial oppression. Systemic racism and negrophobia are endemic to a black person’s lived of experience of his/her own blackness under white supremacy (and, it must be added, they are also endemic – in manifold subtle and unconscious ways – to any white person’s lived experiences of blackness under white
supremacy). To suppose otherwise is to advocate for precisely that sort of “color-blindness” that is not only itself precisely one of those false abstractions that distort lived experience and that phenomenology endeavors to extirpate, but is an abstraction that is actively complicit in white supremacy and racial oppression for the very reason that it is blind to it and seeks to make others blind to it as well. Any “color-blind” account of the world – any account of the world that erases race from lived human experience – is precisely an instance of gaslighting, and it is one that rigorous phenomenological reflection can empower us to undo.  

Moreover, phenomenology can help show us why white supremacy, for example, is (to say the least) a bad perspective. This is, I think, a clear case in which phenomenological description is not purely descriptive but is already an ethical and political project. Indeed, properly understood, I think radical phenomenological reflection is necessary in order to critique oppressive systems and frameworks and further the ends of justice, emancipation, and flourishing. After all, we cannot dismantle what we do not or cannot “see.”

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873 Of course, it should go without saying that rigorous phenomenological reflection – especially concerning matters of political oppression and marginalization – requires epistemic humility, or an attitude of surrendering oneself to listening to or letting be heard other “voices” rather than “speaking oneself,” particularly on the part of those who belong to dominant or privileged social groups. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, phenomenology enjoins us to decenter or suspend our own standpoints in the world precisely in order to let other standpoints come to presence (and also in order to reveal the webs of interdependencies in which all standpoints are embedded). One example of this is what is often referred to as “checking one’s privilege.” Though I think it is incontestable that racism systemically informs all of our lived experiences and especially the lived experiences of being a person of color, I am also white, and so there are necessarily aspects of a person of color’s lived experiences of the world that will never be fully accessible to me. “Privilege” means that there will always be social, ethical, and political truths whose testimony I must cede to those who in fact live them. A point I wish to emphasize here is that “privilege” is also a phenomenological concept just as much as it is an ethical and political one. Appeals to privilege (i.e., the principle that one should “check one’s privilege”) are appeals to epistemic or experiential limitations relevant to the formulation and assessment of certain truth or knowledge-claims, especially those concerning social and political reality or matters of justice, marginalization, and oppression. The idea that there are structures, systems of power, and identity-categories that inherently limit the sorts of experiences to which one has complete access is an inherently phenomenological one, or one that emerges from any sound phenomenological examination of one’s lived experiences of social and political reality. To this extent, not only do I think it is accurate to say that phenomenology is already ethical and political, but also that any ethics or political theory worthy of the name is already phenomenological.
Of course, the targets of my critique in this project have been those abstractions, conceptual frameworks, or presuppositions that underlie and motivate the marginalization and oppression of non-human beings. As much as our lived experiences in the world today are shaped by, say, white supremacy, so too are they shaped by assumptions of human supremacy or “specialness,” or by abstractions that repress our fundamental, constitutive relationships with other forms of life, abstractions that situate “humanity” in hierarchical opposition to “animality” or that advance any sort of “human/animal” dualism, which are also the same abstractions that distort the nature of community in general and which therefore also constitute the underlying “logic” of every unjust ethical and political “ism” and exclusion.

So, let me then be clear about the argumentative strategy I have adopted here. Any move from the descriptive to the prescriptive or from the ontological to the normative will always be logically illicit provided we posit a radical, unbridgeable gulf between them. The point here, however, is not to commit such a blatant naturalistic fallacy. The point is not to move directly from the ontological to the normative, or directly from a description of the fundamental structures of lived experience to ethical and political principles, but to show that a certain normative framework (i.e., anthropocentrism or human-centered speciesism) has always depended upon certain ontological (as well as epistemological) commitments; therefore, to dismantle such ontological commitments is also to dismantle the normative framework they support. Moreover, the point is also to show that ontology and normativity, that “facts” and “values” in general have never really been divorced from one another in the first place, as is already indicated by the fact that ethical and political frameworks always rest upon ontological presuppositions and that, conversely, ontological presuppositions and categories always have ethical and political implications.
Thus, my aim here has been to articulate the ontological precondition for overcoming anthropocentrism, which is also the ontological precondition for any kind of ethical involvement or responsiveness at all: intercorporeity, or what I have called “radical community.” My aim has been to show that Merleau-Ponty dismantles the ontological edifice of any anthropocentric or human-supremacist conception of the moral community, and to indicate the kind of moral community we might cultivate in its place, or rather the kind of community within which we always already exist even though various metaphysical or conceptual abstractions and social institutions actively suppress it. Though Merleau-Ponty did not write nearly as much on ethics and politics as he did on ontology, his ontological project was never purely an ontological project (as no ontological project can ever be), but was always an ethical and political one as well, and my thesis is that his ontology precisely provides the necessary resources for dismantling anthropocentrism, that indeed his ontology entails the decentering of any supposedly “central” standpoint in the world (including especially a “human” one) and the destruction of any imagined hierarchies (or “ladders”) of being. Intercorporeity dismantles traditional anthropocentric ethical and political boundaries because it can never be restricted a priori only to one form of embodied life and because, moreover, it reveals the fundamental intertwining – the “lateral” interrelatedness – of all forms of embodied life, hence of all “goods.” “Selves” are necessarily embodied and necessarily in community with (embodied) others, and since every community is thus one that is among or between embodied beings – since every community is a community in and of flesh – there can never be a sharp, decidable, transcendental demarcation of communal boundaries. And every community is necessarily a moral community, since to be a living body is to be a vulnerable body, or since to be a living body is already to be polarized toward a “Good,” already either to flourish or to fail to flourish in some way or to some extent.
The “radical community” in which all embodied beings – human and a non-human alike – are embedded, therefore, has always already been a radical moral community, and thus it is one that not only any cogent ontology must honor in its conception of the world, but one that any cogent ethical or political philosophy must honor in its conception of “the Good.”

When I was a child, I wanted a dog desperately, but for a long time my father was adamantly opposed to getting one. Before finally agreeing to get a dog, my parents allowed me to have a Guinee pig. I loved this Guinee pig, but he unfortunately died unexpectedly not very long after we got him. As a child I was also, at times, as exceptionally cruel toward animals as I was fascinated by them: I sometimes collected caterpillars and made makeshift terrariums for them out of my mother’s Tupperware only to smash them later; I took delight in stepping on snails; at day camp (on at least a couple of occasions) I plucked moths off of trees and tore off their wings; at day camp I also took delight in deliberately stepping on tiny frogs I might come across in the grass; I was often cold and mean-tempered toward my babysitter’s dog, often shoving or hitting him when he was near me even though he had only been minding his own business; sometimes I would chuck rocks into flocks of geese. On one such occasion, a friend of mine and I were throwing rocks at geese that had gathered on the athletic field of our elementary school, laughing as they scattered and squawked; neither of us noticed our rocks actually make contact with any of the birds, yet as we were leaving to go home, I noticed one of them limping across the field, its leg or foot obviously injured, perhaps even broken. I do not know whether it was I or my friend who was directly responsible for that, but to this day the image of that goose limping across the field haunts me; it is a deep-seated source of anguish and shame for me, one that has persisted in my memory just as vividly as any of the significant wrongs I have ever committed against fellow humans. To pose Derrida’s question (the question that is the right one to pose
here, and one that is profound yet deceptively simple): “whence this malaise?”\footnote{874} If the arguments I have developed up to this point have been successful, we should already have an answer to this question. Indeed, developing an answer to this question and extrapolating its implications has been the overarching aim of this project.

I do not wish to armchair psychoanalyze myself, but I imagine there is likely some connection between my frustrated desire for a dog (compounded later by my grief over my prematurely departed Guinee pig) and my childhood callousness toward other animals. Though I was “just” a child, I am profoundly ashamed of such behaviors and have a lump in my throat as I recount them. Perhaps my chosen topics of concentration in philosophy are part of an effort to atone somehow for all of this (after all, perhaps Nietzsche is right to observe that “every philosophy…is the personal confession of its author and a kind of involuntary and unconscious memoir”\footnote{875}). The point of this confession, however, is neither catharsis or expiation nor merely to make an empirical claim about human psychology, but to reinforce the point that, at the deepest ontological level, my subjectivity has been, and continues to be, shaped by my affective relations not only with human but also with non-human others, that so much of what I now know about the nature of love and cruelty and even about myself I have learned from all of the animals I have ever loved and harmed. My parents were, and continue to be, the very best, most supportive and loving parents anyone could have. Especially since I was as an only-child, they doted upon me incessantly, loved me almost asphyxiatingly, tended to my every need, satisfied nearly my every desire, and nurtured my every interest or passion, and despite what my behaviors toward animals as a child might suggest, I was generally a sweet, happy, well-

\footnote{874}{The Animal That Therefore I Am, p. 4.}
mannered child. But my parents alone could not teach me everything about what it is to love and to be loved, what it is to act in the world kindly or cruelly, or even what it is “to be human.”

The cliché is that it takes a “village” (not just a “family”) to raise a child. My contention is that it takes a “jungle” – a whole ecosystem – to do so, and that indeed (as I and Merleau-Ponty argue) what we call a “village” or a “family” or a “community” is always already composed of human and non-human beings, is always already open to, and suffused with, affective, carnal bonds with non-human as well as with human others, is always already intercorporeally, “interanimalistically” grounded and shaped in ways that refute any divisions of the world along supposedly neat, essential species lines. Any particular community of embodied beings – whether at the scale of a “family” or that of a polis – is always already part of a “Body” (or process of “body-ing”) that constitutes, and that is itself constituted by, indefinitely many bodies and indefinitely many kinds of bodies (or body-ings), is always already embedded in a field of (inter)corporeal be(com)ings or in what I have called a “radical community,” and is thus always already implicated in anything it might pretend to exclude from itself, or is always already, as Merleau-Ponty remarks concerning the nature of human consciousness itself, an “abode of ambiguity.”

Not only did Sammy express his love for me when he clasped his paws upon my shoulders and furiously licked my face, and not only does Mr. Bojangles express his love for me every time falls asleep in my lap or returns my caresses with deep, rhythmic purrs, but such have been major, formative ways that I have learned what love is, that I have learned the kind of ecstasy love can be and of which flesh is capable, that I have learned the kind of love of which I am capable. This is, of course, an empirical truth, but it is not just that. As Merleau-Ponty

876 Phenomenology of Perception, p. 332.
more fundamentally phenomenological truths. 

Like all empirical truths, the one I have just mentioned reveals to us something more: it shows us that we – or rather, that the bodies that we are – always already compose and “pair” with other bodies, that no body is essentially closed off from any other kind of body, that no body is ever isolated or discretely individuated, that every living body is (like the singular that is also already plural, that flesh can only be shaped by other flesh, that flesh is inherently expressive and labile, that in order to know one’s body (hence oneself) it is necessary to know other bodies (human and non-human alike), that before there is ever a question of “inferring” mental states in others I must have already been penetrated by them, or that I must have already “introjected” from others anything I will ever be motivated to “project” into them, that no quality of mind or body – no sensation, no perception, no affect, no emotion, no volition, no faculty or object of thought whatsoever – has any intelligibility in the absence of others who show them to me, and that their intelligibility inherently includes all of the ways that any body could possibly show them to me.

One of my favorite novels is Crime and Punishment, and perhaps the most poignant moment in this novel is a peculiar dream in which Raskolnikov regresses to an incident from his childhood in which he witnessed the cruel beating of an old cart-horse as it struggled under a load far too heavy for it to bear; it is lashed first with a whip, then bludgeoned to death with an iron crowbar by its master; the horse and its master are surrounded by a mob, and the few voices of protest are soon drowned out by laughter and cheer; several of the onlookers even join in on

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the beating. Young Raskolnikov breaks away from his father and rushes into the crowd, throws his arms around the dead horse, breaks into sobs, and cradles its head in his arms. What are we to make of this scene? Is this dream merely an instance of “hysteria”? And can we simply dismiss the young Raskolnikov’s reaction as puerile or “irrational”? Raskolnikov, indeed, sometimes suffers from intense bouts of fever and alcohol-induced delirium. However, we should also recall that it is precisely cold, utilitarian “rationality” that allows Raskolnikov (in his adult, sober, waking life) to justify (or at least rationalize) murdering the old pawnbroker and her innocent sister with an axe. Is this dream, then, “nothing but” the phantasm of a feverish mind, a transient episode of delirium that holds no deeper meaning? Or is this dream rather a revolt of the deepest part of Raskolnikov’s self against that “waking” rationality that suppresses and estranges him from what he lives, the upsurge of an affectivity or intercorporeality that constitutes what it is to be a living body? If Raskolnikov’s “reason” can drive him to senseless homicide, then his “non-reason” – his unconscious, his body – is more wakeful or more “rational” than anything in his reflective, “rational,” waking existence. If reflection or “reason” represses the truths we “know” by direct, corporeal and affective acquaintance, then only something not fettered to its constraints or ill-conceived machinations may lucidly reveal such truths to us. This is the phenomenological lesson of Raskolnikov’s dream and even of the novel as a whole.

Raskolnikov’s dream of the horse – his dream of an immediate, embodied overture of compassion to a suffering, dying animal – is the irruption, the rebellious cry of what he knows prior to reflection, and it is perhaps the most lucid, indeed the most “human” moment in the story. The horse figures not as the object of an oversensitive child’s animistic flight of fancy, nor is it simply an efflux of febrile delirium: it is a genuine Other, a “Thou”; it is a living body that (like every living body) addresses us and whose address to us discloses the fact that, as the very
condition of its possibility, we are always already bound to one another – that is, always already bound to any and all embodied Others – in our vital, embodied existence, that we are always already tied to any beings who do or can address us.

Raskolnikov’s dream, the shame I feel about having harmed animals as a child, and all of our lived experiences of finding ourselves addressed by non-human others disclose to us the basic ontological fact that human and non-human bodies are always already intertwined with one another, or always already open and addressed to one another; moreover, it begins to disclose that there is nothing “human” whose being or intelligibility as such is not already buttressed by webs of relations with non-humans, that there is nothing that is part of our “humanity,” nothing within the ambit of our subjectivity, that is not constitutively embedded in a more-than-human world. Humans are different from geese and from horses. Yet humans, geese, horses, and all embodied beings are also, simply in virtue of their shared embodiment, “parts” of one another, promiscuously involved with one another, “thorns” in one another’s flesh, the flesh of one another’s flesh, irrecusably, indissolubly together in flesh, together yet also other in flesh.

“Flesh,” again, does not just mean shared corporeality (though it saliently does mean this): in Merleau-Ponty, it also designates the paradoxical compresence of togetherness and distance, the paradoxical constitution of togetherness through distance; it designates the paradoxical co-constitution of selfhood and alterity, the paradoxical constitution of selfhood through alterity; it designates the aporia of genuine community, that is, the aporia of a kind of community instituted through neither the totalizing inclusion nor absolute exclusion of what is “Other,” the paradox of a community instituted through its distension into, yet never consumptive incorporation of, what is “outside” itself; it designates the paradox that “inside” and “outside” are co-constitutive, which means nothing is ever really purely one or the other, that nothing is ever wholly within or wholly
outside the boundaries that mark out any distinct compass of carnal existence; it designates, in a word, the paradox of difference.

Raskolnikov is affected by the horse’s plight for the same reason I was affected (and am still affected) by the goose whose leg I am partially (if not solely) responsible for having maimed: there is a necessary, undeniable continuity of flesh and affectivity. All affects (hence all living bodies) are already in composition with one another because affectivity is ecstasy, because to be affected (hence to be a living body) is already to be outside oneself, already to be with and within the bodies of others who nevertheless (paradoxically) remain Other, who in fact must be genuinely, irreducibly Other if I am to be affected by or situated in any kind of relationship with them at all, if indeed I am to be a “self” at all. “Humanity” and “equinity” are different, yet true, fundamental difference – difference “worthy of the name” – is never opposition or mutual exclusion, and so even though they are different, it is impossible to determine with transparent clarity or sharp precision where one ends and where the other begins, and this impossibility is not merely an epistemological defect or limitation, but an ontological condition: it is impossible to ascribe any such determinacy to either of them because no kinds of living bodies possess or express any determinations apart from one another, because nothing in carnal existence is ever isolated or self-contained in its being or meaning; thus, the difference between them is (like all differences) also a limit through which, as Merleau-Ponty often says, they “encroach upon” one another, and neither would be what it is without this encroachment upon or passage into the other any more so than it would be what it is without being different from the other at all. In short, binary opposition effaces or represses difference just as much as any imposition of identity or presumption of “sameness,” and our task is to draw the consequences of this as rigorously as we can (consequences that cannot but be ethical and political as well as ontological). Humans and
horses are different, yet there is always “humanity” in a horse and there is always “equinity” in a human. And I – along with Raskolnikov – learn more about what it is to be “human” by learning about what it is to be “horse,” and indeed I only ever learn what it is to be human – I only ever become (and am ever becoming) human – by discovering, exploring, and surrendering myself to the carnal, affective bonds with indefinitely many other kinds of living bodies of which my own is capable and with which it, even down to the “simplest” sensation or motor power, is already entangled.

In particular, there is human vulnerability in a horse and there is equine vulnerability in our own humanity, and this shared vulnerability – which is also shared flesh – is not only synonymous with that affectivity or reflexivity that binds all living beings together while at the same time distinguishing them from one another, it is also that which addresses us whenever we encounter an Other, whether it be through the outstretched hand of a human, through the labored, dying breaths of a horse, through the injured leg of a goose, through the broken wing of a baby bird, or through the intricate craftsmanship, vital function, and gossamer fragility of a spider’s web; it this vulnerability to which we are always responsive in some manner, it is this vulnerability that constitutes us as the living bodies that we are, it is this vulnerability through which learn who or what we and Others are, it is this vulnerability that expresses the most basic “We” to which “we” and others belong, and it is this vulnerability that is therefore the foundation – the “Ur-phenomenon” – of ethics and politics.

This mutual vulnerability expresses the being-together of living beings that comes before and disrupts any reflective, deliberative considerations of “who we are” or of how “we” should act in the world and live together: before any abstract ideas of rights and contracts, before any abstract constructs of sovereignty, before any abstract criteriology of interests, before any
abstract deductions of duties or balance sheets of positive and negative utilities, before the imposition of any such abstractions, before especially the imposition of false and oppressive (yet often naturalized) abstractions such as borders, debts, and social hierarchies. When I confront, say, the injured wing of a bird or a spider’s web in my path, I do not pause to deduce duties from a priori imperatives, to calculate positive and negative utilities, to tabulate debts, costs, and profits, to consider properties that confer moral rights, or to enumerate necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for communal, hence moral, standing: in fact, all such deliberations betoken the death of authentic, lived ethical experience, or a context in which truly ethical responsiveness is no longer possible. In any case, this shared vulnerability from which any moral experience arises enunciates and saturates the “We” that comes before any questions concerning who or what should be “included” or “excluded” from “our” community or from the circle of “our” moral and political concern; it is that ever-gaping wound in our flesh, in ourselves, in our being through which we pass into (and are already in) one another, that never-to-be-sutured wound that paradoxically sutures our bodies to one another, that openness of the living body to the world and to other living bodies that constitutes selfhood and community yet always puts selfhood and community in question; it is that ecstasy that is synonymous with sentient flesh, with selfhood and community, or rather with selfhood through community; it is that Einfühlung that is also the direct (ap)presentation in lived experience of the needs, flourishings, and sufferings of others, or that is also the immanence of what we call “the Good.”

As we have seen, if and when others address me, they fundamentally do so, in some fashion, through their living bodies, which is also to say through these bonds of affect, vulnerability, and interdependency that already tether us and all living bodies to one another, that make us an “us” or a “we” before we ever oppose “ourselves” to any “them.” Shared sentient,
self-reflexive flesh is shared vulnerability, and it is our shared (sentient, self-reflexive) flesh, hence our shared vulnerability as sentient, fleshy beings, that makes any presencing of alterity, and thus any presencing of moral phenomena, possible. This shared flesh or vulnerability – this primordial “kinship of finitudes”\textsuperscript{878} – is attested every time an Other appears to me and addresses me, especially every time an Other expresses its needs to me, its flourishing or its destitution to me: needs that already overlap with my own, or a condition of flourishing or destitution in which I already participate, simply in virtue of the flesh that we share and without which they would never be presentable to me at all. No living, vulnerable body in my field of experience can fail to address me: the presence of a living, vulnerable body is an “address” of some sort, at once a call for a response and a response, a dialectical, meaning-directed agency or what Merleau-Ponty often calls a movement of “interrogation.” We will recall that, for Merleau-Ponty, “it is not a positive being but an interrogative being which defines life”\textsuperscript{879}. every living body, in the manner in which it copes with the world, is a response to others and to the world and a response to their responses, a questioning that calls others and the world into question, an expression of needs, desires, intentions, projects, and goods to which others and the world will be (more or less) congenial, hostile, or indifferent, but which cannot fail to implicate them – to incorporate them, to share its (vulnerable, desirous, needful, intentional, inherently expressive) flesh with them – in the drama and labor of its existence.

Any encounter I have with an Other – whether it be an encounter with a human or other-than-human Other – discloses the flesh that we share, the affects or vulnerabilities that let us come to presence for one another, that already destined us to address one another upon our first acquaintance, that already entangled us with one another even before our first acquaintance. Any

\textsuperscript{878} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{Institution and Passivity}, p. 20.

\textsuperscript{879} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{Nature}, p. 156.
particular encounter with an Other discloses, as its immanent (“quasi-transcendental”) condition of possibility, the radical “We” that founds not only every “I” but every particular “we,” the Ur-community (Urgemeinschaftung) of beings that founds the very distinction between “inside” and “outside” and that thus always interrupts any questions – that puts into question any questions – concerning “inclusion” and “exclusion,” or that always disrupts any formulation of strict conditions for membership in a particular community or any calculus of ethical and political status: any construction of borders, any circumscription of hearth and home, any deduction of rights, any establishment of laws, any negotiation of contracts, any tabulation of debits and credits; it discloses the “il y a” that “is the establishment of the very framework and the principle of all calculus, of all economy…this being-there by difference and not by identity.”

Since it is outside even the very distinction between “inside” and “outside,” or since it institutes, subtends, and aliments every interiority (whether it be the interiority of a self or the “interiority” of a specific, empirical community of selves), this radical “We” is always a liminal and never totalizing, always a differentiating and never reductively unifying space of cohesion; as such, it is necessarily an undecidable community, and it necessarily imparts its undecidability to those beings and communities of beings it founds. This radical community – this originary community (or communalization) of bodies and of communities of bodies – is, along with the bodies or communities of bodies embedded in it, very “real” indeed; it is not nothing; but like everything real – like every body, or like every “determination” of being, identity, or meaning – it is nonetheless indeterminate, “ambiguous,” porous, and ceaselessly becoming; in fact, it is the indeterminacy, ambiguity, porosity, or becoming – that is to say, of course, the “Flesh” – of “the real” itself.

880 Merleau-Ponty, ibid., p. 238.
As we saw in the previous chapter, all of our lived experiences with others – all of our lived, affective experiences with human but especially with non-human others – disclose our primordial, corporeal, ever-open ‘being-together’ with others, our basic communal enmshment with other living bodies that founds, ailments, and envelops every particular community, identity, or affective relationship. Intercorporeal, affective relationships with others are specific instances of a basic communalization of all beings that is the very source of affectivity itself, or that is itself the movement of reflexivity of which the reflexivity of the sentient body or of identity at any register of reality is but one expression. For Merleau-Ponty, the flesh of the living body that defies the traditionally assumed dichotomy between subject and object, and the intercorporeity between living bodies that similarly defies any assumed dichotomy between self and Other, discloses Being as what he calls “Flesh,” that is, as the medium in and through which all relations, hence all distinct, relationally constituted beings or phenomena, are constituted as such, or rather as simply the relationality of all particular relations; it designates, as we have seen, the “between-ness” of any relationship between things, that is, the simultaneously disjunctive and conjunctive space that enables any distinct thing to be together with other things, hence that enables any distinct thing to be, at all. The “flesh of the world” (or simply “Flesh”), then, is the intrinsically and infinitely parturient, differentiaional plane or process within and through which anything in the world, and especially any specific “self” or community, comes to presence or meaning. The lived body and intercorporeity are sites and surface effects – albeit exemplary sites and surface effects – of a more basic relational process at work in the world and at the core of all things and phenomena, of a coming-into-being of things that is, necessarily at the same time, their coming-together, or of a genesis of things through difference that, as such, entails their overlapping or mutual “encroachment.” This communalization through which all
things – especially all (inter)subjectivities – emerge into being and meaning is what I have proposed we call “radical community,” for it is, again, precisely a community that is radical in the original sense of that term: it is the intercorporeal community that constitutes the radix of every distinct intercorporeal community (whether between beings within a species or between beings of different species), the Ur-community within which all subjectivities, or rather within which all distinct communities of subjectivities, are already embedded.

Far from being a totalizing monolith into which all differences between particular beings or communities would be absorbed, this Ur-community – this primordial community of communities or this radical community – is itself difference (or differentiation), hence relationality, all the way down. “The flesh of the world” is radical community, and as such it does not erase but rather renders fluid and ultimately undecidable the boundaries or “limits” through which distinct identities and communities are constituted, for as the lived body antecedes and founds the very distinction between subject (interiority) and object (exteriority), so does “the flesh of the world” analogously antecede and found the very distinction between every “inside” and every “outside” and thereby always already internally disrupts (or “de-constructs”) any supposed opposition between the two. Thus, Merleau-Ponty’s concept of flesh, or rather his ontology of “radical community” (which is also an ontology of radical difference), is precisely beyond the false alternatives of either a totalizing, assimilative universalism or an atomizing isolationism or relativism; that is, it shows us that communities are never fundamentally instituted through either the reductive inclusion or oppositional exclusion of what is “Other” (which are, indeed, the only conceivable ways communities may be determined in classical liberal ethics and political theory). According to traditional notions of community, one is either wholly inside or wholly outside of a community; one is either entirely included or entirely
excluded. Flesh (or radical community), however, demonstrates that such an opposition between “inside” and “outside,” hence between the traditional alternatives of (appropriative) inclusion and (absolute) exclusion, is just as false as the analogous oppositions of mind and body and self and Other because it institutes, and is therefore below, the very distinction between “inside” and “outside” in the first place and because, moreover, it entails the coupling of every “inside” with an outside, or of every community with other communities, in just the same manner that it entails the couplings of distinct living bodies.

In the same way that reductive materialism is simply the logical counterpart to dualism, in the same way that subjectivism is simply the logical counterpart to an absolutist, “God’s eye” conception of objectivity, or in the same way that the notion of a “mere” appearance is simply the logical counterpart to the notion of a reality “behind the scenes,” so is the totalizing or reductive appropriation of otherness simply the logical counterpart to the strict negation or exclusion of otherness. As we have seen, however, to reject one term of a binary is necessarily to reject the other, and Merleau-Ponty shows that we must reject both of these latter binary alternatives in any sound account of our relations with others and thus in any sound account of the nature of community: neither alternative – neither appropriative identity nor dualistic non-identity, neither assimilation nor exile – can account for the possibility of any relationship to alterity, and given that a relationship to alterity is constitutive of any identity, they also cannot account for the constitution of either selfhood or community.

In Merleau-Ponty, no community can ever be understood to be totally isolated for the same reason that no “self” can ever be understood to be totally isolated; thus, every community (just like every living being of which a community is composed) is constituted by webs of relationships with its “others.” Alterity is fundamentally constitutive of any specific community
– any specific circle of intersubjective existence – for the same reason it is fundamentally constitutive of subjectivity; indeed, any relationship with alterity is community itself. However, alterity can only constitute community or subjectivity insofar as it is not effaced or consumptively absorbed into the latter. Only irreducible alterity can constitute selfhood and community, for anything else is not truly “alterity” at all, yet irreducible alterity cannot be conceptualized as oppositionally excluded from the community or “self” it constitutes, for then there would in fact be no relationship between them at all. No community can ever be constituted by the absolute exclusion of otherness, for such isolationism or solipsism is ontologically impossible for reasons I have already elaborated, yet this also means that no community can ever “include” otherness in any way that would erase or “totalize” it, for that would reinstate the very sort of isolationism or solipsism we have just rejected (and must reject). If a community can never be totally isolated from otherness, then neither can it be a “totalization” of otherness, and this is, in short, the double-bind or aporia at the heart of every community, the double-bind or aporia that is community: no community can ever truly be founded upon the absolute exclusion of others, yet it also cannot absolutely include such others either. In other words, the radical community in which every particular community is embedded signifies, in a sense, a kind of “inclusivity” that is below the conventional opposition between “inclusion” and “exclusion,” for it is, in fact, a process through which communities are instituted through differentiation, and (as we have seen) differentiation entails imbrication. Every particular community is instituted as the distinct community that it is only through a process that entangles it with other communities, hence through a process that necessarily blurs its boundaries or refuses it any purity or closure of identity, a process that, in a word, renders it irreducibly “ambiguous.”
So, if no “community” can ever be understood as utterly isolated, autonomous, or self-enclosed – that is, if no “we” can ever exist independently of its relations with other “we’s” for the same reason that no “I” can ever exist independently of other “I’s” – then neither can it ever be understood as something into which alterities would be totally assimilated, for that is to erase such alterities altogether and thus to construct such a community as isolated, autonomous, or self-enclosed after all. It follows that no genuine community can ever be constructed as either the totalizing, reductive appropriation or as the absolute, oppositional expulsion of otherness(es). Any community “worthy of the name” cannot exclude its extra-communal “others,” yet so too can it not include them in such a way that would efface their genuine, extra-communal otherness. Everything, again, comes down to the “both/and” logic of difference (or of the chiasm): there must be others who are outside of my community, and these others who are outside of my community are also part of my community, or are never absolutely outside of it; my community must “include” or already be open to others who are outside of it, and it must not include them absolutely. The paradox here is the same as the general paradox of alterity: others are “not” me, yet this “not” cannot signify strict negation; others are “not” me, yet they are also constitutive of me, such that there is no sharp, decidable line between where I end and where others begin. And what is true of “the self” relative to others is analogously true of any community relative to other communities (or relative to extra-communal others).

In order to reject any construction of “community” predicated upon the total exclusion of otherness, it is also necessary to reject any construction of community predicated upon the consumptive, assimilative incorporation (or “melting pot” dissolution) of otherness. That is to say, Merleau-Ponty’s concept of what I have called “radical community” is neither absolutely absorptive homogeneity nor atomistic heterogeneity, neither self-enclosed identity nor
oppositional non-identity, neither reductive continuity nor dualistic discontinuity: the alternatives that compose these (roughly equivalent) dyads are logical counterparts, and they are all equally irrelational; thus, genuine, radical community designates neither side of these traditional conceptual antitheses and is precisely what escapes and unsettles them: it is difference, or genuine relationality, all the way down. For the same reason that every “I” must be embedded in a “we,” so too must every “we” be embedded in an “Ur-We,” a field of relations with other communities that constitutes it as the distinct community that it is yet, necessarily at the same time, folds it into other communities or renders the boundaries between it and other communities never sharply determinable and “ever-gaping open.” In Merleau-Ponty, the “flesh of the world” (or simply “Flesh”) explains the possibility of (or is already) precisely a non-appropriative in-corporation of otherness, a non-assimilative yet also non-exclusionary community, which is, again, the only kind of community “worthy of the name,” the only kind of community that any living being – human or otherwise – inhabits, and the only kind of community that has ever constituted what we call a “self.”

Thus, it is never the case that any embodied being is either wholly “inside” a community or wholly “outside” of a community in the same sense that my living body is never either purely an internal subject of experience or merely an external object of experience, for the boundary between any community and its “outside” or its “others” – just the like the boundary between interiority and exteriority and between “self” and “Other(s)” – is never sharp or impermeable but always a site of passage between them, indeed already constituted by its “outside” or its “others” in the first place. As selfhood or interiority is constituted as such by its distension into what is other than itself, so too is any community. The skeins of carnal relations that constitute me as a

distinct self at the price of depriving me of absolute solitude or privacy are the very same as those that constitute any distinct community as such at the price of depriving it of total isolation, autonomy, or sovereignty. Merleau-Ponty’s ontology simply extends to the nature of community what was always known to be true concerning the nature of the “self,” or applies to “the We” what is necessarily true of “the I,” namely that it can never be isolated and is always already entwined with its “outsides” or its “others.” We have seen that what is true concerning the relationship between self and Other is true concerning the relationship between “humanity” and “animality” and is also true, yet more generally, concerning the relationships between any particular intercorporeal communities. There is no such thing as an isolated community, and also no such thing as an isolated “humanity,” for the same reason that there is such a thing as an isolated self. The core thesis of Merleau-Ponty’s ontology – and one that succinctly articulates what he means by the relational, “chiasmatic” institution of all things – is that “inside and outside are inseparable.”882 This inseparability – this differentiation yet necessary, correlative overlapping – of “inside” and “outside,” of “selfhood” and “alterity,” of every “Us” and every “them,” is precisely the radical community that precedes and institutes every particular community, the community that therefore precedes and resists any supposed divisions between particular communities, the community that unsettles any supposed oppositions between any “us” and any “them,” any “we” and any “other we’s.” Thus, Merleau-Ponty’s ontology discloses and foregrounds the irreducible ambiguity that constitutes any distinct being, identity, or community, the intertwining of all things – hence the primordial, positive indeterminacies or liminalities – from which any kind of determinacy is derived; it discloses the relational embeddedness, hence the fluidity, openness, or undecidability, of every boundary; it discloses

882 Phenomenology of Perception, p. 407.
the worldly, incarnate, even aporetic “both/and” logic endemic to the constitution of any
category or community of beings – and endemic to the very Being of beings – that precisely
disrupts the abstract, “either/or” logic through which we conventionally police the borders of
categories and communities.

We have seen that, toward the end of his career, Merleau-Ponty was led to discover a
layer of intersubjectivity or intercorporeity that is more basic than that which had traditionally
been taken for granted (by himself and others) as basic, that is, one that is more basic than any
supposed sphere of exclusively human interaction; he was led to discover an “interanimality,” or
an interspecific intersubjectivity, that is prior to, and the condition of, any intra-specific (e.g.
“human”) intersubjectivity. Of course, since intersubjectivity is always already intercorporeity –
that is, always already a relationship between bodies – it was always the case that it could never
be sharply restricted to only one kind of embodied being, since all embodied beings are, in virtue
of their embodiment and no matter how significantly different their bodies may be,
fundamentally continuous with, or never ontologically divorced from, one another. Merleau-
Ponty’s concept of “interanimality,” then, simply makes explicit what is entailed by his
understanding of Being as “Flesh”: all subjectivities are constituted as such within skeins of flesh
coiled back and over upon flesh, an inter-carnality that does not obey “species” boundaries – or
the boundaries of any supposed community of carnal beings – for the very reason that it is the
source of all of them, or for the very reason that is the source of every form of sentient, carnal
being. All subjectivities are constituted, in other words, by an elemental differentiation from one
another that entails, or simply already is, their communalization, by an element, then, that is the
source not only every particular embodied being but also the source of any particular community
of embodied beings and that I, therefore, call a radical community. This is precisely what
Merleau-Ponty intended to signify as “interanimality” (or, yet more broadly, as “Flesh”), namely the intercorporeal differentiation and imbrication of all things that constitutes them as the distinct things – or as the distinct communities of things – that they are, that “encroachment of everything upon everything”\(^883\) that decents not only the anthropocentricity of conventional phenomenological accounts of (inter-)subjectivity and meaning but also any such supposed “centricity” – any such pure, isolated, privileged origin or supreme perch – in the order of worldly being or meaning, including especially any (explicitly or tacitly) essentialist – hence solipsistic, isolationist, or supremacist – notions of identity and community.

To be clear, “interanimality,” or the pairing or co-constitution of humanity and animality – or rather the foundational overlapping of all communities of living beings, or the radical communalization of all communities – does not necessarily generate or signify a perfectly harmonious, peaceful or congenial communion of living beings or communities\(^884\); rather, it signifies a certain indeterminacy or ambiguity as the constitutive condition of community, an aporetic relational dynamic that we conceal and even attempt to expunge or master through various metaphysical abstractions, conceptual analyses, and clerical, technocratic (“liberal”) sorting apparatuses and classification schemes, in particular through the attempt to define “community” in terms of a transparently recognizable and intelligible or supposedly essential set of properties shared by all and only its members (or in terms of “necessary and jointly sufficient conditions” for community membership). To put the point positively, “radical community” – or Merleau-Ponty’s concept of flesh – signifies an enmeshment with otherness that precisely disrupts our pretensions to any sort of closure, purity, or sharp delimitation of identity or

\(^{883}\) Merleau-Ponty, The Visible and the Invisible, p. 234.

\(^{884}\) Thus, Merleau-Ponty affirms that an inter-animality or crossing of Umwelts happens even between species that are “usually enemies, as the rat lives among vipers” (Nature, p. 173).
community. In short, the point here is that nothing in existence is ever “pure.” No categories of being or identity, no genus or species, no subject or object, no framework of knowledge, nothing immanent, nothing transcendent, nothing internal, nothing external, nothing perceptible, nothing abstract, nothing “mental” and certainly nothing corporeal (as everything ultimately is), no source of existence or meaning, no community, lifeworld, or form of life, is ever “pure.” Purity is perhaps the most fundamental abstraction. Nothing is ever purely what it “is,” and that means that nothing is ever purely not what it “is not.” In short, if there is no such thing as purity of existence, identity, meaning, and thus community, it follows that there is no such thing as purity of exclusion: to say that nothing is ever “pure” or self-contained is to say that nothing may ever pretend to exclude absolutely from itself what is “other” than itself, for what is “other” than itself is constitutive of what it itself is. Thus, all pretenses to strict, oppositional exclusion are but merely pretenses. The point, again, is not there are no such things as distinct beings or communities but that, at the fundamental ontological level, there are no such things as strict, mutual exclusions, or no such thing as pure, self-contained beings, identities, or communities. The point is not there are no such things as boundaries, but that there are no such things as sharp, essential, fixed, clear, or impermeable boundaries. Boundaries are real, but strict divisions or borders are not. All borders are false abstractions. All borders are barbarisms. This is what it means for things to be constituted chiasmatically: that they be constituted as what they are by their contamination by what is other than what they are, which means that what is Other must be truly, irreducibly Other, yet not “Other” to the pitch of contradiction, or not so “Other” that it is ever a completely excluded Other. If there is no purity of “selfhood,” so too is there no purity of otherness. But this does not mean there is no such thing as selfhood or as genuine, irreducible
otherness: the only way to conceptualize selfhood or otherness correctly is to conceptualize them as co-constitutive, that is, as equally impure.

The crucial point here, and the one that we encountered in our discussion of Merleau-Ponty’s appropriation of Gestalt psychology (that is, in our discussion of Merleau-Ponty’s concept of “écart”), is that anything that is ever taken to be, or adopted as, a “foreground” is in no way a central, privileged, originary site of meaning, but one node among infinitely many others through which flesh expresses itself, or but one manner in which Being is incarnated, a stable albeit fugitive hiatus in the becoming of life and worldly meaning. The point here is that any sort of foregrounded site of meaning, style of existence, or experiential standpoint – like the one we call “human” – is always already decentered in the ontological and semiotic order of things, for it is not the source of its own being or meaning let alone the source from which the being or meaning of anything else could be negatively derived; rather, what is fundamental is the reciprocal exchange of sense between itself and its “Other(s),” which is also to say the space itself through which they are differentiated as such that lets such an exchange of sense happen in the first place; what is fundamental is the non-foregroundable dehiscence in Being that couples the terms it separates because it is a cleavage, or opening, between terms from within a common elemental or relational medium, a medium, it must be underscored, that is not an amorphous, monistic, undifferentiated ground or “mass” – not a hypokeimenon or heap of “prime matter,” not John Locke’s “I know not what” that is supposed to support perceptible qualities – but is itself inherently differentiational, or inherently generative of difference. As we have seen, humanity is of animality, yet this of does not designate descent from a simple, undifferentiated origin but rather designates the relational openness – the irreducible, “fecund” distance or differentiational space – between them, the already multivocal and pluriform yet conjunctive, the
already pluralizing and communalizing flesh between them; it indicates the element from and in the midst of which they both (along with everything else in perceptible and intelligible reality) arise and exist in common. When we hear “of” in this respect, we should hear not “on the ground of” so much as “in the midst of”; the human way of being is simply one particular incarnation of the carnal world in precisely this sense of that preposition: it is utterly enveloped and invaded by the world – by “nature” or by “animality” – from all sides yet is also apart from it as a distinct manner of being or “fold” within it, as a particular way of summoning or sublimating the flesh of all other beings. “Humanity” is “of” animality in the sense that to be human is to express in distinctive ways the corporealities of all other living beings or “animals”; it is to express the sensibilities and vulnerabilities, the modes of affect and intentionality, the capacities and incapacities of all of the other bodies in creative dialogue with the world we inhabit in common, the world we inhabit differently yet together all the same. Other animals are “me” and are not me; animal bodies are and are not my body; their living bodies are other than mine yet they are, nonetheless, living bodies, hence articulations of myself and my world, hence enfleshments of the same flesh, hence the flesh of my flesh.

Any standpoint – whether experiential/epistemic, ontological, or ethical – that postures itself as “central” or “primary” in the order of things, relative to which all other things are merely secondary or marginal in their meaning, being, or value, is at once decentered by those very “margins” themselves, for it is precisely these margins that, like the edges through which, say, a tent is staked into the earth, anchor it as such and which are therefore not merely or even “margins” at all; on the contrary, since without such margins or horizons no standpoint would show up in the world, they are foundational to whatever hold upon the world such a standpoint enjoys, yet nothing that is foundational may be regarded as truly marginal or secondary, and
nothing that has a foundation may be regarded as truly “central” or “primary.” There is never a center without a periphery, never a foreground with a background, but the profound insight this reveals to us – the profound ontological kernel of truth in Gestalt psychology – is that the supposed autonomy of the former term in opposition to the latter (that is, the supposed autonomy of any foreground, or the supposed centrality of any “center”) is never anything but imaginary, and that the very opposition between the two is therefore, likewise, imaginary, unstable, and, in the final analysis, untenable; it reveals to us the fact that no position or manner of existence in the world is every purely central, originary, or primary and that, by the same token, neither is any ever merely marginal, derivative, or secondary. In short: no center ever holds, because nothing ever effectively functions as a “center” of meaning, being, or value at all, provided we take that to mean functioning as a purely autonomous, originary, nonrelational, simple locus of meaning, being, or value. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, “what enables us to center our existence is also what prevents us from centering it completely…” 885 Nothing, then, is ever truly “central,” and therefore nothing is every truly “marginal” either. There is never any such thing as a “center” of meaning, being, or value: there are only nodes in the pluriform field of experience and existence that we otherwise, in perhaps a misleadingly totalizing or homogenizing way, call “the world.” And likewise, there are never truly any such things as “margins”: there are only the threads through which any particular node of meaning, being, or value is tied to the world, only those warps and woofs of relations in the fabric that holds together any standpoint, identity, or form of life. The only “margins” are those that have been constructed in order to marginalize certain beings for the profit of others: such margins are “real” in the same way that any social

885 Phenomenology of Perception, p. 85.
construction is real, but they are not necessary or fundamental features of reality, and they can therefore be undone just as well as they can cemented in our imaginations and institutions.

Reality is neither dualistic nor reductively monistic or homogenous, and so it is never the case that any being, or that any category or community of beings, is ever completely excluded from or subsumed by any other: there is only irreducible plurality, and therefore only irreducible relationality. There are differences, and therefore so too are there distinct beings, identities, and sites of experience and meaning, but fundamentally there are never anything but differences, never anything but the fluid and porous interstices between everything that is and in virtue of which anything is. There are distinct, definable “selves,” “entities,” “forms of life,” and communities, but these are only knots of relations and imbrications embedded within a plane of yet further relations and imbrications. There are foregrounds and backgrounds, figures and horizons: there is no question of denying this axiom of Gestalt theory. However, what is truly primary or foundational is never the foreground nor even the background or horizon amid which every foreground stands; rather, what is foundational is the very opening or dehiscence between the two, the non-foregroundable space through which they endlessly fold or shift into and out of one another, the “hinges,” “clear zones,” or “pivots” through which they ceaselessly take up and yield to the place of one another and, in turn, reconfigure one another and clear the way for the appearances of ever new figures or “others,” ever new horizons or vectors of being, ever new “rays of the world” in the universal kaleidoscopic unfolding – in the primal differentiation and overlapping – of phenomena and perspectives, of bodies and meanings, of “lines of force and

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87 Ibid., p. 240-242.
dimensions 888 that Merleau-Ponty calls “the Flesh,” “écart,” or “chiasmatic” relationality and that we otherwise call “Being” or “Nature.”

Thus, it should be clear that Merleau-Ponty never denies the existence of distinct identities or of “individualities,” for then his (or any similar) ontology would indeed plunge all of existence into an undifferentiated monistic substance or sheer nothingness, a Parmenidean plenum that would efface all apparent differences between things in the world; on any such account, Being would indeed be a “motionless identity with itself” 889 or a “night in which all cows are black.” It should be clear, then, that Merleau-Ponty vehemently opposes, and seeks to develop an alternative to, any such ontology; as he writes in one of his working notes to The Visible and the Invisible: “Start from this: there is not identity, nor non-identity, or non-coincidence, there is inside and outside turning about one another…”. 890 As I hope to have shown in the previous chapter, Merleau-Ponty offers an ontology that is beyond the classical alternatives of (reductive) monism and dualism (or any crude atomistic or relativistic pluralism), beyond the dilemma of scientistic naturalism and Platonic/Cartesian supernaturalism; he provides a conception of Being that is below the classical antitheses of identity and opposition, sameness and contradiction, immanence and transcendence, ideality and materiality, the transcendent and the empirical. In a word, Merleau-Ponty provides an ontology of (genuine) difference, which is precisely the only kind that can take seriously or explain correctly what it means to exist as a distinct being (or within a distinct community of beings), what it is to have “identity” or “individuality,” what it is to be a “self” and an “Other.” There is individuation, and thus there are “individuals.” Individuality is a real phenomenon, for without it experience (or

888 Ibid., p. 148.
889 Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, p. 426.
890 The Visible and the Invisible, p. 264.
distinct existence) would be impossible. However, there are no utterly isolated individuals. Individuals – and, by extension, individual communities – are constituted relationally all the way down. Merleau-Ponty argues and continually insists that the same fundamental relatedness that obtains between and constitutes embodied subjectivities also obtains between and constitutes communities of embodied subjectivities, that in just the same way that there is intercorporeity between living bodies, so too is there intercorporeity between worlds, or so too is there an “interworld” (or a space of inter-world-ing). As we know quite well concerning every actual “individual” (human or non-human) body, “individuality” is not the antithesis of hybridity or community but is in fact always a form and effect of it. Though phenomenology teaches us to be suspicious of binaries and that most binaries are in fact false, not all of them are; not every dilemma is a false dilemma, and the fundamental dilemma of ontology – which is not a false dilemma – is this: we may either have static, atemporal, undifferentiated (Parmenidean) Oneness, or we may have difference all the way down, and we cannot have both. We must, of course, accept the latter alternative, and what remains to be done – what always remains to be done – is to extrapolate its consequences rigorously and let them inform further thinking and living.

So, Merleau-Ponty shows us that insofar as we struggle to understand our own “humanity” in opposition to animality we do not know what our humanity is at all and, consequently, that we do not know what “animality” is either. There is no self without others, and no humanity without animality. In order for us to learn what our humanity is, we need to re-attune ourselves to non-human life. We fail to understand our own “humanity” insofar as we endeavor to understand it in isolation from “animality” for the same reason that we necessarily fail to understand the (“human”) self in isolation from (“human”) others or for the same reason that we necessarily fail to understand subjectivity in isolation from corporeality; the same
chiasmatic relationship that obtains between self and Other or between subjectivity and corporeality also obtains between “humanity” and “animality.” We cannot understand “who we are” to the extent that we attempt to do so in such a way that excludes animal alterities from who or what we are, or in such a way that disavows our own continuity or enmeshment with what is “other” than “us,” for just as there is no self without others, so too is there no “us” without “other-than-us” us’s, and finally there are no “we’s” or “us’s” or communities at all without a broader community of all such communities, without a radical community from or within which all particular communities are differentiated as such and in virtue of which they may claim for themselves neither absolute solitude or autonomy nor a central, privileged station in the order of existence.

Since nothing is ever isolated, nothing is ever “pure”; again, there are only relations all the way down. Thus, there are divergent and intersecting axes of meaning and being, hence differences and limits, but there are no “essences” (in the classical sense of the term), no fixed, stable, impregnable boundaries or identities, no pure origins or centers of truth, being, meaning, and value; there are only contestable, labile, bounded yet ever-open regions of being-together, only shifting, mobile vectors of coexistence and otherness, only enfleshments and the their affects, only bodies and communities of bodies in the making, only beings in relations and only relations in genesis, only becomings. There are no pure, simple origins or central, autonomous, Archimedean loci of existence, knowledge, meaning, or value. For this reason, one has already erred whenever one regards the standpoint, style of being, or identity-category from which one experiences and thinks about the world to constitute such a pure, simple, autonomous, central source of knowledge, meaning, or value. Since there are no simple ontological origins (and also no pre-given ontological destinations) – since there is no single, self-contained being or identity
from which the being, identity, meaning, or value of anything else may be unilaterally derived—there are no ontologically basic hierarchies. Again, this is why Merleau-Ponty insists upon the fundamental laterality of every ontologically primary relationship; as we have seen, in Merleau-Ponty “laterality” is the contrary of “hierarchy.” Though we typically conceptualize hierarchies as ladders, they can also be (and indeed always also are) wheels: privileged centers of being, meaning, or value around which derivative, subordinate, marginalized, or deprivileged others orbit, or relative to which all other things in the world ultimately, centripetally refer. Hierarchies consist not only of relations between lower and higher rungs on a kind of “ladder,” but also of relations between “centers” and “peripheries.” Any schema in which things are organized in terms of a center and a periphery is hierarchical, for it constructs a certain position in the world as one relative to which all other beings, identities, or forms of existence may be negatively derived and measured, a position in the world in whose orbit all other “positions” are but satellites. So, if there is any normative injunction that follows from Merleau-Ponty’s ontology, it is to decenter every apparent “center” of being, meaning, or value and thus to dissolve all apparent “margins” or “peripheries”; it is to break the wheel of every hierarchy and to “get the walls out of our heads.”

Human beings are the most ontologically insecure beings we know to have ever existed; this is proven by the great extent to which we neurotically attempt to distinguish ourselves from the rest of animate existence, and though “human exceptionalism” is a thesis that would be comedic if it were not so destructive, perhaps ironically this is the one thing that (if anything) defines us uniquely: our profound ontological insecurity, the fact that we are the only animals that obsess over the question concerning what essentially makes us the kinds of animals that we are, the fact that we so desperately crave an answer to the question concerning what (if anything)
distinguishes us absolutely from all other forms of life. It is obvious how dangerous this insecurity is. However, it is dangerous only insofar as it motivates us to take flight into the false comfort of ontological security, which is in fact the true danger. The true danger is the notion that there is ever any such thing as a pure, “uncontaminated,” isolated, or autonomous identity or source of meaning to which one might cling; the true danger, the gravest violence is to attempt to expunge from oneself or from the world the ambiguity (or positive, “fecund” indeterminacy) that always already inflates everything to meaning and presence in the first place. Merleau-Ponty’s ontology teaches us that we must attempt to think and to comport ourselves in the world in such a way that our existence or identity – that this royal “we” – is always registered as fluid, porous, ambiguous, and questionable, or in such a way that we are always disclosed to ourselves as enmeshed with what is other than ourselves, as always in a process of becoming who or what we are, as always implicated in a “never-finished differentiation,”\(^ {891} \) and thus as in no way the center or eschatological fruition of any universe. This is, I think, the ethical crux of any philosophy of difference, “ambiguity,” or “radical community.” And it is perhaps why Merleau-Ponty, who did not explicitly write very much on ethics, elliptically and provocatively remarks that his notion of ambiguity may “give us the principle of an ethics.”\(^ {892} \)

As I argued in the previous chapter, one must, indeed, acknowledge that one cannot escape or absolutely transcend one’s own situated, material perspective in the world (for there is no such thing as a “view from nowhere”), yet, in acknowledging this, one in fact opens oneself to appreciating and affirming others, even to risking oneself in suspending one’s own comfortable absorption in the familiar, even to exercising one’s innate vulnerability as a finite, bodily being in the effort to form bonds of affection, solidarity, or at least partial understanding across

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\(^ {891} \) Ibid., p. 153.

apparently unfathomable depths and impassable distances. As we have discussed, one always
risks oneself in truly extending oneself to an Other, and perhaps this risk is the only kind of risk
worthy of the name. And is not “the animal” the “Other” *par excellence*? “…Isn’t the animal,”
Derrida asks, “more other still, more radically other…than the other in whom I recognize my
brother, than the other in whom I identify my fellow or my neighbor?” 893 If to be “Other” is to
exceed one’s own familiar horizons of experience and intelligibility, do we not have to step
outside our own human standpoint or community in order truly to encounter otherness? If we
never take leave of our “all-too-human” domain, do we not remain absorbed in “sameness” and
deny ourselves any relationship with genuine “transcendence” or “alterity”? Is it not insufficient
that we only allow ourselves to be exposed to, indeed to extend respect and hospitality to, human
others? Is that really hospitality? To welcome and affirm otherness, do we not have to open our
own human standpoint or community to that which is other-than-human? Must we not open our
doors to “the animal” – must we not always be ready to let “the animal” into our community,
into ourselves through the threshold between us – if we are ever to practice hospitable living, or
if we are ever truly to enrich our community through a transgression of its boundaries?
Moreover, if alterity truly is constitutive of what it is be a “self” or “subject,” must it not also
already be the case that we are constituted by relationships with “animal” alterities, that
“humanity” is inseparably enlaced with other-than-human-alterities, that indeed genuine alterity
has always already been other-than-human alterity, that non-humans have always been present in
and amidst “our” community? Must it not also already be the case that the presence of other-
than-humanness has always already infested our humanity, has always already lefts its traces –
its pawprints, its dander, its ecdysial residue, its trails and secretions – on us? Must our doors not

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893 *The Animal That Therefore I am*, p. 107.
already be open to “the animal”? Paradoxically, must animals not have already passed through
the threshold between us and them in order for us ever to have been an “us”? 

Here, I think, we broach Levinas’ fundamental error, the woeful contradiction that derails
his philosophical project: he goes on at length about the importance of “radical” alterity and
provides often brilliant phenomenological analyses of it, yet in the end he maintains that it is
either only or exceptionally the human face through which alterity is revealed, that “the epiphany
of the face qua face opens humanity”894 and that a dog, for example, although not without a
“face,” does not present a face in its “purest form.”895 As Derrida remarks ironically, this is quite
a “surprise, coming from a thinking that is so “obsessed”… so preoccupied by an obsession with
the other and with his infinite alterity.”896 For Levinas, the foundation of ethics is a relationship
with otherness: only otherness interrupts the self-absorption of the ego and, in imposing upon it
the demand to respond to something that transcends it, always already makes it a proper – an
especially and primarily ethical – “self” or “subject.” Yet, in the end, for Levinas, the so-called
“Other” must be a human other; the face of the other must resemble my own; thus, the “Other” is
not really – or at least not radically – “Other” at all. In Levinas, “[the] subject of ethics, the face,
remains first of a fraternal and human face.”897 On his own terms, Levinas’ refusal to extend full
alterity to non-human animals is a refusal of alterity as such. Levinas goes on at length about
otherness, and he goes on at length about how otherness must precisely disrupt and in principle
be irreducible to what he designates as “sameness,” or anything whose meaning, being, or value
is constituted only relative to the ego and its narcissistic enjoyments, concerns, and schemas of

895 “The Paradox of Morality: An Interview with Emmanuel Levinas,” in The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking
896 The Animal That Therefore I am, p. 107.
897 Derrida, ibid., p. 106.
knowledge, yet he also suggests that “the Other” can only have a very specific kind of face, namely the assumed human one of that very ego or subject with which his phenomenological examination of subjectivity and ethics begins. In other words, the Other must be “absolutely Other,” yet also “the Same” – that is, comfortably within the abode of my own familiar, human-centered experiences of the world – after all.

In Levinas, the Other must be irreducible to me, and the otherness of the Other must be revealed through a “face” that, as a transcendental condition of its revelation, is irreducible to any literal, empirical, or physical “face,” yet the “Other” must reflect my own visage after all: the otherness of the Other must be revealed through a face with two eyes, two ears, a mouth, and a nose arranged just so (or at least in the general manner of a typical human’s physiognomy). I think this is one of the fundamental contradictions that characterizes and beleaguer Levinas’ whole philosophy, and given his otherwise rich descriptions of lived, ethical experience, it is one that makes it such a disappointment. As Lingis remarks, “…he [Levinas] wants to find ethical experience only in the face of his confrontation with another human being…all this seems to me so limited. If it’s true that I feel that hunger and need of another human being is a demand put on me, then it is also about other species. If I come upon an injured bird or deer in a path, it is exactly the same thing, it seems to me.”898 For Levinas, only a human face can disclose alterity, or only within the circle of humanity does otherness have a place in the world, but in the end this means that it is only from within what Levinas himself calls the sphere of “sameness” – only from within the circle of the ego’s quotidian absorption in the world (insofar as this ego is always implicitly a human ego) – that there is such a thing as otherness, but on Levinas’ own

terms this does not merit being regarded as “otherness” at all. Levinas is right that anything that
remains within the orbit of the ego is not truly “Other,” but if this ego is defined as “human,”
then it must follow that nothing within the orbit of humanity (qua humanity) can be truly, or at
least most radically, “Other” either.

So, if there is such a thing as “radical alterity,” if there is such a thing as “alterity worthy
of the name,” it cannot be a human face, or at least it cannot only or merely be a human face, that
presences it: it must also be presenced by a canine face, a feline face, a bovine face, an ovine
face, a cervine face, a porcine face, a murine face, an ursine face, an equine face, an elephantine
face, a cetacean face, a phocine face, an amphibian face, a piscine face, an avian face, an
ophidian face, a chiropteran face, an arachnid face, a vermicular face, an octopean face, a
molluscan face, a scyphozoan face; all of these faces and more are the kinds that truly bring me
face-to-face with otherness. And if we are able to recognize our own (human) faces in the mirror
and in one another, it must have always already been the case that all of these other “faces” – all
of these other diverse forms of embodied life with which our own is enmeshed – taught us how
to do so, that they in fact taught us what “a face” or what “otherness” as such really is and that
therefore, no matter how much we wish to repress or disavow the fact, have from the beginning
shaped, encompassed, invaded, reflected, refracted, haunted our own sense of what “we” are, our
own sense of what is “our own.” As Merleau-Ponty argues, it is always already the case that all
of these other, non-human othernesses lift human otherness – or one’s sense of a human “we” –
to being and intelligibility, just as it is always already the case that human others or that a human
“we” lifts me – my “ego” or my selfhood – to being and intelligibility.
So, if there is an experience that truly “subjectifies” me, an encounter that interrupts or “paralyzes” the economy of my “sojourning,” appropriate egological enjoyments and activities, or if there is what Levinas calls a “traumatism of astonishment” that primordially, or at least most exemplarily, awakens me to what I am, it cannot consist only in an encounter with an “all-too-human” alter-ego; rather, it must also be an encounter with non-human otherness, an encounter with a kind of radical otherness that is, as such, paradoxically constitutive of me, an encounter with an “animal” alterity that is paradoxically constitutive of my humanity, an encounter with a being who is irreducibly Other than me yet, paradoxically, an “animal that therefore I am,” too; it must also be an encounter with the wails of a deer who, having recently been struck by a car, lies dying on the side of the road; it must also be an encounter with the broken wing of a baby bird at the foot of the tree from whence it fell; it must also be an encounter with the terror of a cow or a pig who, in his final moments, futilely attempts to flee his fate with the slaughterhouse; it must also be an encounter with the listlessness of the tiger who paces back and forth in his cage at the zoo; it must also be an encounter with the elephant who sways in mourning over the death of one of its own; it must also be an encounter with the emancipatory optimism and perseverance of the octopus who ceaselessly invents new ways to escape its captivity; it must also be an encounter with the cunning of the raven who hides his cache of food from his comrades; it must also be an encounter with the kindness of the rat who would rather forgo the greater profit than deny his friend the pleasure of a treat; it must also be an encounter with the altruism and bravery of dolphins who protect swimmers from sharks in the

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900 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 171.

901 Ibid., p. 37, 172.

902 Ibid., p. 73.
open seas; it must also be an encounter with the turtle stuck on its back, whose helplessly flailing legs express a plea for help and impress upon me the demand for a response just as much as any outstretched hand; it must also be an encounter with the destitution of a duck’s oil soaked body; it must also be an encounter with the manta ray who intentionally approaches a scuba diver and turns itself over to reveal the fish hooks stuck under one of its eyes; it must also be an encounter with the worm who squirms in protest against oblivion under one’s foot; it must also be an encounter with the ecstasy of the puppy who insatiably licks one’s face upon arriving home; it must also be an encounter with a cat whose deep, rhythmic purrs of contentment and tenderness swoon into my chest or lap and invite my caresses; it must also be an encounter with the eyes or jaws of a crocodile that, as Val Plumwood describes,903 reflect back to oneself the predatory indifference with which one tends to regard the rest of the living world and thereby show that one is, in fact, always already potentially prey as well as predator, that one is already meat, too, and that thereby force one to confront the inconvenient continuities between oneself and the rest of world one wishes to dominate or to not have to be much concerned about at all, the material vulnerabilities – the susceptibility to dismemberment, consumption, decay, and unspeakable suffering – one otherwise represses and displaces onto other creatures yet which nonetheless are, in truth, among the deepest, most important aspects one’s creaturely being.

If there is, moreover, such a thing as an experience that poses the question of hospitality or that calls my own ‘being-at-home’ in the world into question, it is not originally – or at least not only, or at least not most paradigmatically – an encounter with another human in need of shelter; it is an encounter with the cockroaches who scurry about under my stove, with the mice who dwell in my walls or cupboards, with the beaver or opossum who tunnels beneath the

903 See Plumwood, The Eye of the Crocodile, especially chapters 1 and 3.
foundation of my house, with the spider who spins its magnificent web across the threshold of my front door, with the raccoons who scavenge my garbage, with the deer who graze upon my yard, with the aphids or caterpillars who feast upon my garden, with the stray cat who visits me for food and water, with the stray dog, outside in the frigid depths of a Chicago winter, bereft of the warmth of a home and family, with the birds who nest in the tree outside my bedroom window: these are what call the boundaries within which I dwell, the walls I erect for myself in the world, into question; these are what truly pose the question of hospitality: whether one happily welcomes, grudgingly tolerates, simply ignores, or attempts to eradicate them, a response one way or another is what they unavoidably demand, and the question concerning who or what has a place in my home, the question concerning what indeed even is my home, the question concerning who or what is my kin, and therefore the question concerning who or what I even really am, is the one they unavoidably pose. Moreover, insofar as it is even possible for them to present such demands or questions in the first place, they already offer testament to a more profound kinship – what Merleau-Ponty, again, calls a “strange kinship”\(^{904}\) – between us, yet one which we are prone to forget or disavow; they already indicate a deeper, “radical,” quasi-transcendental community to which we all belong and which is, as such, outside any binary (“either/or”) logic of inclusion and exclusion, or which signifies an “inclusivity” that is prior to, and the very condition of, the abstract categories or sorting apparatuses of classical liberalism, prior to questions of membership and rights, prior to the oppositions between “public” and “private” and “citizen” and “alien”: a “body-politic” that is, like indeed my own body, an assemblage of heterogenous bodies and communities in symbiosis. If we are truly to resist what

\(^{904}\) _Nature_, p. 214, 271.
Levinas calls “the imperialism of the same,”905 I think it is clear that we must resist (especially Levinas’) “humanism,” and that means resisting “human/animal” dualism wherever we find it, perhaps even resisting the very opposition between “sameness” and “otherness” (which, in Levinas, always risks collapsing into dualism) as well. Levinas is right to insist that the self is only constituted as such in response to Others, that the “subject” is precisely “subjectified” by its responsiveness to what it can never assimilate to itself. Likewise, for Merleau-Ponty, since subjectivity is always already intersubjectivity, I am constituted all the way down by others to whom I am responsive. “I am no more than the respondent for the interpellation that is made to me,”906 yet, as a living body, I am always already responsive (in some manner) to any other living bodies, that is, to non-human others as well as to human others. I am thus already all of those “animals” I have ever loved or helped or even ignored, and I am also all of those animals I have ever harmed, killed, or consumed.

The issue of “consumption” – that is, the issue concerning whose flesh we are willing or unwilling to consume – brings me to the title of this concluding chapter, and is one that dramatically poses the larger issues I have been addressing here. As I have attempted to make clear up to this point, community is inherently aporetic (inherently a “possible impossibility” or “impossible possibility,” to borrow a concept from Derrida), yet there is an aporia endemic to conventional (especially classically liberal) notions of community, or endemic to any flawed or spurious constructions of community, that rends them apart from within: such communities attempt to constitute themselves by exclusions that, precisely because such exclusions are constitutive of them as such, are not truly exclusions; such communities are constituted by excluded others that, precisely because they are constitutive of them as such, are not truly or

905 Totality and Infinity, p. 87.
906 Merleau-Ponty, The Visible and the Invisible, p. 11.
wholly excluded from them, and which therefore tacitly dispel the fictive isolation, autonomy, purity, or exclusionary, “gated country club” or “walled-garden” security such communities suppose themselves to enjoy. Any attempt to define a community relative to others to whom membership would be absolutely closed, or any attempt to define a community in terms of utterly fixed and uncrossable borders, is undermined by the conceptual, ontological, and performative impossibility of such closure or purity of existence. The borders of such a community are already transgressed by the exteriority they pretend to seal away, by the otherness such a community falsely otherizes as absolutely excluded from itself or as the negation of itself. The upshot of Merleau-Ponty’s account of the human-animal relationship is essentially the deconstructive one that any “human” standpoint already necessarily “includes” – is already constituted or shaped by – what it might pretend to exclude from itself or to displace outside itself: what “we humans” call “animality.”

The attempt to define community through such self-defeating exclusions, and in particular the attempt to define community through the imposition of an erroneous, inherently unstable human/animal binary, is perhaps revealed no more clearly or dramatically than by dominant normative attitudes toward carnivorism, that is, by patently irrational yet deep-seated attitudes concerning whose flesh it is (and is not) acceptable to consume. As we have seen, non-humans clearly present ethical appeals to me or impose ethical demands upon me. The possibility of such appeals or demands, however, discloses a more basic, “background” ethical community or inter-relatedness already in place, a radical ethos in the original sense of the term, that is, an abode or space in which we – human and non-human beings alike – already commonly dwell. The question whether to extend hospitality to a creature who entreats entry or trespasses into my home discloses, as a condition of its givenness – as the condition of the possibility for
such a question of hospitality even to present itself – a background life of ethical involvement already up and running, a radical (moral) community in which we are already commonly situated and implicated. However, there are many ways in which we repress this fact, many ways in which we self-defeatingly attempt to deny the ties that bind us to other forms of life, or many ways in which we attempt to “otherize” others so that they are not even “others,” often not only in order to rationalize exploiting or murdering or not really giving much thought to them at all, but also in order to displace outside ourselves – that is, to displace onto such “others” – those aspects of our own existence we would rather not confront honestly or would rather pretend to transcend.

Yet, as I mentioned earlier, repression is inherently self-undermining: through repression, the ego attempts to deny or to expunge from the purview of its awareness some aspect of itself, yet doing so is a performative contradiction, for the ego would never attempt to repress something that is not, indeed, a part of itself in the first place; therefore, the ego always affirms through repression that which it seeks to deny through repression, and this is why, as Freud knew, repression never truly succeeds: what is repressed is never erased, but is rather driven into the depths of the unconscious from which it inevitably reemerges in new guises and has effects – usually deleterious effects – on one’s conscious life (and on the lives of others). What is true of repression at the level of individual subjectivity, however, is also true at the level of intersubjectivity (or community). Unfortunately, one of the most common ways in which we humans conceptualize the most basic community to which we belong – that is, one of the most common (yet self-defeating and fallacious) ways in which we conceptualize the community of “humanity” – is precisely through the repression of our constitutive enmeshments with non-human forms of life or with a more-than-human (“natural”) world, or through the attempt
circumscribe “humanity” within fixed and impermeable boundaries. As I will now elaborate, this is exemplified by the manner in which our conception of “food” informs our conception of community, by the manner in which our sense of “who we are” is often quite literally constructed (speciously and speciesistically) in terms of which bodies we refuse to eat and which bodies we not only deem it permissible to eat but also actively encourage one another to eat and even take great delectation in eating. Our attempt to constitute a (“human”) community through the repression of our constitutive ties to various (“non-human”) alterities – indeed, any notion that we occupy or command a “pure” and utterly isolated or sovereign community – clearly inflicts grave violence upon those alterities we attempt to repress or absolutely exclude or “purify” from ourselves (and often even inflicts grave violence upon “ourselves”); such repression is in itself an act of violence. Yet, the self-defeating or specious nature of such a violent construction of community holds out the promise that, provided we recognize it for what it is, we might cultivate in its place a less violent community, a better, more just manner of living together and with Others. As Freud believed, the hard work of undoing repression is necessary for the psychical health and integrity of the individual, and provided there is such a thing as repression at the level of a “collective unconscious” (or provided there is no such thing as an absolutely isolated individual), it stands to reason that it is also necessary for the health and integrity of a community.

How we define “food,” or what (and who) we judge to be edible, has much to do with how we typically conceptualize, perform, and enforce a shared moral and political identity. The issue concerning whose flesh we judge to be acceptable to consume, and the issue concerning how we are – or how ultimately, in fact, we are not – able to justify such a judgment and the practices supported by it, reveals one of the most salient yet fallacious and needlessly violent
ways in which we typically construct a sense of community, as well as the general sort of “logic” or pathology at play in the construction of any false or oppressive, chauvinistic or supremacist conception community. In doing so, it also reveals the community to which we truly belong, the radical community we often attempt to repress through spurious marginalizations, exclusions, and hierarchies.

In any critical examination of our conception of the moral community, it is necessary to examine the lines we draw (often unreflectively) between those who do and those who do not have moral worth, to examine how we determine who or what falls on which side of such lines, and then to interrogate the assumptions that motivate such discriminations and thereby interrogate the acceptability or stability of such lines. As I have been suggesting, what (or who) we eat, and conversely what (or who) we refuse to eat, reflects our sense of what (or who) we are, for it is precisely in drawing such a line between edible and inedible flesh that we typically attempt to draw a line between “ourselves” and morally sub-considerable or non-considerable “others.” The production, preparation, and consumption of “food” are inherently normative practices through which we ritualistically police the outermost boundaries of moral considerability. Our concept of food – or rather our concept of who or what may be regarded as consumable – saliently determines how we draw a line between who or what does and does not have intrinsic or full-fledged moral standing, or how we circumscribe the scope of our moral community; indeed, it is perhaps the most common way in which we attempt to impose an impenetrable, insurmountable border between “self” and “Other,” “us” and “not-us,” “human” and “animal,” but if my (and Merleau-Ponty’s) arguments up to this point have been successful, no such border really exists; any such border is a false and thus unstable (or intrinsically self-deconstructing) imaginary, one that – like all such imaginaries – may come to be reified through
thoughtless practices and habits of thinking that affirm it, yet nonetheless violates lived experience or the very conditions of its own construction and thus collapses as soon as we wakefully attend to it.

In particular, the points I am making here are demonstrated by the curious taboo against cannibalism that we (at least in the West) commonly observe, that is, by the curious fact that many of us not only regard as acceptable but also encourage and take great delight in the consumption of “animal” flesh yet are deeply, reflexively averse to the consumption of human flesh; indeed, we do not merely express disgust toward the consumption of human flesh but condemn it so strongly that it is often constructed as “monstrous,” as a transgression more severe or depraved than most other moral evils: to eat a human being is to cross an uncrossable line. So, what is really going on here with this disparity between our attitudes toward the consumption of human and non-human flesh? There are two distinct questions to unpack here: why does the consumption of human flesh repulse us? Conversely, why does the consumption of non-human flesh not repulse us? In other words, why do we have such an aversion to cannibalism, and why do we not have the same aversion to ordinary carnivorism (i.e., to the sort that we practice when we sit down to a meal of non-human meat)?

My hypothesis is that both of these questions, and that the answers to them, are interrelated: the taboo against cannibalism and the widespread acceptance of non-cannibalistic carnivorism are in fact two sides of a single psychosocial complex. Consider first the taboo against cannibalism. Why are we so repulsed by the notion of eating human flesh? Like most taboos, this one does not seem to be a rational norm once we examine it closely; like many taboos, it seems to be little more than a socially constructed superstition or phobia. Yet, as Freud knew very well, taboos are quite telling if we wish to understand ourselves.
The taboo in question here is critically examined by the classic horror film *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (dir. Tobe Hooper), and though I do not have the space here to provide an extensive reading of this film, it is a pertinent point of reference. *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* is unquestionably one the most culturally and aesthetically influential horror films in the history of cinema. Even if one has not seen this film, one is likely familiar with its main antagonist, “Leatherface,” who surely belongs in the pantheon of culturally significant “monsters” (along with the likes of Dracula, Freddy Krueger, Jason Voorhees, Michael Meyers, Pinhead, and so on). The imagery of an imposing, hulking man concealed behind a mask made of human skin, donning a butcher’s apron, grunting and sometimes squealing like a pig, and wildly wielding a chainsaw in pursuit of human prey for the purpose of cannibalistic consumption, is as striking and unsettling today as it was when it first premiered in 1974 (thus predating by four years John Carpenter’s *Halloween*, which is usually credited with birthing, or at least popularizing, the slasher sub-genre).

Leatherface and his family hunt and kill other humans for food, and indeed they do so in ways that are coded as not relevantly different from the manner in which humans hunt and kill non-human animals for food. All of the horrors presented in the film – the actions of Leatherface and his family in preying upon the main characters – are presented as analogous to the killing and preparation of cattle for food. For example, when we first encounter Leatherface, he lures one of the main characters (Kirk) into his house by squealing like a pig, and immediately proceeds to beat him to death with a hammer, which is the very method used for killing cows in slaughterhouses that had coincidentally been described earlier in the film. And Leatherface is, of course, always donning a standard butcher’s apron. When Kirk’s girlfriend, Pam, later goes searching for him, she is eventually apprehended by Leatherface; as she’s kicking and
screaming, Leatherface hangs her on a meat hook, and then proceeds to use his iconic chainsaw to dismember Kirk’s body in front of her. What is most striking about this scene is that Leatherface does not exhibit even the slightest hint of malice or obvious, “mustache twirling” sadism in his actions. He places Pam on a meat hook in an utterly nonchalant way, as though her screams do not even register perceptually (let alone ethically), and he dismembers Kirk’s body in a purely mechanical fashion, as nothing more than a rote chore. What is supposed to strike us as horrifying here is not simply Leatherface’s violence, but the completely casual indifference with which he performs it: the very same sort of attitude with which we, of course, perpetrate and support violence against non-humans, or the very same sort of attitude that, as Adorno describes, we exhibit whenever we regard an animal as “just an animal.” Later in the film, during the iconic dinner table scene in which the film’s “final girl,” Sally, is a captive dinner guest, the “father” of the family remarks: “I ain’t take no pleasure in killing, but some things gotta be done.” Of course, this is less a statement of a practical matter of fact than it is the common manner in which we always rationalize or “naturalize” exploitation and cruelty. That the father says this while Sally is hysterically crying and pleading for her life suggests that what is truly “monstrous” is not, in fact, a supernatural monster like Freddy Krueger or Jason Voorhees but rather the kind of evil that Hannah Arendt famously characterizes as “banal”: an internalized (and institutionalized) casual, thoughtless indifference to the suffering and wellbeing of others, or a docile compliance with the organized oppression and brutalization of others, that is utterly ordinary or “all too human,” a kind of evil that is far more unsettling than any other precisely because it is unexceptional, or precisely because it is not something we may comfortably externalize in the form of some preternatural, inexplicable “inhuman” force or agency (as is the case in Lovecraft’s writings, for example). Freddy Krueger may be terrifying, but not just anyone can be Freddy
Krueger. Far more terrifying is the monster that *anyone* can be, the monster that we ourselves perhaps already are.

We strongly recoil from the thought of eating other humans, yet many if not most people not only do not recoil from the thought of eating animals but embrace the practice gladly. The *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, of course, wants us to examine the assumptions implicated in this disparity, and suggests that such a disparity, in fact, reflects an indefensible double-standard. So, the Texas Chainsaw Massacre is decidedly *not* about the horror of watching 20-somethings on a road trip being hunted and slaughtered by a deranged butcher; it is *not* a film about the horror of a human family that preys upon other humans for food; rather, it is about the extent to which these horrors mirror others with which we are already complicit and about the psychosocial complexes and flawed conceptual frameworks that underpin and motivate our complicity: our complicity, that is to say, in the horrors of killing non-human animals for food; it is about the horror of the delectation we take in consuming murdered flesh, and it is about the horror of how murdered, ingested and digested flesh cements the borders we typically erect to establish a moral, political, and cultural community; it is a film that intends to prompt us to question the assumptions according to which we conceptualize and police the outermost boundaries of moral considerability. In short, insofar as we needlessly kill and consume the flesh of other animals, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* suggests that we are all *butchers* like Leatherface and his family: those who willfully suppress our capacity for empathy, or rather those who, as living bodies, repress the vulnerabilities and bonds with other living bodies that are essential to our embodiment and that make empathy possible in the first place: carnal vulnerabilities and bonds that in fact always already disrupt any supposed opposition, or blur any supposed line, between ourselves and those whose flesh we murder and consume.
Of course, it is easy to explain why what Leatherface and his family does is wrong insofar as they commit murder, i.e., they kill and eat people who do not consent to be meals. However, murder alone does not quite seem to capture the evil or depravity we readily ascribe to their practices. Their actions are commonly regarded as far more egregious than simple murder. In murdering other humans in order to eat them, they seem to overstep an even more significant moral line, and it is this line that the film really wants us to examine. Arguments against murder are not interesting; what are more interesting are arguments against cannibalism, since in fact such arguments seem to be conspicuously wanting. Everyone will readily agree that it is wrong to kill other humans in order to eat them without their consent. However, what if the people who Leatherface and his family ate had volunteered to be killed for food? What if, moreover, Leatherface’s family only ate those who died of natural causes and who expressed their willingness for their postmortem flesh to be used for food (much like how many of us check the organ donor box on our driver’s licenses)? My intuition is that most people would still be repulsed by the practice. My intuition is that, even if we had sufficient evidence that a person died of natural causes and expressed consent to be consumed, we would most likely refuse to eat that person if we were offered to do so; indeed, some might even prefer to starve rather than consume the flesh of a fellow human. Consider, for example, the (in)famous case of Uruguayan Air Force Flight 571. This flight, which crashed into the Andes in 1972, became a media spectacle because its survivors resorted to cannibalism in order to stave off starvation. The survivors only ate those who had perished in the crash, and they reluctantly resorted to doing so only in order to survive, yet nevertheless this incident was received by the general public with repugnance, and many even morally condemned the survivors.\footnote{An interesting side-note here is that one of the survivors, in order to defend himself and his fellow survivors}
strange, to say the least. As Freud knew, the things that instinctively repulse or disgust us – the things we most strongly, uncritically resist, even and especially when there are no apparently good reasons to do so – tellingly reveal much about ourselves (as every psychoanalyst knows, the most significant and productive moment in analysis is precisely when the analysand resists or attempts to avoid some topic, for that is when one knows one has struck a nerve rooted in the deepest reaches of the unconscious). We kill many non-human animals for food often without giving it a second thought, yet eating other humans is so odious to us that it is widely considered beyond the pale regardless of the circumstances (nearly everyone is a Kantian when it comes to opposing cannibalism); indeed, it is often regarded as the most extreme mark of venality. Leatherface and Hannibal Lecter are not “monsters” because they murder people. Murder is wrong, of course, but also rather commonplace. Murdering people for the purpose of eating them, however, is unthinkable. It is telling that we would probably regard a person who murders people simply for the pleasure he or she takes in murder for its own sake to be somehow less monstrous or nightmarish (even if only very slightly less so) than someone who murders people for the pleasure he or she takes in the taste of their flesh.

So, to return the question I posed above, what is going on here? Why do we tend to have fundamentally opposite reactions to the practices of Leatherface and his family and to those with which we ourselves are compliant when we eat animals? Why are we so deeply, viscerally averse to eating other humans, while we hardly flinch at the notion of killing non-humans for food? As I will soon suggest, our literal viscera seem to have much to do with it. The answer to this question that immediately presents itself is that the taboo against cannibalism indicates the manner in which we commonly construct and police the broadest boundaries of our moral community or against public condemnation, claimed that their cannibalism was consistent with Christian values by comparing it to the taking of communion.
polis, i.e., the line that separates who or what does and does not have full moral standing. That is to say, we typically construct the outermost boundaries of moral considerability in terms of *who or what is and is not consumable*, or in terms of which bodies are and are not at least potentially edible (or “on the table” for being consumed, pun intended). I think that this largely explains why eating human flesh is a widely heeded taboo and why, conversely, eating non-human flesh is not only *not* taboo but is a widely encouraged practice; it has everything to do with how we – even if largely unconsciously – conceptualize, erect, and enforce the borders of the moral community.

This point brings me, finally, to the title of this concluding chapter: “We Are What We (Do Not) Eat.” We are all familiar with the saying “we are what we eat,” which has been a cliche for quite some time. As I will soon discuss, I think that there is an important sense in which we indeed *are* what we eat, however there is also a sense in which we are what we *do not* eat, in that we typically define the “We” – our fundamental moral and political community – as consisting of those beings whose bodies are categorically forbidden from being eaten. Those who are taken to belong fully to the moral community are precisely those whose bodies are *off the table*, those who are accorded a special dignity that proscribes the consumption of their flesh. We are what we do not eat in the sense that the broadest boundaries of the moral and political community are typically constructed in terms of who or what is and is not consumable. This is why the consumption of many if not most non-human animals is widely considered acceptable, for most non-human animals are excluded from the moral community; indeed, the very category of “the animal” usually designates any living entity that is not a full-fledged member of the

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908 This saying was supposedly first coined by French lawyer and politician Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin in a book on gastronomy in 1825, in which he proclaims: “tell me what you eat, and I’ll tell you what you are.” However, this notion was perhaps more famously taken up by Ludwig Feuerbach in his essay *Concerning Spiritualism and Materialism* (published in 1863), in which he writes that “man is what he eats.”
moral and political community (which further reinforces the fact that such a category has always been a moral and political category). We should also observe that this explains why consuming non-human animals is not only widely considered acceptable but is also strongly, systemically *encouraged*, and why vegetarianism or veganism is often resisted or lambasted (naturally, the underlying ideological impulse here is to enforce, and neutralize any potential challenges to, status quo ethical boundaries). Moreover, this is also why cannibalism is so commonly regraded as abhorrent, for to engage in cannibalism is precisely to transgress the apparently foundational boundaries of the moral community; it is to overstep, flout, and thus threaten the moral line that seems to hold human society together, a line that is also usually supposed to sharply separate “the human” and “the animal.”

As Val Plumwood puts it, we conceptualize ourselves as “eaters of others but never ourselves eaten.” In short, we do not eat “our own” because we define “our own” as precisely those whose flesh we do not eat. This is correct but also rather circular. What remains unexplained is precisely why we define “our own” – the scope of the moral community – in such a way. Why, in fact, is such an obsession with food – or why is such an obsession with the consumption (and non-consumption) of flesh – so deeply constitutive of our conception of who “we” are, so endemic to our sense of a shared identity and moral dignity? Why exactly does the taboo against cannibalism serve the ideological function that it does? Why do we reflexively define the limits of ethical considerability in such a manner? Why, that is, do we think that eating our fellow humans crosses a line that threatens the very foundations of human identity and society? As is usually the case when genuine reasons are absent, I think the reason for this is a deep, often unconscious, psychopathology. My answer to these questions is that our reflexive

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909 *The Eye of the Crocodile*, p. 18.
aversion to eating one another, or our impulse to condemn cannibalism as the most profound violation of ethics (one even more repugnant than ordinary murder), is grounded in a deep existential anxiety concerning our very own consumability, which is to say our materiality and the vulnerabilities that essentially accompany it. Our aversion to consuming other humans has much to do with our own refusal to confront authentically our own meatiness and mortality, the often terrifying, destabilizing inevitabilities of death and decay; it is in fact an effort to repress such vulnerabilities and unnerving truths and, therefore, our own carnality.\footnote{It is relevant to mention here the symbolism of Leatherface’s mask of human skin. As striking and disturbing as such an image is, it serves more than just to shock and disturb us. In choosing to conceal whatever individual, autobiographical identity he may have behind a mask of human skin, Leatherface is indeed choosing to perform his identity in a particular way, and in a way that is, in a perverse albeit undeniable sense, more honest or authentic than the way we perform our own when we kill and eat animals. In wearing a mask of human skin, Leatherface is performing his identity in a way that blatantly affirms and conveys, rather than denies or tries to repress, the ontological, material continuity between himself and his victims; his mask precisely blurs the boundary between his own flesh and the flesh of those he butchers; he is in fact enacting the truth of “being what he eats,” and in that sense he is not so much wearing a mask at all, while it is precisely we who are the ones who wear masks when we pretend to be categorically opposed to the animals we kill and consume. The Texas Chainsaw Massacre does not thereby suggest that Leatherface is better than us morally (if anything, it simply invites us to consider that he may not be any worse than we often are morally), but it does suggest that he is at least more authentic or honest.}

We are essentially embodied beings, and embodiment entails mortality and, therefore, indeed, edibility. This is something we all know, yet it is also something we typically attempt to repress, and we do this by constructing ourselves as predators and never, in principle, as possible prey; at one level, we know we are consumable, yet at another level we also pretend as if we are categorically unconsumable because we cannot bear to confront our finitude, which is also to say our “animality,” our fleshy vulnerabilities, our messy continuities with others (especially those we “otherize” as “animals”) and with the natural world, hence our potential to be someone else’s meal, our equal potential to be prey as well as predator. Though we attempt to repress our embodiment, mortality, or edibility, what is repressed always finds a way to surge up from the recesses of the unconscious to impact how we live, and in some cases certain disruptive
experiences or events arise to shake us out of comforting metaphysical illusions. Plumwood describes finding herself between the jaws of a crocodile as precisely this sort of experience:

It is not a minor or inessential feature of our human existence that we are food: juicy, nourishing bodies. Yet, as I looked into the eye of the crocodile, I realized that my planning for this journey upriver had given insufficient attention to this important aspect of human life, to my own vulnerability as an edible, animal being… Of course, in some very remote and abstract way, I knew it happened, knew that humans were animals and were sometimes – very rarely – eaten like other animals. I knew I was food for crocodiles, that my body, like theirs, was made of meat. But then again in some very important way, I did not know it, absolutely rejected it.911

We are all sentient flesh, but flesh we are nonetheless. Every living being is, by virtue of being an incarnate being, consumable, which is also to say susceptible to death, aging, decay, suffering, illness, and manifold forms of violence. Our carnality means that we may be preyed upon, maimed, tortured, killed, and, yes, eaten. There is simply nothing that reminds us more vividly of our own carnality – of our own meatiness and messy vulnerabilities, of our transience and mortality – than the thought of being eaten, the vertiginous notion of ourselves being ingested and digested, reduced to food and excreted matter. This is why we recoil from and condemn the notion of eating other humans yet often embrace eating non-humans: it is a (misdirected, ultimately impossible) effort to cope with anxieties we harbor concerning our own embodiment through the construction and performance of an identity – a shared, communal sense-of-self – intended to repress, exclude, or “otherize” our embodiment and, thus, the anxieties rooted in it; that is, it is an effort to conquer or resolve through repression – to distance from ourselves as much as possible – our own materiality and the vulnerabilities entailed by it. We do this – we distance ourselves from our own inherent edibility and, by extension, our materiality – by defining ourselves as precisely inedible in opposition to other bodies that are

911 The Eye of the Crocodile, p. 10.
edible, other bodies that may rightfully be killed for food because they are, unlike us, “just bodies.”

Thus, in eating other animals while refusing to eat fellow humans, we enact an identity that distances from ourselves as much as possible our irrecusable materiality, or that at least attempts to exclude embodiment and bodily vulnerability from our conception of our being. In eating other animals while refusing to eat fellow humans, we implicitly deny that we are akin to those animals; we implicitly affirm ourselves to be essentially not like them, essentially something more than consumable flesh. We are beings who are not consumable, hence beings whose embodiment is not an essential aspect of the kinds of beings that we are. So, insofar as we unconditionally condemn cannibalism yet embrace other forms of carnivorism, even the most anti-Cartesian thinkers among us ultimately affirm themselves to be “ensouled” bodies in opposition to the soul-less bodies they consider it permissible to eat, bodies they consider it permissible to kill in order to eat because, after all, such bodies are (unlike themselves) “just” bodies. It is clear that our deep-seated anxieties concerning our own mortality and bodily vulnerabilities are not only at the heart of the common yet unfounded taboo against cannibalism, but are also at the heart of human/animal dualism and Platonic/Cartesian somatophobia. Sitting down to a meal of non-human flesh is, we might say, a ritualistic form of violence through which we attempt to disavow or master our very own susceptibility to that very form of violence, which means disavowing, as a constitutive aspect of our existence, the carnality that renders us susceptible to violence in the first place and that sentences us to death and putrefaction. Yet, all “souls” are embodied, and all living bodies are “ensouled.” Subjectivity is necessarily enfleshed, and all forms of flesh are necessarily continuous with one another. Thus, if one feels disgust toward eating a fellow human, one should feel the same disgust toward eating an “animal,” for
the latter is, in fact, equally a form of “cannibalism.” If I eat an “animal,” I am indeed eating “the flesh of my flesh.”

This point brings me to other side of the equation I mentioned earlier: while in one sense, or at one level, we “are what we do not eat,” in another sense, and in fact at the fundamental ontological level, we undeniably are what we eat insofar as we, too, are incarnate, hence mortal, subjectivities; we too are living bodies; we too are sentient, vulnerable flesh; we too are meat. Our effort to repress our embodiment by drawing a sharp line between non-edible and edible bodies and by placing ourselves strictly and nearly exclusively on the former side of that line is a misguided and self-defeating ruse, for we are essentially vulnerable, bodily, mortal, decomposable, and consumable beings, as all living beings are. As Merleau-Ponty remarks, “inasmuch as we are incarnate beings, violence is our lot.” Of course, one of the things Merleau-Ponty means by this is that susceptibility to violence is essential to our corporeality (and therefore to our being), yet this essential truth about our condition is something we attempt to repress by displacing it exclusively onto others (i.e., “animals”) whom we deem it acceptable to consume, or something we pretend to transcend by constructing ourselves – that is, our “humanity” – as somehow ontologically exceptional or supreme relative to all other forms of life, that is, as inedible. As Plumwood writes:

Although, by definition, all ecologically embodied beings exist as food for some other beings, the human supremacist culture of the West makes a strong effort to deny human ecological embodiment by denying that we humans can be positioned in the food chain in the same way as other animals.

We may eat other animals (while refusing to eat other humans) in order precisely to repress our intercorporeal continuities with them, or in order to deflect the “repugnant” truths about bodily existence we would rather not confront honestly (truths that are encapsulated literally and

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913 The Eye of the Crocodile, p. 16.
symbolically by the notion of one’s flesh being eaten), yet like all forms of repression, such an
effort is inherently self-undermining. All forms of repression are, again, self-defeating because
the truths that are disavowed through repression are, by virtue of that very disavowal,
simultaneously affirmed by it. We only attempt to repress or to displace outside ourselves those
things that are truly constitutive of what and who are. Thus, the prohibition against cannibalism,
coupled with an endorsement of non-cannibalistic carnivorism, reflects what is, in the end, a self-
defeating effort to efface, otherize, or overcome our very own animality, our essential carnality
or “meatiness.”

Ironically and in truth, the very “brutishness” Leatherface exhibits in his predation and
butchery, and presumably the similar brutishness we exhibit in our own common forms of
predation and butchery, also exhibits the very “animality” – or at least a characteristic
stereotypically attributed to animality – that we otherwise, at the same time, disavow in ourselves
in opposing ourselves to the “animals” we eat. As The Texas Chainsaw Massacre suggests,
there is no relevant difference between the violence of cannibalism and the violence of other
forms of carnivorism, for to posit such a difference is ultimately to posit a sharp line of
demarcation between “ourselves” and those we otherize as “animals,” yet, as we have seen, no
such sharp line of demarcation exists: “human/animal” dualism is, like every dualism, a false

914 I wish to mention here that our violent aggression toward animals is a pathology of a piece with other forms of
violence, or with other toxic and abusive enactments of identity that are supposed to repress various anxieties and
insecurities. Just as homophobia implicitly affirms the fragility of heterosexuality, and just as misogyny implicitly
affirms the fragility of masculinity, aggression against non-humans similarly implicitly affirms the fragility of our
identity as human, or reveals deep sources of anxiety that shape our existence and that we attempt to distance or
exclude from ourselves by oppositionally displacing them onto non-humans, that is, by pretending that we do not in
fact share with non-humans their messy embodiment, their flesh, their inherent edibility.

915 Thematically, this is most likely why Leatherface never “speaks” but rather only grunts or squeals. His behavior
is intended to parodically perform the very “animality” we humans typically displace onto those beings we call
“animals.”
abstraction. Whether I slaughter pigs or other humans for the pleasure of how they taste and in order to assuage whatever pathological anxieties about my own existence I might harbor, I needlessly inflict violence upon another living being, and in doing so repress not only their subjectivities but also my own subjectivity, for in doing so I must repress the vulnerable flesh that we share and in virtue of which we are subjectivities at all. The basic lesson here is that borders are inherently unstable – indeed, are either false or contingent rather than natural or essential constructs – if those forms of violence through which they are enforced are not relevantly different from those through which they are transgressed. Our (seemingly ungrounded) revulsion to cannibalism ought to prompt us to question the categories and assumptions that inform our other predatory and carnivorous practices and that, by extension, inform how we construct the boundaries of a moral and political community. Perhaps the most profound “food for thought,” then, consists of questions concerning how we do and should think about food. Questions concerning “what (or who) is for dinner” – questions concerning who is on the table, who is always off the table, and who is allowed to be at the table – are, I think, among the fundamental questions of ethics and political philosophy.

Thus, everyday carnivorism (the killing and consumption of non-human flesh) and the widely accepted taboo against cannibalism are two sides of the same pathology: the ultimately self-defeating repression of our own embodiment. As this pathology often informs how we construct our sense of “the moral community” (in that we conceptualize the boundaries of the moral community in terms of those who are and who are not edible), recognizing it for the self-undermining (and violent) pathology that it is has profound ethical and political implications, implications for how we conduct ourselves in the world and conceptualize our relations with others, human and non-human alike. We attempt to mark and sustain a sharp line between
ourselves and those whose bodies we murder for consumption, yet no such line, of course, “really” exists. Human beings may differ in many significant ways from many non-human beings, just as many non-human beings differ significantly from one another. Yet all living beings are of the same flesh. Human beings are, like all forms of subjectivity, essentially embodied beings, and to be an embodied being is to be inescapably, incessantly vulnerable to violence, and a renewed affirmation of this shared vulnerability may provide the basis for a better, more just, less violent, non-anthropocentric ethical and political framework. For Merleau-Ponty, all forms of life are characterized by an essential “fragility”; life is “not a hard nucleus of being, but the softness of the flesh.”916 This is perhaps why Merleau-Ponty draws our attention not only to the differences between ourselves and non-human others but also to the “weaknesses” or vulnerabilities, “failures and limitations” we share with them, weaknesses or vulnerabilities we possess, and to which we are responsive, simply in virtue of being embodied beings: weaknesses or vulnerabilities that do not efface the differences between us but nevertheless refute any supposed essential ontological (and ethical) **oppositions** or **divides** between us and which are, indeed, synonymous with our ontological (and ethical) continuity. Thus, Merleau-Ponty claims that “[the animal] displays very clearly the struggle involved in existing in a world into which it has been thrown, a world to which it has no key. In doing so, it reminds us, above all, of our failures and our limitations.”917 I think that this reminder is significant, for it deviates from our traditional tendencies **either** to stress (often to the point of dualism) differences in “capabilities” between humans and non-humans **or** to stress (in ways that reproduce the very anthropocentrism one might thereby intend to combat) shared capacities between humans and non-humans. Merleau-Ponty insists that animals ought to remind us not of how “special” or

916 *Nature*, p. 238.
917 *The World of Perception*, p. 76.
“exceptional” we are, but on the contrary of how vulnerable we too are as embodied, animal beings. Animals fundamentally teach us not about our own superiority but, on the contrary, about our common flesh and finitude.

Merleau-Ponty does not develop the ethical implications of this line of thinking, but I think this line of thinking rightly suggests that shared *incapacities*, or shared “weaknesses” and vulnerabilities – not, as is traditionally (anthropocentrically and also ableistly) posited, shared *capacities* – are the foundation of a moral community. Thus, Merleau-Ponty suggests here a profound reorientation of ethical thinking, since typically ethical considerability is defined in terms of the possession of certain properties or capacities, and typically those who argue that we should extend ethical consideration to animals do so by indicating certain morally relevant properties or capacities we share with them. However, it is our shared vulnerabilities or weaknesses – not our shared “capacities” – that in fact motivate and make possible our attentive concern for embodied others; it is in fact our shared vulnerabilities or “limitations” that make us dependent upon one another and that enable us to be responsive to, or to care for, one another’s needs. By drawing our attention not to our shared capacities but rather to our shared incapacities, Merleau-Ponty suggests, I think, an approach to ethics that undermines anthropocentrism or human-supremacism in a way that does not erase the meaningful differences that may obtain between humans and non-humans. Such an approach would be the foundation for more responsive (and responsible) ethical thinking and acting, that is, for an “ethics of care” that would be both radically egalitarian yet also radically attentive to particularity, which is also to say an ethics that truly takes our communal embeddedness with others (and with other communities of others) seriously, an ethics that would ground ethical consideration in *difference*, that is, not in either a *totalizing* “sameness” or in any sort of dualism or supernatural
transcendence; in other words, such an approach to ethics would be grounded in the recognition of what Merleau-Ponty calls a “strange proximity,” a proximity that is “consonant” or “synonymous” with distance. At an ontological level, this proximity that is consonant or synonymous with distance is “flesh”; at the level of ethical comportment, it is vulnerability, that is, one’s reflexive, corporeal recognition of another’s needs, one’s affective responsiveness to another’s potential for flourishing or suffering. Sentient flesh is, by definition, vulnerable flesh, and so to share sentient flesh is to share vulnerability, and to share vulnerability is to share a “Good,” even to share an “ethos.” If there is such a thing as a “univocity” of Being that is synonymous with difference or relationality, it is what Merleau-Ponty calls “flesh”; yet this univocity of Being is also a univocity of ethical-being, which is precisely being-vulnerable, being always already caught up in webs of interdependencies and affective relations with other living bodies.

In short, we may attempt to distance ourselves from our own materiality, but material beings we nevertheless essentially are, and materiality is the fundamental equalizer. Any violence I inflict upon others is violence I inflict upon flesh I share with others. “Animal others” are “the flesh of my flesh,” and thus despite the ways in which we attempt to separate our flesh from theirs through certain normative culinary practices, when we consume an animal – when we consume any living being – we are always also consuming our own flesh. We thus literally are what we eat. Carnivorism is, indeed, always “cannibalism,” and only bad metaphysics or some sort of psychopathology may convince us otherwise.

So, if we acknowledge rather than repress our embodiment, we may be able to cultivate more compassionate and egalitarian habits of dwelling and attunement. When we falsely (and

918 See, again, Merleau-Ponty, Signs, “Introduction,” p. 15.
919 See, again, Merleau-Ponty, The Visible and the Invisible, p. 135.
pathologically) construct ourselves as somehow divorced from or above materiality, so too do we
construct ourselves as divorced not only from other forms of life but even, in truth, from one
another, and we know all too well the consequences of such a pathological construct. Despite the
apparently endless debates that continue to be had among competing moral theories, I think it is,
in the end, incontestable that vulnerability, or rather that responsiveness to the vulnerabilities of
others (and vulnerability is always already a responsiveness to the vulnerabilities of others), is
the foundation of ethical and political life, the “Ur-condition,” so to speak, of having (and
sharing) a “Good.” Exposure to, hence implication in, violence is the foundation of ethics, and to
be an embodied being is already, necessarily or by definition, to be exposed to and implicated in
violence. It is thus that our embodiment is not only the necessary precondition for ethical
existence but is already – and without being a contradiction in terms – ontologically ethical. As
Merleau-Ponty writes:

…A pure consciousness would be in such a state of original innocence that any harm done to him would
be irreparable. But to start with a pure consciousness is beyond my grasp; even if I tortured his body I
could not do him any violence. In such a case the problem of violence does not arise.920

If we could neither flourish nor fail to flourish, or if we were disembodied souls that, as such,
could never be penetrated by the often harsh contingencies and tribulations of material existence
– if neither the world nor other living bodies could ever “get under our skin,” or if, that is to say,
we could never truly do violence to one another through our bodies because, as pure spiritual
beings, we would be insulated from such violence – there would never be any such thing as
“good” or “bad,” or questions concerning “right” and “wrong” would never arise for us. One
must not merely “have” a body but must truly be a body in order to have a “good” and in order to
be receptive to, as well as implicated in, the goods (and bads) of others. If this is correct, then

insofar as we repress or attempt to separate ourselves from our materiality, so too do we repress or separate ourselves from the very possibility of ethical living and thinking at all.

I have been attempting to demonstrate here that Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy provides the resources for developing a thoroughly non-anthropocentric ethical framework. Moreover, however, I have also made the stronger claim that Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy (in particular, that the ontology he develops in his later writings) entails such a framework. Lastly, then, before I bring this chapter and this project as a whole to a close, I wish to articulate the argument for this claim, an argument that, given all of the arguments I have developed thus far, is rather straightforward, and one whose premises will not require extensive elaboration.

It seems to me that anthropocentrism is, in the final analysis, logically analogous to every bad “ism” (that is, to every chauvinistic moral or ideological framework), but in particular I think we may most clearly expose its fundamental, fatal flaw by showing that this flaw is analogous to that of another false, yet perhaps more easily refutable, moral theory: ethical egoism. The case against any strictly anthropocentric moral theory that follows from everything that I (and Merleau-Ponty) have argued up to this point, then, is this: we can show that ethical egoism is false because it is essentially committed to a kind of solipsism, yet this solipsism is analogous in all relevant respects to the basic ontological assumption of anthropocentrism; therefore, anthropocentrism is false for reasons that are analogous to those that show ethical egoism to be false. The falsity of ethical egoism implies the falsity of anthropocentrism because both presuppose relevantly similar false abstractions. In short, both ethical egoism and anthropocentrism depend upon a kind of solipsism, and so to refute the former is also to refute the latter; indeed, to refute solipsism in general is to refute every moral or political framework
that posits a fundamentally isolated ethical subject, whether this subject be an individual self or an individual community.

Ethical egoism (which, from this point forward, I will refer to as simply “egoism”\(^{921}\)) is a moral theory that few philosophers have ever advocated, yet it is one that many philosophers have attempted to refute. From Plato’s treatment of Thrasymachus and the ring of Gyges in the *Republic* to Hobbes, Hume, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, John Stuart Mill, Marx, and Rawls (to name just a few), the “problem of egoism” is one that has occupied much attention in ethics and political philosophy, for egoism is a view that seems to violate many deeply held moral intuitions (and to have many apparently unacceptable consequences), yet it has also been rather recalcitrant to refutation. Of course, arguments in favor of egoism are easy to critique (and I do not think that any of the arguments that have ever been proposed in favor of it are sound), yet to critique arguments in favor of a theory is not to demonstrate that it is false (even if arguments for a view are poor, the view in question may nevertheless be true, and to suppose otherwise is to commit an *ad ignorantiam* fallacy). So, many philosophers have attempted to develop arguments of their own *against* egoism, and usually these have turned out to be nearly as flawed as the traditional

\(^{921}\)“Egoism” is an ambiguous term because it may designate at least two distinct (and indeed mutually exclusive) theories: on the one hand, it may refer to the theory I am discussing here (ethical egoism), which is a moral theory, or a theory of right and wrong conduct. On the other hand, it may refer to the theory of *psychological egoism*, which is not a moral theory at all, but is rather a theory of human nature. According the latter, all human actions are (as a metaphysical or natural fact) necessarily motivated by self-interest, whereas, according to the former, all actions should be motivated by self-interest. Psychological egoism claims that altruistic conduct is impossible, whereas ethical egoism acknowledges that altruistic conduct is possible but claims that such conduct is *immoral*. Thus, psychological egoism does not make a normative claim, and in fact, if it were true, it would render all normative theories moot (given that it is, in fact, a version of strong determinism). And though, as I have argued, ontology and ethics, “facts” and “values” are not separable from one another, it is nevertheless the case that psychological egoism (which is merely a descriptive theory) cannot provide support for ethical egoism or, indeed, for any normative theory. After all, if all of our actions truly are necessarily determined by self-interested motives, there is no point in arguing that they should (or ever should not) be motivated by self-interest. There is no point in arguing that we should perform actions we are already determined to perform anyway, nor (given the principle that “ought implies can”) is there any way to argue that we should ever resist actions we are determined to perform. Now, I think psychological egoism is just as erroneous as ethical egoism, but to critique it is beyond the scope of my focus here (however, that being said, the major flaw of ethical egoism can easily be shown to be a major flaw of psychological egoism as well). So, when I refer to “egoism” here, it should be understood that I mean ethical egoism, not psychological egoism.
arguments for egoism itself. Many have attempted to demonstrate, for example, that egoism commits some sort of fundamental logical error or inconsistency or that it is self-undermining in some way, and I do not find most of these kinds of approaches to be convincing or successful. However, here I am not going to survey the history of philosophical treatments of egoism, but will only draw attention to what I take to be the most decisive (and perhaps the only decisive) refutation of it.

In short, egoism is a moral theory that posits that an action is morally right if and only if it maximizes the self-interest of the agent who performs it (and is thus morally wrong otherwise). Egoism, then, is a particular form of consequentialism, since it defines right and wrong actions in terms of their consequences, yet it is opposed to most other forms of consequentialism (that is, to various versions of utilitarianism) because it claims that the interests of others should never matter to me or be counted in my deliberations as equal to my own. According egoism, the supreme (and indeed only) moral duty that any agent has is to act in such a way that exclusively aims to advance his or her own interests. Egoism does not deny that I can, in fact, care about and seek to aid or realize the interests of others for their own sake, but it does deny that it is ever morally right to do so. According to egoism, to aim to advance the interests of others as ends in themselves is morally wrong, a violation of the one and only moral duty one has, namely the duty only to promote one’s own interests. To be clear, this is not to say that it is never permissible to help advance the interests of others; rather, it is to say that is never permissible to advance the interests of others for their own sake. Egoism licenses literally any kind of action – no matter how apparently cruel or beneficent – as long as it maximizes the self-interest of the agent who performs it. Thus, on an egoistic view, I am permitted to care about and take up the interests of others instrumentally. If ever there is a situation in which helping to advance another
person’s interests ultimately advances my own, then helping to advance another person’s interests is the right thing to do. According to egoism, then, it is only ever morally right to advance another person’s ends merely as a means to advancing my own; it is never right to advance another person’s ends as ends in themselves. Whenever I consider what I ought to do, egoism dictates that I ought only to calculate and perform the course of action that will maximize my self-interest. Only purely self-interested conduct is morally right; conversely, purely altruistic conduct is always morally wrong.

As I have mentioned, many responses to egoism have been developed throughout the history of Western philosophy, but I think that the only decisive refutation of it consists in a refutation of the fundamental ontological commitment upon which it depends: radical individualism. It is obvious that egoism depends upon a radically individualistic account of the self, and given all of the arguments I have developed up to this point, such an account of the self is clearly a false abstraction. Egoism is only able to posit the exclusive pursuit of self-interest as morally right – or in fact is only able to posit things that would be exclusively in one’s own self-interest to pursue in the first place – because it posits such a thing as a self whose existence is fundamentally isolated from others. Only a self that is fundamentally separate from others is one whose interests may be considered fundamentally separate from others. Egoism claims that everyone ought to pursue their own interests exclusively, or that the highest good is the good of the individual. Such an account of right conduct or of “the Good” clearly assumes a particular account of what it means to be a “self” or “individual”: it assumes that selfhood or individuality is something prior to sociality or community; it assumes that the self is essentially atomistic or asocial, that is, radically independent of its ties to others or to a community. Only if individuals are fundamentally isolated from others may their goods or interests be fundamentally isolated.
from others. I can only conceive of my own interests as radically separate from others – as interests that are strictly, exclusively “my own” – if I conceive of myself as radically separate from others. Only if I am isolated can I have, or be oriented toward, a Good that is exclusively or absolutely my own. Egoism logically depends upon a radically individualistic or atomistic conception of the self. Egoism thus reduces to solipsism, and so in order to refute egoism it is sufficient (and perhaps necessary) to refute solipsism. And we have already refuted solipsism.

Though hardly any philosophers have regarded egoism as a sound moral theory, the conception of the self to which it is wedded is one that is, in fact, deeply rooted in Western philosophy, politics, and culture. So, although not many philosophers have been egoists, many have accepted or advanced the atomistic or solipsistic notion of the self that underlies egoism. Egoism is an offshoot – indeed, it is the logical consequence and purest distillation – of the ideological framework that has dominated Western culture at least since the Enlightenment, namely classical liberalism. Given the fact that in our contemporary American lexicon the term “liberal” tends to designate political views left-of-center on the mainstream political spectrum, the category of “classical liberalism” (or of simply “liberalism”) may invite confusion, for in political philosophy it does not mean what “liberal” tends to mean in contemporary, everyday American political discourse. Classical liberalism is the ideology that we inherit from European Enlightenment political theory, metaphysics, and epistemology, beginning (roughly) with Hobbes and further developed by philosophers such as Descartes, Locke, Hume, Rousseau, Kant, and Mill. “Classical liberalism” is an ideological framework that in fact encompasses what today we classify as “conservative” and “liberal” views alike. With only a few exceptions (such as various Marxist and anarchist theories, which are often classified as “leftist”), classical liberalism covers the entirety of our contemporary spectrum of political views.
I do not have the space here to elaborate fully classical liberalism’s theoretical commitments and the history of its development. For our present purposes, however, we can define classical liberalism in terms of its central and most distinctive commitment: individualism. We can define classical liberalism as the theoretical framework according to which the “individual” is the fundamental unit of social reality and analysis; it is defined by an individualistic account of selfhood, agency, and social institutions, as well as by an individualistic derivation of normative (i.e., ethical and political) principles. Classical liberalism posits the individual as metaphysically prior to, and independent of, society, and understands social phenomena, or political systems and institutions, in terms of the aggregate behaviors and motivations of fundamentally discrete and separate individuals. Thus, classical liberalism is committed to an atomistic or monadic conception of the self: the assumption that individuals are essentially isolated and separate from one another, or essentially independent of any social roles and relationships. On a liberal view of the self, the self is not constituted by any situated, embodied social markers of identity. Since, on this view, the self is metaphysically prior to, and independent of, any social roles and relationships, it is radically free to craft for itself its own identity and destiny. As Will Kymlicka writes:

On the liberal view of the self, individuals are considered free to question their participation in existing social practices, and opt out of them, should those practices seem no longer worth pursuing. As a result, individuals are not defined by their membership in any particular economic, religious, sexual, or recreational relationship, since they are free to question and reject and particular relationship…the self is prior to its socially given roles and relationships…

The “liberal self,” then, is an utterly solitary, atomic, deracinated self, a self that is divorced from others and untethered to any time or place or even to any particular (gendered, sexed, racialized, or otherwise culturally inscribed) body; it is a self that is unencumbered by any essential social

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attachments, a self that is abstracted entirely from any intersubjective characteristics, roles, and relationships; it is a radically independent and autonomous, asocial or isolated self. Of course, liberalism acknowledges that individuals have social roles and relationships, but according to liberalism individuals only choose to adopt such roles or to enter into such relationships, and are therefore intrinsically not defined or constituted by those roles and relationships: individuals exist apart from their social roles and relationships in much the same way that, in classical metaphysics, a substance exists and subsists apart from its properties. The liberal self may have relationships with others, but these do not penetrate or shape the core of its being; they are only ancillary or adventitious features of its existence. In other words, liberalism maintains that the individual is essentially free to adopt or abandon any social markers of identity in much the same way that one is free to adopt or abandon articles of clothing: presumably I remain the same self regardless of how drastically I might decide to change my style of attire, for – at the fundamental ontological level – I am not the clothes I wear; I choose my clothing, and a chooser is always prior to, or separate and distinct from, what it chooses, and this is how liberalism conceptualizes the relationship between the self and its social roles and relationships. Thus, the liberal self is fundamentally an island unto itself, which is why Marx sarcastically remarks that bourgeois political economists (i.e., classical liberal political philosophers) are “fond of Robinson Crusoe stories.”

Classical, Enlightenment liberalism is perhaps best exemplified by Hobbesian social contract theory and Cartesian solipsism. In general, social contract theory deduces moral and political principles and institutions from the supposed consent of free, rational, self-interested individuals. Contractarian moral or political theorists ask us to perform a particular “thought

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experiment” (or *epoché*): they ask us to abstract human beings from their social and historical context – to strip away any characteristics that might belong to human beings by virtue of modern civilization – and thus to imagine them in a pre-social, pre-civilized condition, or in what is often referred to as a “state of nature.” Though the philosophers that belong to the social contract tradition of political theory have different accounts of how human beings would be in such a state of nature, they each reason that legitimate moral and political principles are those that such pre-social individuals would agree to for the sake of their own interests. Hobbes, for example, famously assumes an egoistic theory of human psychology; that is, he assumes that human beings are essentially isolated and self-interested, and that life in a state of nature – life without the rules that civilization imposes upon us – would therefore be, as he famously puts it, “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short,” or a “war of all against all”; however, given our individual needs and desires for self-preservation, it would be in our best individual interests to come together and enter into a contract according to which we give up some of our natural freedom for the sake of the security and welfare that only a State can provide, and from this we proceed to establish the principles according to which such a State would best function. We should notice here that for Hobbes (as for all thinkers in this tradition) it makes sense to conceptualize individuals as abstracted from any concrete social context or as isolated from one another. For Hobbes, individuals in a “state of nature” are essentially atoms or billiard balls propelled along trajectories of self-interest that every now and then collide with another, upon which time conflicts arise requiring some form of resolution. And for Hobbes, a State or society is simply the ultimate means of conflict resolution that atomistic, rationally self-interested individuals would construct for themselves. Society is a contract just like any other, and just like any other contract it derives its legitimacy from the free consent of the parties or contractors.
involved in it. Even though most social contract theorists admit that such a “state of nature” is not meant to be understood as a literal, historical time and place, they nevertheless advance the notion that individuals are in some sense fundamentally prior to society: society is a contractual arrangement agreed to by free contractors, but that means that such contractors are themselves logically prior to “society”: there may have never been, as an anthropological or historical fact, such a thing as a human being in such an asocial state of nature, yet it is still the case that the individual is a priori, metaphysically independent of social relationships. So, on this view, “society” is not something that constitutes the “self,” for logically the relationship is the reverse: “the self” constitutes society in a contractual arrangement with other selves, and such selves (or “contractors”) are therefore, by definition, originally asocial. Such a reduction to a “state of nature” is clearly similar in certain ways to Husserl’s reduction to a “sphere of ownness.” However, unlike Husserl or Merleau-Ponty, liberal social contract theorists fail to realize that such a reduction is, in fact, impossible, or that the very notion of an asocial self is a conceptual absurdity, an entity that not only has never historically existed but one that can never, in principle, be encountered experientially or even conceptualized consistently. As we have seen, the concept of an asocial self is a contradiction in terms, for there are no intelligible characteristics of a “self” that do not ultimately derive from relations with others.

As for Cartesian solipsism, nothing is perhaps most emblematic of classical liberalism than Descartes’ presumption to be able to doubt the existence of others altogether. In his search for absolutely certain, indubitable truths, Descartes famously retreats inward, takes stock of all of his beliefs, and systematically discards those that are even the least bit uncertain. Of course, as we know, Descartes famously concludes that the only thing of which he can be certain is his own bare existence, or his own consciousness. Anything supposedly outside his own mind, including
his body and especially the existence of other people, may be doubted; the only thing that cannot be doubted is the only thing to which he has direct and immediate access: his own existence as a mind, for that is entailed by the very act of doubting anything in the first place. Descartes, then, formulates the metaphysical scaffolding of liberal political philosophy, namely the kernel of radical individualism that was in fact already advanced by Hobbes before him and that would be taken for granted by liberal thinkers after him: the self is, fundamentally, an isolated ego. Any relationships with others, or even the mere existence of others, may be doubted and are therefore not essential to subjectivity, or not constitutive of what it is to be a self.

So, in classical liberalism the fundamental unit of social reality and analysis is a *presocial* or *asocial* entity. This is, indeed, a patent contradiction, but it is also an often pernicious, insidious abstraction. There are such things as “individuals,” but *individualism* (at least in its traditional Western formulations) always misdescribes what it is to be a “self” or an “individual,” for it posits the “self” or the “individual” as an entity that is independent of its ties to others, as something that may “have” but is nevertheless not constituted by its communal roles and relationships; as such, it is at best a false abstraction and at worst an oppressive ideology intended to suppress our constitutive solidarity with others in order to safeguard certain institutions or systems of power that would be threatened by an awareness of that solidarity. Now, we may contrast a classical liberal concept of the self with a broadly “communitarian” one. Communitarianism, like classical liberalism, encompasses a broad range of (often disparate) views, but in general, or broadly construed, it rejects classical liberal individualism. A communitarian concept of the self, as its name suggests, affirms the primacy of *community* in the constitution of selfhood, identity, and lived experience; it affirms the fact that subjectivity is necessarily founded intersubjectively, that there is no such a thing as a self that could ever be –
logically or in fact – removed from its social roles and relationships. Communitarianism affirms the fundamentally communal embeddedness of “selves,” bodies, and identities, the intersubjective constitution of experience, agency, knowledge, and flourishing.

If the arguments I have articulated up to the point are sound, then I have already established that an egoistic or liberal conception of the self is necessarily false and that a communitarian one is necessarily true. We have seen that there is no such thing as a self that is prior to or outside of a community, no such thing as subjectivity without intersubjectivity, no such thing as an “I” independent of a “We,” no such thing as an individual that could exist independently of its bonds with others. Egoism (or, more generally, classical liberalism) is an utterly mistaken understanding of what is to be a self, for selfhood is intersubjectively constituted. A self can only emerge in the world – can only achieve even a minimal awareness of itself or of anything at all – amid communal horizons of being, meaning, and knowing. To be a self is to be a member of a community. A self is nothing but an ensemble of overlapping social roles and relationships, a skein of affective bonds with other living bodies. No one “springs forth from nothing” or is “king on his desert island,” and this is why we must reject the false notion that we begin from an atomistic, asocial condition and only later construct a community through some sort of deliberative and contractual calculus or negotiation, and it is also especially why we must reject the notion that there are ever such things as interests, goods, or ends that are radically, exclusively “mine,” since, as we have seen, there is no such thing as “mineness” at all without otherness. In short, if there are no such things as isolated individuals, then neither are there such things as isolated, individual interests or goods. Every “good” is always already a communal Good; every “interest” is always already caught up inextricably in relations with

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others. Egoism is essentially, irredeemably solipsistic; it is true only if the self is utterly isolated. Therefore, to vanquish the “incomparable monster” of solipsism is also to vanquish egoism in one blow. This is why Korsgaard claims that she believes that “the myth of egoism will die with the myth of the privacy of consciousness,”\(^9\) both of which, as I hope to have demonstrated, are myths that Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy dispels, and along with them he also dispels, as I will soon discuss, the myth of anthropocentrism.

Since “there exists not a plurality of subjects, but an intersubjectivity…,” the intersubjective goods are also features of the world, features of the world that are just as real or “objective” as anything else that is constituted intersubjectively. The publicity (or “objectivity”) of the world is already the publicity of a public, common Good. Since to be a living being is to be oriented toward a “good,” and since to be a living being is to be enmeshed with other living beings, it follows that to be a living being is already to be enmeshed with the goods of other living beings, that is, already to be oriented toward a common Good, or already to be involved in a Good one constitutes with others. This is not to say that there are no such things as distinct, individual goods. The intersubjective constitution of objectivity also explains the intersubjective constitution of an objective, common Good. In just the same way that there are such things as distinct, individual perspectives upon an object (say, a building) that, though distinct, are not radically isolated or disconnected from one another but are perspectives upon one and the same objective thing and together constitute and disclose the objective being of that thing, so too is it the case that distinct living bodies (hence goods) in the world are perspectives upon, and together

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\(^9\) The Sources of Normativity, p. 144. In this work, Korsgaard remarkably presents the same case against egoism, and much the same case against anthropocentrism, that I am presenting here. The basic difference between Korsgaard’s approach and my own is that Korsgaard appeals mainly to Wittgenstein’s argument against the possibility of a private language (and against the possibility of private “sensations” or mental states), whereas I am relying upon a phenomenological account (inter)subjectivity.

\(^9\) Merleau-Ponty, Humanism and Terror, p. 110.
constitute and disclose, a larger, shared, objective Good, a Good that outstrips each of them yet is shared and constituted by all of them. This must be the case if there are no isolated living beings, for again, if there are no isolated living beings, then neither are there any utterly isolated or private goods: every good must be an aspect of a communal Good, since indeed there is nothing in existence that is not always already communal, nothing that is not always already a knot of embodied perspectives, nothing that is not always already a mélange of flesh overlapping with flesh. All distinct, “individual” goods are interwoven aspects of a shared, radically communalized Good, or rather are moments in a “never-finished differentiation”\(^\text{927}\) of goods, which is also to say moments of an ever-communalizing “Good.” In the end, this is simply what it means for values not to be transcendental, supernatural, or purely private mental objects but to be(come) enfleshed, that is, to be immanent to bodies that strive to flourish and that only ever flourish (or fail to flourish) together.

To be clear, we have not here traded egoism for what would be an equally abstract altruism or totalizing “collectivism.” Egoism, or the pure and exclusive pursuit of self-interest, and “altruism,” conceived as the complete sacrificial abolition of self-interest for the sake of the interests of others, are two sides of one and the same false abstraction and dilemma, and (to recall the same point I previously made pertaining to other similar false dilemmas) to exchange the former for the latter would be to “[compensate] for one abstraction with a counter-abstraction.”\(^\text{928}\) Altruism conceived as the total absorption of self-interest into the interests of others or of the individual into some sort of totalizing, monolithic collective is the reactionary counterpart to egoism and its conception of an atomistic, acommunal, radically individual self, and in repudiating the latter we thus also neutralize the supposed threat of the former. Both

\(^{928}\) Ibid., p. 68.
notions – egoism and a kind of radical, “self-sacrificial” altruism – equally presuppose an 
opposition between self and Other(s) that we must reject from the start or that any lucid attention 
to lived experience refutes. Indeed, the only way to reject egoism in favor of an ethics that 
coherently explains why the interests of others should (or rather always already do) matter to me 
non-instrumentally is not to demonstrate why I should care about others conceived as separate 
from myself, but rather is to show that I am always already an ensemble of social relationships, 
that my “self” is always already constituted communally, that “my” good is always already an 
aspect of a communal Good, and that egoism therefore represses the communal constitution of 
my being and flourishing. An egoist who proclaims only to be concerned about his or her own 
good is thus revealed to commit the same sort of performative contradiction as any Cartesian or 
solipsist who necessarily draws upon language or some tacit, prior experiential acquaintance 
with others in order doubt or deny that others exist.

The point, then, is not to move from an asocial self to a non-self-interested self, or from 
egoism to altruism, but to begin from the fact all selves are already social selves. As Richard 
Norman argues (in the context of his critique of John Stuart Mill’s “proof” of utilitarianism), “we 
can bridge the moral gap between self and others only when we understand the self as a social 
self,” and thus “what we are doing here is not arguing from egoism to altruism, but revealing the 
inadequacy of the dichotomy between egoism and altruism.” 

Properly understood, a 
communal self is below any traditional, facile opposition between “the individual” and “the 
community,” “the private” and the “public,” egoism and altruism. To refute solipsism, or to 
refute the egocentricity of “the ego,” is necessarily to refute egoism, yet, as we have seen, to 
refute solipsism is not to efface any distinction at all between self and Other(s); rather, it is to

refute any supposed *opposition* between self and Other(s), and therefore so too is it to refute any supposed opposition between “self-interest” and the interests of others, hence any supposed opposition between egoism and altruism. To decenter the self is not simply to decenter self-interest, but is to dismantle the very self/Other, individual/society, private/public binary as such. Thus, Merleau-Ponty affirms that “egotism and altruism exist against a background of belonging to the same world,” which is to say that “egotism” and “altruism” are abstractions torn out of a more basic communal fabric of existence, the horns of a dilemma founded yet at once undone by the life we truly share with one another, by coexistence in the flesh.

This “background of belonging to the same world” entails an enmeshment of goods that founds yet, for that very reason, dismantles any supposed opposition between “self-interest” and the interests of the others, hence any traditional dilemma between egoism and altruism. So, it is crucial to understand that an ethics of “radical community” does not obliterate the existence of distinct goods and interests any more so than an ontology of radical community obliterates the existence of distinct “selves” or living beings. As we have seen, since subjectivity is necessarily embodied, continuity of embodiment is continuity of subjectivity, and continuity of (embodied) subjectivity is also continuity of *vulnerability*, which is also to say continuity of affects, needs, interests, or goods. Continuity of (sentient) flesh is continuity of flourishing and suffering. Yet, as we have also seen, continuity is not necessarily the negation of difference, and properly conceived it is also already difference. We may no longer think according to any strict dichotomy between self and Other(s), but of course this does not mean we may no longer admit any differences at all between them: on the contrary, we have seen that to think (radical) community is also to think (radical) difference. To say that our goods and interests are

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930 “The Philosopher and His Shadow,” in *Signs*, p. 175.
intertwined is not to say that they necessarily coincide or that they are all exactly the same.

Likewise, to say that self and Other are intertwined is not to say that they are totally fused with one another: self and Other are necessarily distinct but, at the same time, they are also necessarily inseparable. Self and Other are irreducibly different yet also inseparable from one another, and so too, therefore, are their interests or goods.

So, we all have our own interests and goods, but at the same time they are never entirely our own. Since selves are intertwined with one another, so too are their interests or goods, but this does not imply that tensions or conflicts between interests or goods are impossible. To say that self and Other are intertwined is not to say that they absolutely coincide with one another: they are not separate from or opposed to one another, but they are also not identical to one another. Thus, just as the inseparability of self and Other is not their identity or coincidence with one another, neither is the inseparability of their goods and interests an absolute identity or coincidence of their goods and interests. From the fact that there is no such thing as an isolated self, it does not follow that there is no such thing as a distinct self; likewise, from the fact that there are no isolated, individual goods, it does not follow that there are no distinct, individual goods. Goods – just like the individuals oriented toward them – are interconnected or overlapping; sometimes they converge, sometimes they diverge, and some will be more or less distant from others and thus more or less difficult to reconcile with one another, but there is never an absolute abyss between them, and any view that attempts to carve the good of an individual or the good of a particular community out of this radically communal tapestry commits a deep – indeed, the deepest – kind of violence. Such an atomization of goods is a kind of conceptual or ontological violence that is, in fact, inevitably reified through, or embodied by, certain social institutions or systems, and it is the origin of every instance of gratuitous violence.
in the world, the conceptual basis of every spurious, cruel, and exploitative exclusion or marginalization of the goods of others. Again, this interweaving or being-together of our goods – this overlapping of ends, interests, needs, and vulnerabilities that is coterminous with the overlapping of those living bodies that “have” them – generates, or rather itself already is, a shared, communal Good. If human beings are essentially – at the very core of their being and experience – communal, then the good of each participates in a Good woven from the communal fabric of their existence; the good of each is but a perspective upon, or but an aspect of, a (capital “G”) Good that they co-constitute through their carnal coexistence.

Such a Good woven from a relationship between self and Other cannot be reduced to either side of that relationship; in such a relationship, I take up your good as my own precisely because such a relationship transforms the very meaning of “mine” and “yours,” or confounds any traditional opposition between self and Other. If I am in a genuine relationship with you, then our “goods” cannot be radically partitioned, and so it is perfectly intelligible why I would be motivated to pursue “your” good “for its own sake” or to take up “your” good as “my own,” because the truth is that your good is not entirely yours and that my good is not entirely mine; together, we do not possess radically separate goods but rather participate in a good that is ours, a good that we co-constitute. In such a case, when I recognize and take up your good as my own, I am not being egoistic, that is, I am not cannibalizing your good, and still less is it the case that I am totally abandoning or sacrificing a good that is purely “mine” in order to take up and further one that is entirely “non-mine,” for it is no longer the case that I can identify “your” good over there in opposition to “my” good over here. If I truly am in community with you, if our lives truly are intimately tied to one another, then when I recognize and take up your good as my own, what I really recognize and take up is a good that we share, a good that emerges between us, a
good that is itself a synergy of me-and-you; in such a relationship, there are not two radically separate goods that simply get added together or annexed to one another, but a good that is produced through an *intertwining* of living bodies. When selves or living bodies truly come together, a Good comes into being that cannot be localized in any of them apart from one another. Thus, when self and Other are in a *real relationship* with one another, a Good emerges that is not purely the good of one or of the other, nor one that is the simple arithmetical sum of two originally self-contained goods, but is a Good that is *theirs together*. And my own “good” is always already part of a Good I share and constitute with others, a good that is “my own” only on the condition that it is not, indeed, purely or exclusively “my own.”

Now, given the arguments of the previous chapters, it should be clear that the refutation of egoism we have just discussed implies an analogous refutation of any strictly anthropocentric moral framework. Anthropocentrism, or any human separatist/supremacist conception of the moral community, is just as solipsistic as egoism; indeed, it is simply a version of solipsism at a different level. In egoism, the isolated moral subject is an individual human being. In anthropocentrism, the isolated “moral subject” is “humanity” as such. Both moral frameworks are equally solipsistic, for they both posit, as the fundamental or supreme bearer of moral value, a being or form of life isolated from all others. Indeed, as we have seen, self/Other dualism and human/animal dualism are ultimately dependent upon, or are simply different repetitions of, mind/body dualism. And in general, any notion that a community of living beings is utterly isolated from, or absolutely excludes, all other communities assumes the same “logic” that Cartesian solipsism or egoism deploys in divorcing the self from others, for it equally suppresses the radically intercorporeal bonds that tie together the living beings who belong to any community, bonds that, precisely because they are (inter)corporeal, never *absolutely* exclude
other living beings (or other communities of living beings) and in fact already envelop them in one another. As we have seen, just as a self is constituted intercorporeally, so too is any particular community of “selves”: all distinct intercorporeal communities of living bodies are themselves embedded in a radical, intercorporeal community of intercorporeal communities. Thus, just as the good of any “self” is already caught up in the Good of the community to which it belongs, so too is the Good of any community already caught up in, or already partly constitutive of, an even more basic, radical communal Good, a Good that it shares with all other communities, no matter how different or distant from it these other communities may be. In short, if there is such a thing as what I have called a radical community, then there is such a thing as a radical communal Good, a (quasi-transcendental) Good that is woven from the differentiation and attendant overlapping or compresence of every specific, empirical community. As I have continually emphasized, there are never sharp divisions between forms of flesh, no matter how deeply divergent from one another they may be. All living bodies fold into one another, and this means that so too do all of the goods they embody or strive to realize. All living bodies are oriented toward a good, and all living bodies, as well as all communities of living bodies, are fundamentally intertwined. In order to isolate the good of either a single living being or of a single community of living beings, one ultimately has to repress the flesh in virtue of which any living being or community “has” a good or even exists as such at all.

A radical community is not one that obeys any sharp lines of demarcation (whether those of species or otherwise), and every community is always already a moral community. We are thus compelled to acknowledge that “we” are embedded in a larger, radical “We” that is also a radical enmeshment of all goods, human and non-human alike. We are thus compelled to acknowledge that the radical community that constitutes “us” is also already a radical moral
community, a community in which “our” goods are entangled with those of all other living bodies (or with all other communities of living bodies). As soon as there is such a thing as vulnerability – as soon as there is such a thing as life or subjectivity or sentient flesh – there is flourishing and suffering, there are goods and bads in the world, and if all living, vulnerable bodies are fundamentally tied to one another, so too are all flourishings and sufferings, all goods and bads. As soon as there exists a community of living bodies, so too does there exists a common flourishing or a common good, and if there is such a thing as a radical community of living bodies, so too is there such a thing as a horizon of radical flourishing, or so too is there a radical Good in which they all participate, a (capital “G”) Good that they each (ap)presence in their own way.

Merleau-Ponty’s ontology demonstrates that no community of living beings can ever be absolutely exclusionary. If there are no isolated, self-enclosed living beings, then so too are there no isolated, self-enclosed communities of living beings, and in particular, as Merleau-Ponty argues, there is certainly no isolated, self-enclosed “human” community: there is no human community that is utterly isolated either from other human communities or from non-human communities. Thus, Merleau-Ponty’s ontology suggests a critique of anthropocentrism analogous to the one it levels against egoism. If there is nothing identifiable as “human” in isolation from other forms of life, then so too is there nothing identifiable as a human good in isolation from other forms of life (hence in isolation from non-human goods). Egoism is false because there is no such thing as an isolated individual and therefore no such thing as an isolated individual good. Likewise, anthropocentrism is false because, as Merleau-Ponty argues, there is no such thing as an isolated “humanity” and therefore no such thing as an isolated “human” good, or no such thing as a good that could register as exclusively or essentially “human.” We see, then, that not
only the “myth of egoism” but also the “myth of anthropocentrism,” as well as the myths of every other bad or oppressive “ism,” are dispelled along with that of solipsism, for indeed they are all, logically, iterations of solipsism. Fundamentally, what Merleau-Ponty calls “the “incomparable monster” of solipsism spawns all of the other monstrous “isms” we must ceaselessly combat, all of the other delusions of ontological purity, centrality, separatism, and “specialness” that anyone committed to wakeful thinking and living must always work to dispel: egoism/liberal individualism, white supremacism, cisheterosexism, nationalism, ethnocentrism, ableism, and human exceptionalism/supremacism. Every “centrism” or supremacism depends upon the notion of a form of life that is, in some way, fundamentally isolated or self-enclosed, the notion that a particular identity or domain of existence is circumscribed by impermeable, absolutely exclusionary boundaries, boundaries that, as such, are usually established in terms of some unique characteristic (or set of characteristics) possessed by those within them, and which is presumed to rank those within them as more important than those who are outside of them. If Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of “flesh” demonstrates anything, it is that no such impermeable boundaries ever “really” exist. Differences – genuine, radical, irreducible differences – are real, yet differentiation is also always communalization, also always overlapping or “encroachment.” All chauvinisms or oppressive, monstrous “isms” are, in the final analysis, different heads of one and the same “monster.” The “incomparable monster of solipsism” is, so to speak, a hydra of many monstrous heads.

Finally, it is important to underscore that an ethics of radical community or that, in particular, a genuinely, thoroughly non-anthropocentric ethical framework entails a reorientation in how we think about or attempt to “demonstrate” moral considerability. Such a phenomenologically founded, broadly “communitarian” reorientation of ethics distinguishes my
critique of anthropocentrism from traditional critiques of it, from those critiques that ultimately, in their approach, assume or reinscribe the very anthropocentrism they pretend to reject. Many philosophers argue against anthropocentrism, and they do so according to various disparate moral theories. However, regardless of their moral theory of choice – regardless of whether they subscribe to, say, some form of utilitarianism or some form of deontology – philosophers have traditionally adopted the same basic approach in their critiques of anthropocentrism. Typically, such philosophers begin from some presumably non-controversial account of who is included in “our” (always implicitly “human”) moral community and of those (“morally relevant”) characteristics or capacities in virtue of which they (i.e., fellow humans) are included in it, then proceed to indicate that the same or similar characteristics or capacities are also found in others (i.e., in certain animals) who currently are either outside of our moral community or are at least not accorded full moral standing within it, and consequently argue that the boundaries of our moral community ought to be expanded so as to include such (“animal”) others.

I find all such supposed critiques of anthropocentrism to be deeply unsatisfying and flawed, for it is clear that such arguments for “including” animals in “our” moral community begin from precisely a default, anthropocentric standpoint or standard of reference, an unaccounted for and tacitly centered “human” we relative to which the moral considerability of other forms of life are derivatively evaluated, or from which the scope of moral considerability is concentrically expanded outward. All such critiques presuppose or start from the very kind of “center/margin” conceptual schema that, as I hope to have demonstrated, Merleau-Ponty’s ontology dismantles. In particular, one begins by conceptualizing “the moral community” as a circle with “humanity” at its center and simply proceeds to argue that this circle should be widened so as to include certain non-humans. The problem here, of course, is that one thus
assumes or reifies the very anthropocentricity one presumes to be critiquing, the very anthropocentricity that Merleau-Ponty’s ontology shows must be, or rather always already is, *decentered*. Moreover, to conceptualize any moral community as a “circle” is already to necessitate the marginalization (and, correlative, the privileging) of certain of its “members,” for one cannot have a “circle” without a “center” and a “periphery.”

Consider egoism, for example. One does not truly critique egoism by attempting to demonstrate to an egoist why he or she ought to expand the circle of his or her solitary, purely self-oriented moral universe so as to include others, for in doing so one concedes the egoist’s egocentric standpoint. In order to critique egoism successfully, one has to decenter or dismantle the egoist’s egocentricity, that is, one has to demonstrate that the egoist never is and never has been the center of any moral universe, for he or she is, at the fundamental ontological level, entangled in relationships with others. If one attempts to convince an egoist to expand the circle of his or her moral concern so as to include others, one thus leaves intact the egoist’s self-constructed position at its center. The egoist imagines “the moral community” to be a circle with only one member at its center, namely the egoist him/herself. Thus, one does not truly refute egoism unless one abolishes the egoist’s very construct of the moral community as a circle with the egoist him/herself at its center: one must decenter this center and therefore dissolve the peripheries that exist only relative to it. One can also draw an analogy to what would be similarly flawed critiques of racism. We do not truly dismantle the “logic” of racism or white supremacy by arguing that the circle of a “white” moral community ought to be expanded so as to include people of color; rather, we dismantle the “logic” racism or white supremacy by demonstrating that people of color have never truly been excluded from the moral community all along, or we expose and demonstrate the speciousness of those constructs according to which people of color
have been conceptualized as ethically sub/non-considerable, the false construct of “whiteness” itself as designating some sort of pure, central subject-position or communal identity relative to which the value of anything else in the world can or ought to be measured.

My contention, then, is that in order truly to overcome the “logic” of anthropocentrism or human-supremacism, we must do so in the same manner in which we must overcome the “logics” of egoism or white supremacism. In order to overcome, say, egoism, it is necessary to decenter the supposed egocentricity of “the ego,” to show that no ego is ever truly isolated or “centered” in the world but is already a nexus of communal roles and relationships, that every ego is embedded in community with others such that it is deprived of any purity or centrality of existence. Likewise, in order to overcome anthropocentrism, it is necessary to decenter (as Merleau-Ponty attempts to do) the supposed anthropocentricity of any “human” standpoint in the world, to show that “humanity” has always been entwined with “animality” or with “animal” alterities and that there has therefore never been such a thing as an isolated, “pure,” or “centered” human sphere of existence, that any “human” community has always been entwined with other-than-human communities for the same reason that a “self” has always been entwined with others. In just the saw way that one only refutes egoism by demonstrating that the “I” is always already but an articulation or surface effect of a “We,” so too is it the case that one only refutes anthropocentrism by demonstrating that the “the human” is always already an articulation or surface effect of a “radical,” inter-animal (or “humanimal”) “We,” but one fold among infinitely many others in and of the world’s flesh, an expression of the flesh that differentiates forms of life yet is shared by all of them, the flesh that makes me who and what I am yet is never just “mine” or just “human,” the flesh that makes “us” us yet is never just ours.
So, rather than argue for “inclusion” we should dismantle those false constructs or imaginaries that legitimize exclusion; these are not the same modes of argumentation: the former conceptualizes the moral community in terms of a taken-for-granted center of moral standing from which the moral standings of (currently excluded) others are subsequently derived and measured, whereas the latter centers every standpoint taken for granted as a central, default standard of ethical value, or seeks to dismantle any ethical framework organized in terms of “centers” and “margins” in the first place; in other words, the latter seeks to dismantle those abstractions that structure every exclusionary ethical framework, and thereby does not so much argue that certain others ought to be “included” but instead reveals that such others have never been absolutely “excluded” all along, or rather repudiates, as I have suggested, the false dilemma of assimilative “inclusion” and total, oppositional “exclusion” in favor of an ethics of difference, which is also to say an ethics of radical community, or an ethics that affirms rather than represses the intertwining of all living bodies and goods, for “intertwining” signifies a kind of relationality below any traditional, neat distinction between “inclusion” and “exclusion,” “inside” and “outside.”

In an anthropocentric framework, “the human” is our default, central, Archimedean starting point relative to which the scope of ethical concern or considerability is later concentrically either expanded or contracted. Such a framework is logically analogous to that of every other bad “ism,” such as egoism, racism, sexism, ethnocentrism, nationalism, and so on. Each of these make the same logical or ontological mistake, which is precisely the very starting points from which they proceed to determine the moral worth of others. This is why I think critiques of anthropocentrism or speciesism that argue that our circle of moral concern ought to be expanded so as to include certain non-humans are fundamentally flawed, for such critiques
concede and reproduce the core, uninterrogated assumption of the very anthropocentric
doctrine they supposedly reject, namely the assumption of a human standpoint as a central,
default yardstick with which to determine derivatively the moral considerability of other beings;
indeed, such critiques thus assume a human standpoint that would be fundamentally prior to non-
human life. So, moral reasoning that proceeds to expand the scope of moral concern or
considerability concentrically outward from some presupposed central or centered standpoint
already concedes too much: Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy precisely shows that such standpoints
are always already decentered by their enmeshment with other standpoints, and that therefore the
starting points of traditional moral reasoning are already false abstractions. Such starting points
are those that are assumed to be privileged, central founts of meaning and value. Moreover, such
forms of moral reasoning assume that the moral community is something we constitute through
some sort of deliberative process rather than something that already constitutes us, something in
which we are already embedded before any questions of moral standing or of right and wrong
action can ever present themselves in the first place. Liberalism assumes there exists some
standpoint outside of a community – some acommunal standpoint – from which we could deduce
or construct a moral and political community, but no such standpoint exists. It is precisely a
collapse of genuinely communal life, or a loss of a sense of genuine community, that motivates
every kind of nativist, tribalist, or chauvinistic construction and policing of communal
boundaries through mechanisms of selective inclusion or exclusion; to construct a community in
such a way is simply to assume atomism or solipsism at the level of a group rather than at the
level of an individual.

Thus, the logic of concentric ethical “inclusion” or “expansionism” is just as “centric” or
solipsistic as any logic of ethical separationism or exclusionism that would, on the surface,
appear to be antithetical to it. A broadly phenomenological and specifically Merleau-Pontian reorientation of moral philosophy is one whose aim is not primarily to extend oneself outward to others or to expand progressively the compass of ethical concern and considerability to include others, for that always takes for granted the standpoint of either a solitary ego or of an exclusive, gated “country-club” association of egos, so to speak, as its point of departure, and such a point of departure is always, as we have seen, phenomenologically and ontologically erroneous; rather, the aim of such a reorientation of moral philosophy is to recognize, foreground, and affirm the ties that always already bind us to one another and, one hopes, to strengthen those ties through a renewed and enriched affirmation of them. So, I hope I have here addressed one major way in which my arguments throughout this work might be misinterpreted. I have not attempted to demonstrate the mindedness of non-human beings, or to critique those assumptions that lead us to doubt the mindedness of non-human beings in various ways, in order to argue for their “inclusion” in our “human” moral community; rather, my point has been to use phenomenology, and in particular Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology and later ontology, to show that non-human beings have always already been, in fact and in principle, “members” of “our” moral community, for that moral community has always been a community that has never been just “ours,” a community in which “we” have always been embedded with other “we’s.”

The point, then, is to change the basic question we usually ask in moral and political theory. The question we usually ask is some version of “why ought X be included in our moral and political community?”, which naturally assumes that “X” was not always already a member of one’s moral and political community in the first place. For example, most people would no longer ask and attempt justify answers to questions such as: “why should black people be included in our moral and political community?” or “why should women be considered just as
morally important as men?” We simply assume, as we should, that black people and women are or ought to be equal members of the moral community. In fact, not only are such questions uninteresting, even simply posing them is morally repugnant. The moment one poses or attempts to answer either of these questions, one has already conceded too much. The burden of proof should be on anyone who would exclude black people or women from the moral community, and if there is anyone who would do so, the appropriate response is not to argue for the “inclusion” of black people or women on the racist’s or misogynist’s own terms but to dismantle the assumptions or conceptual schemas that support a racist or misogynistic conception of the moral community, that is, to dismantle the constructs of white exceptionalism or phallocentrism. I have attempted to adopt a similar approach in my critique of anthropocentrism. Thus, the question I have really been asking and attempting to answer here has not been the question concerning why non-humans should be included in “our” moral community, but rather the question concerning why or how non-humans were or ever could have been excluded from our moral community in the first place, and to expose the specious conceptual frameworks that have supported their exclusion or marginalization. To argue for the inclusion of non-humans in our “human” moral community is already to begin from the position that they have not always already been “included” in it, or is already to position “humanity” as something that exists or is intelligible prior to, or independently of, other-than-human alterities. My point has been to demonstrate that precisely such a position has always been false, that it has always been a position that concedes too much. My point has been to critique and expose as false the very assumption that there has ever been a human moral community in isolation from other communities of living beings. My point has been that Merleau-Ponty’s ontology shows that such an assumption is false, yet it is precisely this assumption that underlies most conventional theories in animal ethics, not only
those that defend anthropocentrism or speciesism but also those that attempt to combat it by arguing for the inclusion of most if not all non-human beings in the moral community. To argue that moral concern ought to be expanded in order to include non-humans is already to assume a central, sovereign, transparently intelligible “human” standpoint or community isolated from non-humans in the first place, or is already to assume that “we” have not already been enmeshed with “them” from the very start, and these are exactly the assumptions that, following Merleau-Ponty, I have argued we ought to reject.

The fundamental question, then, is not “how ought we to determine the moral community?”, for this question already concedes too much in assuming, as does classical liberalism, that “we” determine the moral community in the first place, that we deliberatively choose, from an asocial standpoint, who is going to count and who is not, who is in and who is out. My point is to interrupt this question by showing that a radical moral community – an Ur-“We” – must always already be in place in order for us even to be able to ask it in the first place, much in the same way that the question concerning whether and how I might be able to know that other people exist is one I would never be able to pose or contemplate if I were not always already immersed in relations with others. What we have to do is to understand the nature of this primal “We” that allows us even to pose questions concerning moral and political inclusion or exclusion, yet if we understand this radical We correctly, we realize that it signifies the envelopment of all forms of life in one another, that it generates boundaries between forms life or between communities of living bodies that, though real and often significant, are always undecidable, fluid, and porous, or are never determinable as lines of strict inclusion or exclusion.

A non-anthropocentric ethical framework is, minimally, one that does not restrict the scope of moral considerability, impingement, or responsiveness (or responsibility) to inter-
human relations, and such a framework is entailed by the fact that inter-human relations are never \textit{a priori} exclusively inter-human, or by the fact that there is no such thing as an isolated, exclusively human community or purely self-contained “humanity” for the same reason there is no such thing as an isolated, purely self-contained (human) self or individual. Moreover, any enumeration of criteria or properties that would be necessary for ethical considerability or standing, any abstract deduction of universal duties or rights, or any abstract calculus or ranking of interests and utilities, is precisely \textit{un}ethical for the reason that it negates or suppresses the very encounter with alterity that is constitutive and distinctive of ethical experience and responsiveness. It is my contention, then, that Merleau-Ponty’s ontology dismantles any anthropocentric ethical (and political) framework and supports (indeed entails) a thoroughly non-anthropocentric one, one that takes seriously the important, distinctive features of human life yet also recognizes the irreducible embeddedness of those features in a more-than-human world, one that does not dissolve humanity into “animality” yet recognizes the constitutive intertwining of the two, the originary limit between what is human and what is other-than-human that makes it impossible ever to determine where one ends and where the other begins; it is a framework that grounds ethics not in a classically human-centered intersubjectivity but in an anti-essentialist or anti-speciesist, always human-\textit{de}centered \textit{interanimality}, that is, in a radical community. It is thus that Merleau-Ponty is able to affirm the ethical value (and ontological distinctiveness) of “humanity” in such a way that makes no concessions to anthropocentrism or to any sort of human exceptionalism, and it is thus that his philosophy in fact enjoins us always to problematize – even to transform in ways that go beyond anything conceivable in traditional, hegemonically human-centered philosophy – the very categories of “humanity” and “animality.” It is thus that Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy perhaps provides (as he provocatively suggests it
does) the basis for what might be an “antihumanistic humanism.”

As I suggested earlier, webs of interdependency are not necessarily webs of “harmony.” “Intertwining” is always an intertwining of what is irreducibly different; intertwining is differentiation. So, as is the case with the intertwining of anything, the fact that all goods are intertwined does not mean that they coincide with one another: there can be, and often are, great distances and variable tensions between goods. This is precisely why living ethically – why living a good life – is hard rather than easy, an infinite, ever-open rather than a neatly calculable or ever finished task. For me, ethical life is an infinite task not in the sense that it consists of “debts” that I can never fully repay, but in the sense that my own life or good is inextricably intertwined with other lives or goods to such an extent that I will never be able to advance all of them, that many of them will necessarily elude my attention or concern, and that I will even inevitably harm many of them. It is precisely because I inhabit what I have called a “radical community” – it is precisely because I am caught up in webs of interdependencies with all forms of life – that I will never be able to give myself to all who should and do already matter, and this is a hard truth I should never cease to suffer, a truth that any sound account of ethics must confront honestly.

I do not think it is correct to think of ethics in terms of “indebtedness”; that is how a capitalist thinks of ethics. Our primary, immediate relationships with others – ontological as well as ethical – are always (as Derrida and others have argued) “aneconomic.” Primary or genuinely ethical relationships are never “transactional” or “contractual”; they are never “exchanges” in any economic sense of the term and in fact disrupt all such circuits of economic exchange. If I do

931 Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology, p. 37.
something for someone because of what I expect to get of it, I am an egoist or a capitalist, not
someone who is doing something for someone with whom I am intimately or truly communally
involved or whose good I acknowledge as intertwined with my own in any correct understanding
of that term, and thus in order to think about ethics correctly – and in order to live ethically – we
must, in fact, jettison from moral philosophy all references to “debts” and “obligations,”
“investments” and “contracts,” or all talk about what we “owe” to one another. H. Peter Steeves
describes the manner in which certain Inuit peoples exhibit this sort of communitarian,
aeconomic way of being, and it is one that we ought to regard as a paradigm case of what it
really means to dwell in the world ethically:

A few years ago, I…discovered that expressions of gratitude aren’t made among the Inuit of Greenland.
In fact, “thank you” is considered an insult. The Inuit live together and assist each other as part of the
fabric of their lives. Benevolent giving, openhanded helping, non-economic exchange, and generous
sacrificing are just part of living an ordinary life in common – the taken-for-granted backdrop of real
community. To call attention to what others do for us would be to say that such commitment to mutual
flourishing, such love, isn’t the norm.932

I do not do things for those I love, or for those with whom I am genuinely in community,
because I have some sense that I “owe” it to them to do those things; the concept of a social
contract, like the concept of asocial contractors who devise and enter into such a contract, is an
abstraction that, like all abstractions, always comes too late and deforms how and what we live;
nor do I do things for intimate others because of what I expect to get out of it or because I wish
to place these others in my debt: I do things for those I love simply because I love them; I do
things for intimate others – for those with whom I exist in genuine community – simply because
of the intimate, communal ties that bind us, or simply because of a kind of intimacy or being-
together that is below or beyond any facile opposition between egoism and altruism or that is

certainly prior to any calculus of self-interest, for it is in fact below any strict opposition between self and Other in the first place. I do things for intimate or communal others because that just is what it means to be in an intimate relationship or in community with others: notions of “contracts” or “debts” never factor into it at all. Contractual calculations come into play in mediating our relationships with others only when those relationships cease to be genuinely ethical or communal: I do not, for example, do the dishes for my partner or help edit the essays that my partner writes for her therapy practice’s website because doing so satisfies the terms of some contract we devised or to which we even tacitly consented at the beginning of our relationship, nor do I do these things because I have first calculated that it is in my “self-interest” to do them, or because I wish to put my partner in my debt, or because in general I expect some return on my investment. I do such things for my partner simply because I love her and because, in a relationship, one’s life and thus one’s flourishing is entwined with the life and flourishing of another in such a way that, though both retain their distinct identities, one can never say where one’s life or good ends and where the other’s begins. In short, to conceptualize my reasons for doing good things for the people I care about or for those with whom I exist in true community in some sort of contractualist, egoistic, or economic way is precisely to deform the very character of the moral life, to distort what it means to care about others ethically; it is to distort the intersubjective, interpersonal ties that truly bind us together ethically and to impose upon our lived experiences of ethical concern and action abstractions derived from metaphysical frameworks and political institutions that have a stake in keeping us from truly living ethically.

When relationships become merely transactional, that is precisely when they become unethical (or at least non-ethical). Ethical relationships with others – just like our fundamental ontological relationships with others – are lateral rather than hierarchical, and are reciprocal
without being merely transactional (or without being mere “exchanges” in the economic sense of the term), for they precede, found, and disrupt any fixed opposition between self and others that every economic or transactional conceptualization of our relationships with others – hence any rigid distinction between self-regarding and other-regarding motives – presupposes. Though ethical relationships are sometimes asymmetrical (like many relationships of care, such as those between a parent and a child or between an adult child and an elder parent), they are never fundamentally or strictly hierarchical, as are all relationships between a creditor and a debtor; they are ultimately rooted in our lateral relations with others, in our mutual dependencies and vulnerabilities, in relations with others that displace every supposed hierarchical ordering of goods or interests just as they displace any hierarchical ordering of beings or modes of existence. Indeed, I think we must acknowledge that all “ethical” (and political) hierarchies ultimately involve certain people in positions of privilege exploiting the interests of others: one only ever puts others in one’s debt in order to exercise power over them, and if there are such things as debts that can never be repaid, they are not the bonds that truly tie together members of a genuine moral community or equal participants in a radically communal, intercorporeal Good, nor do they signify bonds we ought romanticize or theologize as bonds to some sort of spiritual transcendence, but rather are the bonds of slavery or indentured servitude, bonds to a despotic and not a moral power. As is perfectly obvious with respect to capitalism (which structurally depends upon debt in order to operate), debt is an institution that exists solely as a means of oppressive social control, or solely as a means to entrench extant inequalities. If we are to dwell in the world ethically, it is necessary not to think of ourselves as fulfilling debts to others, and moreover it is necessary not to think of ourselves as in thrall to certain “infinite” debts: on the contrary, in order to dwell in the world ethically, or in order to realize an ethical world – the sort
of world in which we should all wish to live— it is necessary to *cancel* all debts, now and forever. It is for this reason that, tempting though it often is, I resist conceptualizing ethics in terms of “debts” to be amortized or “investments” to be returned: at best, this way of thinking about ethics does a profound disservice to lived, ethical experience or to the kinds of ethical relationships with others in which we always already find ourselves, and at worst it helps legitimate or naturalize oppressive systems and relations of power.

So, my claim that ethical life is an “infinite task” has nothing to do with the notion that it consists of infinite debts; rather, it has to do with the fact that my own suffering and flourishing is entwined with the sufferings and flourishings of others, and this precisely does not mean that they always coincide or harmonize with one another; they are surely never *opposed* to one another, but inevitably there are going to be great distances and irresolvable tensions between certain of them, and of course any decision that I make to help, care for, or even to love certain others will always also be a decision not to help, care for, or love other others. There is, then, a sense in which every decision is an act of violence, for in order to choose to actualize one possibility one must exclude, or leave unactualized, other possibilities, yet it is an act of violence that is always necessary, for without it nothing would ever be decided at all, no one would ever act at all, indeed subjectivity would thus be withdrawn into the innocence of an interiority utterly untouched by the world (or would be what Hegel referred to as a “beautiful soul”), which is of course no interiority or subjectivity at all. This is another reason why Merleau-Ponty claims that violence is endemic to life. When he claims that “inasmuch as we are incarnate beings, violence is our lot,” the context in which he makes this claim makes it clear that he does not just mean that *susceptibility* to violence is our lot, but also that *complicity* in violence is our lot. Thus, immediately before he makes the above claim, Merleau-Ponty states that “we do not have a
choice between purity and violence but between different kinds of violence,“933 and I think this is also, fundamentally, the point Derrida makes when he claims that he does not believe in “absolute vegetarianism” and that “a certain cannibalism remains unsurpassable.“934 Setting aside for the moment things such as capitalism and colonialism that make living ethically impossible, the truth is that all life lives on violence in some way or another. Even the most committed vegan, for example, cannot live without harming or destroying other living things (i.e., plants and trees). In fact, as Derrida suggests and as Merleau-Ponty would have to agree, to ingest anything is to ingest flesh that I myself am, and often it is, unavoidably, to kill the flesh of a living Other, to kill flesh that, though truly Other, is also the “flesh of my flesh.” In order to recover from a recent bout of pneumonia, I had to take a bacteria-killing antibiotic. When my family and I chose to welcome Sammy and Dexter into our family, we had to exclude, and leave to languish in cages for an indefinite amount of time, other dogs equally deserving of our love. The money I give to one homeless person is money I cannot give to another. The time I have devoted to writing all of this is time I otherwise might have spent helping others in my community. Every decision is violent to some extent. As I (and Merleau-Ponty and Derrida) have insisted, ontological “purity” is always an illusion or false abstraction, but so too, then, is moral purity. Purity is never something we either can or ever ought to seek to realize, whether it is the ontological purity of an identity or the supposed moral purity of an action. There is never such a thing as moral purity for the same reasons that there is never such a thing as ontological purity, and this is a fact that we, in seeking to live morally, have to confront soberly and restlessly.

Indeed, if there is any decisive proof against the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient,

933 Humanism and Terror, p. 109.
and supremely benevolent cosmic architect, it is the fact that it is impossible to be alive without inflicting some sort of violence upon others, the fact that life is violence. There is no prelapsarian, ahistorical utopia to which we may ever retreat, no heaven we can ever hope for either in this life or beyond it. Setting aside the fact that certain acts of violence are often permissible (and perhaps even necessary) for moral and political reasons, a purely non-violent existence is never possible; it is never ontologically possible and (if “ought implies can”) therefore never ethically possible, and so it is not something to which we ought to aspire (as Hegel argued, the “beautiful soul” is always a hypocritical fiction). However, the appropriate response to this fact is not nihilism or quietistic resignation but the resolve to strive to live in the least violent and unjust ways, or in the most just and melioristic ways, one can, and also always to acknowledge with anguish rather than repress the violence one will always have wrought upon other bodily beings in the world, to remain ever awake to one’s ensnarement in webs of suffering and injustice, and thus never truly to be at moral ease with existence.

As we have seen, difference is not opposition, but so too is it not syncretic communion: it entails boundaries that are fluid and porous yet does not abolish boundaries altogether. This means that in order to be a self, and that in order to exist in community with other selves, one’s selfhood and community will depend upon certain boundaries that, though never sharply decidable or exclusionary, will have to distance certain others from the purview of one’s attentive concern, yet unless one appeals to specious metaphysics (of the sort I have criticized throughout this work) in order to rationalize one’s commitments, these others will always equally merit one’s attentive concern. If my flourishing is always already implicated in other flourishings (and vice versa), it will also always already be implicated in other sufferings (and vice versa). We will never be able advance or help realize every good in the world. But my point – and the
point of any kind of ethos that we may derive from what I have called the radical community in which we and everything is embedded, the core of any ethos one may infer from our radically communal being — is that we at the very least ought not to use bad metaphysics or bad epistemology in order to attempt to justify such moral exclusions.

Ethics is an infinite task, then, because it is not possible for me to flourish or for me to advance the flourishings of others without also not attentively concerning myself with or actively advancing the flourishings of other others, without, in some cases, causing (or at least failing to notice or ameliorate) other sufferings. In chapters three and five I argued that knowing the world is an infinite task because it involves taking into account all of the possible perspectives — that is, the infinite number of perspectives — through which the world may be disclosed. Since the world is composed of all of the possible perspectives to and through which it may appear, it will never be possible to take every perspective into account; it will never be possible to do justice to every perspective. The point here concerning ethics is precisely analogous to this point concerning knowledge: ethics is an infinite task because it will never be possible to take into account every perspective on the Good, because it will never be possible to attend, advance, or do justice to every possible and actual good in the world, because to realize certain goods will also mean that certain other goods will remain unrealized (or under-realized), even harmed. To do justice to one perspective or good will always be to do injustice to certain others. Not to do justice to certain perspectives or goods is to do injustice to them, and in this sense there is a certain violence or injustice that will never be eradicable from existence, yet this should inspire not nihilistic resignation or despair but, on the contrary, intense, compassionate pain, a compassionate pain that should precisely prompt one to work to realize the least violent or unjust world that is possible, a less violent or unjust world that is always, as such, beyond the horizons of the one we
presently inhabit, a world beyond the one that even our present one allows us to imagine; it is the
task of ethics (and politics) precisely to imagine and seek to realize such a world in which we
should all want to live yet which is, as such, always, paradoxically, unthinkable or impossible
from within the horizons of the one in which we actually live.

Though, as I have mentioned, I regard ontology and ethics (and all areas of philosophical
inquiry) as intertwined, this is why ethics will never be reducible to ontology (at least in a certain
sense of the term): ontology has to do with “the way things are,” but ethics must always think
beyond “the way things are”; ethics must always be the radical effort to imagine worlds beyond
the one in which we exist, even the effort to imagine “impossible” worlds. Every time one hears
someone remark “well, that’s just the way things are” (usually as a way to dismiss some moral or
political critique of the status quo) one hears (or one ought to hear) not a sober assessment of
reality, not a pure, accurate description of “things,” but rather a reification of a contingent
construction of reality that is, as such, anything but “just” the way things are; one should also
hear despair and servile acquiescence; one should hear thoughtlessness; one should hear an
“asinanity”; one should perhaps even hear radical evil. This is not “naïve idealism.” Or if ethics
is “idealistic,” it is so only in the sense that it necessarily resists the hegemony of any naïve
“realism,” that is, the reification of any extant set of circumstances as natural or essential and
thus as unchallengeable or untransformable when the truth is always otherwise, when the truth is
that “reality” is never “real” in the ways in which many people – not only political theorists and
pundits but also ontologists – often think it is. It is, then, the task of ethics (and politics) to
imagine and seek to realize an impossible world, a world in which everything that can flourish
does flourish, a world of radical equality and flourishing, a world of radically equal flourishing.
The power of ethical thinking to envisage and seek to realize such a world is its distinctive
power, and the impossibility of such a world means its distinctive power is one that is always in process of actualization. Our world, for better or worse, is always becoming, always in process of actualization. The task of ethics (and politics) is to help the world become ever better, to help actualize the world for the better and not for the worse, for the (radical) Good and for the (radical) Worst: that is its infinite task.

I am convinced that any considerations of non-human animals (ethical or otherwise) that are not phenomenological are fundamentally flawed, indeed (to put it bluntly) quite worthless. We must begin from, and always return to, what it is actually like to be with particular non-human others in lived experience, and in order to do this we must surrender ourselves to experiences and relationships with them. But this requires rigor; as Lingis and Deleuze would say, it requires that we “become active” in a particular way; it requires the rigor of suspending as much as we can our conventional anthropocentric schemas of knowledge and interpretation, the rigor of cultivating liberated, charitable engagements with other othernesses, the rigor of “letting others show themselves.” It requires the rigor of seeing, listening, and feeling, which is also to say the rigor of ceaselessly subjecting to critique the abstractions that may get in the way of seeing, listening, and feeling, the rigor of never ceasing to question whether we are seeing, hearing, or feeling what and as we ought to be.

If we are committed to justice, we must ceaselessly attend to marginalized suffering, and that of course means challenging the marginalization of marginalized Others and their suffering. In order to attend to marginalized suffering, we must interrogate the very constructs of such “margins” themselves, which also means to interrogate this very royal “We” in the first place, this singular plural pronoun that so often functions as nothing but an empty placeholder deployed in order to legitimate, naturalize, or police such margins. So, to attend to the bodies, voices, and
sufferings of marginalized others is of course never to reinforce or naturalize their marginalization; on the contrary, it is the necessary first step toward undoing it. And no others are more marginalized than those we call “animals.” Indeed, as I have mentioned, it is not an accident that when humans are marginalized they are nearly always “animalized”; we might even say that all marginalized others are, in a sense, “animal others,” for “the animal” really is just an empty placeholder to which we relegate any being we wish to exploit, oppress, or simply not have to think very much about at all. In a sense, every moral/political caste system is a “human/animal” caste system or hierarchy, regardless of whether or not those at the bottom of it are actually (biologically) “human.” It is clear that “the animal” is not a “natural kind”: in truth, there is no such thing as “the animal.” But if “the animal” is not a natural kind, if it is inherently an ethically fraught, politically constructed category, and if moreover the category of “the human” is only intelligible relative to it, then we also ought to stop pretending that “the human” is just a natural kind or biological concept; in one of its valences it does mean “Homo sapiens,” yet it is untenable and simply disingenuous to pretend that this is all it means; it is not and never has been reducible to the definition of it found in biology textbooks, but has always been an inherently ethical and political construct. So, if justice demands radically rethinking (if not abandoning entirely) those categories through which others are arbitrarily marginalized, then we clearly must rethink or problematize the category of “the animal,” and if we must do that, then so too must we rethink or problematize the category of “the human.”

If we wish to attend to marginalized others in order to help dismantle their marginalization, we must work to decenter the very centered, privileged standpoints relative to which they are marginalized, which also means we must work to decenter the standpoint – the “we” – that “we” occupy. We must work to decenter “the human” in order to presence rather
than occlude or silence the alterities that always already shape it. Indeed, we must dismantle all frameworks in which any standpoint is “centered.” To decenter one’s own standpoint is never to extricate oneself from it entirely, for to do so is never possible. But it does mean achieving a certain critical distance from one’s own standpoint, a distance that would not further distance us from those at the margins but would precisely bring us into closer, deeper proximity with them; such a distance is one that would be proximity with others, a proximity that would be an affirmation of otherness, a proximity that would not dissolve the differences between ourselves and others but that would dissolve the margins that hold others apart from us in specious and oppressive ways and that, in doing so, keep us from truly affirming or appreciating them.

As I have argued, I can never entirely transcend my own situated, privileged standpoint in the world (since there can never be any such thing as a “view from nowhere”), but it surely does not follow that I am entirely imprisoned within it (since no standpoint is ever utterly isolated) and that I am therefore helpless to do anything to challenge its arbitrarily centered, privileged status. I am a white, cishetero, able-bodied man who has benefitted from a stable, middle-class upbringing. I will never fully be able to know what it is like to be a black person under white supremacy, what it is like to be a woman under patriarchy, what it is like to be queer in a cisheteronormative society, what it is like to be “disabled” in an ableist society, and I likely will never know what it is like to contend with extreme poverty. And, I must add, I will never know what is like to be an “animal” in a deeply, systemically human supremacist world. Yet, it is possible for me to achieve a critical distance from all of these intersecting axes of identity and privilege that constitute me and my experiences of the world, to subject them to critique in allyship with those upon whose exploitation, marginalization, and immiseration my own privileges depend, and to help undo those systems that center my own subjectivity at the
illegitimate expense of other subjectivities; it is not impossible for me to critique and work to dismantle white supremacy, patriarchy, cisheteronormativity, ableism, or class inequality. It is not impossible for me to help decolonize the present world in order to realize one in which we should all want to live. Likewise, it is possible for me to critique and work to dismantle the anthropocentricity of my own position in the world, the anthropocentricity that has hitherto falsely defined “my world.” It is not impossible for me to work to decenter and decolonize even my own “humanity.” This would be to “bracket” one’s “all too human” perspective so as to make visible all of those other perspectives it otherwise occludes or suppresses. And despite the importance of epistemic humility, maybe one should not be so readily pessimistic about what imagination, empathy, and the body can accomplish, for of course, if Merleau-Ponty is right, everything is intertwined with everything. For example, maybe I cannot quite know the degradation, suffering, and terror of pigs corralled in cages too small for them to move and sent to slaughter. But then again, I am Jewish, and Auschwitz indeed teaches me (as it also taught Theodor Adorno) something (to say the least) of the horrors of efficiently organized, industrialized, mechanized murder. And as Jews were compared to rats in order to legitimate their extermination, it also teaches me something (as, again, it also taught Theodor Adorno) of the ideological, bio/necropolitical function that “animalization” always inherently performs, whether it is weaponized against Homo sapiens or against those we thoughtlessly call “animals.”

To challenge any margins is to challenge the privileged centers of meaning, value, knowledge, and identity relative to which they exist, and to challenge any privileged centers of meaning, value, knowledge, or identity is, reciprocally, to challenge the margins they depend upon (conceptually and materially) in order to hold sway as such. Moreover, to challenge any margins is to challenge all margins, for in the final analysis it is to challenge the very constructs
of “margins” and “centers” – or any “center/margin” conceptual schema – as such; it is to challenge any framework in which meaning and value is organized in terms a center or pure origin of meaning and value relative to which everything else is derivatively, peripherally meaningful or valuable. Such is the deep, ontological truth of intersectionality: to challenge any one form of marginalization or axis of oppression is to challenge all of them.

In closing, the thesis I have sought to defend here is that an anthropocentric worldview is, like any solipsistic or chauvinistic worldview, demonstrably false and “asinine” (as Derrida would put it) or “thoughtless” (as Arendt would put it). In her account of Adolf Eichmann’s Nuremberg trial, Arendt draws a distinction between “thoughtlessness” and “stupidity,” writing that “he [Eichmann] was not stupid. It was sheer thoughtlessness – something by no means identical with stupidity – that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of that period.” Arendt does not elaborate this distinction, but I suppose that, for her, “stupidity” designates an incapacity for thought, whereas “thoughtlessness” is an absence of thought exhibited by a being who is capable of it. Given the implicit ableism of the concept of “stupidity,” and given Merleau-Ponty’s own hesitation regarding the correlative concept of “intelligence,” I prefer to conceptualize philosophy as a radical, strenuous, concerted resistance to “thoughtlessness.” As Arendt knew, thoughtlessness is the basis of the most pervasive and deeply entrenched evils in the world, and it is, as I have attempted to show, exemplified by anthropocentrism, by our human pretensions to be divorced from all other forms of life and to be the default yardstick relative to which everything in the known universe has meaning and value. As Adorno suggests, such thoughtlessness is expressed, and the evils such thoughtlessness precipitates are portended, whenever someone says that an entity is “just an animal,” indeed,

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perhaps, whenever anyone even uses the word “animal” at all, and in general whenever anyone speaks, thinks, or lives in such a way that shuts out or denies rather than welcomes or affirms any kind of alterity.

This is why ethics is truly “first philosophy”: not just a “branch” of philosophy among others, but its trunk. So, though I understand yet hesitate to embrace Deleuze’s claim that philosophy is “useful for harming stupidity,” I agree with his insistence that philosophy’s “only use is the exposure of all forms of baseness of thought,” that philosophy is essentially an “enterprise of demystification.”⁹³⁶ If indeed the goal of philosophy is wakefulness, then its proper function and goal is to dispel those forms “thoughtlessness” or “asininity” (bêtise) – those mystifications – that precisely keep us from wakeful seeing, thinking, and living. The proper task of philosophy is to dismantle those frameworks that obfuscate or violently silence and repress rather than elucidate or allow to be seen and heard the truths that urgently demand our recognition because they are, like all truths worthy of the name, not truths suspended above and beyond carnal existence but rather truths that are precisely tethered to it and to its fate, truths that are not merely or purely “abstract” because there are always bodies behind or entwined with them, bodies whose flourishing or suffering are always at stake in them, vital needs and goods whose visibility is always at stake in (re)learning to see them. Anthropocentrism suppresses not only what it truly means to be “human” but also, therefore, what it truly means to flourish as one as well, for it precisely suppresses all of the other forms of embodied life, and thus all of the other goods, with which human life is inextricably enmeshed; indeed, anthropocentrism simply suppresses what it means to be at all, and in doing so perpetrates grave violence and injustice – the very Ur-form of violence and injustice – against all beings. I think that Merleau-Ponty’s

ontology provides the best resources for decentering anthropocentricity in all of its guises, and in fact Merleau-Ponty explicitly came to regard decentering the human standpoint as integral to radical phenomenological reflection. My contention is that doing so is integral not only to a phenomenology or ontology worthy of the name but to an understanding of community, and thus to an ethics and political philosophy, worthy of the name as well.

“All those we have loved, detested, known, or simply glimpsed speak through our voice,” and if phenomenology teaches us anything, it is that justice means doing justice to all those who already speak to and through us, that justice means learning how to let others speak, that justice means graciously attending to those voices without whom we would, in truth, have no voice at all, even and especially those whose voices are typically silenced by abstract, often oppressive categories and conceptual frameworks, those whose voices are typically drowned out by the loud, cacophonous chatter of powers that presume themselves to be the only ones with anything worth being heard, powers that mistake the value or truth of what they say with the loudness or authority with which they are able to force everyone to hear it, that mistake contingent dominance and privilege with ontological, epistemic, moral, or political merit; it also means using one’s voice to critique, even to shout down if necessary, such voices that have for far too long denied voices to others, to speak against entrenched and unjust power. For far too long, human beings – even philosophers – have spoken quite loudly, yet have mostly used their voices to silence others (indeed, to silence the vast majority of others) rather than to say much of anything worth saying or hearing, to reinforce rather than speak against entrenched and unjust power. Perhaps in the end this is all phenomenology really is or ought to be: learning how to use our voices to give voice, or rather learning how to use our voices to let speak, to in fact listen

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rather than speak, and then learning how best to respond to what is thus heard, which of course is still to listen, and to listen is also to learn continually how to listen, and sometimes also to speak against those who would keep us from listening, against those who are threatened by what we might hear.

If phenomenology can truly fulfill its promise of lucidity, its promise to bring to light those beings and “things themselves” that most saliently and urgently address us in everyday life, it has to find a way to suspend, to see and listen through, those obfuscations that masquerade as fundamental truths, those boundaries that masquerade as essential, impermeable, and immobile borders, those frameworks of power that conceal themselves as “natural” or ontologically basic conditions of being and knowing, those particular standpoints or constructs of identity that pretend to be central, universal, pure founts of truth, meaning, and value, those abstractions that precisely oppose lucid seeing, attentive listening, sound thinking, genuine knowing, and thus just acting and good living. No question is more radical than the question concerning “who we are,” the question concerning the boundaries that demarcate this plural singular pronoun that subtends every experience and that we uncritically deploy in everyday thought and speech (as I just did, and as I have been doing throughout this work). If there is one final point I hope to have conveyed here, it is that we must say of “community” what Merleau-Ponty says of “the Other,” namely that it is “always in process of an unfinished incarnation,”938 and that we therefore must similarly say of the radical question of “who we are” what we must say of the flesh or of the “We” – the radical community – that constitutes “us,” namely that it is “ever gaps open.”939

So, I have no doubt Merleau-Ponty would agree that everything – not just abstract truth and knowledge but flesh-and-blood ethical and political flourishing – is at stake in “relearning

939 Ibid., p. 132, 147.
how to look at the world,”⁹⁴⁰ and that relearning how to look at the world is something we must ceaselessly, relentlessly do because it especially means learning how the world looks from those vantage points that are invisible from within the one we usually occupy, the one that constitutes our ordinary, uncritical, royal sense of “We.” I have no doubt that for Merleau-Ponty just as well as for Nietzsche, in order for critical, philosophical thinking to live up to its name it must teach us how to “think differently – in order at last, perhaps very late on, to attain even more: to feel differently.”⁹⁴¹ Merleau-Ponty has certainly helped me think and feel differently, and I hope my work may play a humble role in helping others do the same. My sincere belief, which I have here attempted to support argumentatively and performatively, and my sincere hope, which I have here attempted to advance, if only in a small way, toward its fulfillment, is that phenomenology in general, and that Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology in particular, may empower us to think more cogently, to feel more sensitively, to see more lucidly, to listen more carefully, to dwell in the world more responsively and, therefore, more responsibly: never without violence, but with the least violence.

⁹⁴⁰ *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. xx.