

Vision, Mirror and Expression

The Genesis of the Ethical Body
in Merleau-Ponty's Later Works

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Where are we to locate ethics in the later works of Maurice Merleau-Ponty? In the generality of the vision that works through us, of the flesh that produces us in its folds, where is responsibility to be inscribed? This is to ask how our lived bodies are more than instantiations of a wandering vision; how they can become, at the same time, singular bodies, capable of sociality and ethics.

To search for ethical bodies in these later works is to ask after the genesis of the body. This genesis provides the nonethical, or not yet ethical, background to an ethics of the body. It gives rise to a multiplicity of bodies in the flesh, which makes there be other bodies along with my own — opening the question of ethics among our bodies. For this genetic account, I will turn to *Eye and Mind*, which, among all of Merleau-Ponty's works, is the one that presents us with a literal mirror. In this mirror, we will encounter the secret of genesis, which characterizes the flesh — the genesis of my body and its mirror image, my body and its other. This mirror is more than a mere device. In this “magical” mirror, we see a figuration for all flesh¹ — for the flesh that radiates, that wanders through the world as vision and reassembles itself in visibles, “la Visibilité tantôt errante et tantôt rassemblée” (Visibility sometimes wandering and sometimes reassembled) (VI

181/137–38), the flesh that is *voyant-visible* (seeing-visible), that is sensing and sensible.

Drawing upon this magical mirror, I wish to interrogate the possibility of an ethics in Merleau-Ponty's later works. The multiple radiations of the flesh, seen in the mirror, show the impossibility of a solipsistic body, as well as the intrinsic interpenetration and co-genesis of bodies that arise in the flesh. But this interpenetration is not yet necessarily an ethical relation for Merleau-Ponty. Merleau-Ponty describes the mirror in *Eye and Mind* as a "prehuman way of seeing," a magical vision that is also that of the painter.² The mirror's vision is prehuman and presocial; like the painter's, it is a vision that suspends judgment and engagement in the world. "Only the painter is entitled to look at everything without being obliged to appraise what he sees."³ This detached vision performs a curious *epoché* of social, human life; it withdraws from the interests and the responsibilities of life in order to better attend to the genesis of these relations.⁴ This vision remains beneath the threshold of ethics, allowing us to see the ground where myself and the other are engendered, the precursor to any ethical relation between us. We will need to turn to *The Visible and the Invisible*, as well as to the preface of *Signs*, to see how this precursor to ethics, this genetic ground of the flesh, can produce the singular bodies that bear responsibility.

CARTESIAN MIRRORS AND MAGICAL MIRRORS IN *EYE AND MIND*

There are several mirrors in *Eye and Mind* — each witness to the genesis of a different body with its own consequences for ethics. As I look into these mirrors, what do I see? The answer is different for Merleau-Ponty than it was for René Descartes. The Cartesian who looks into the mirror sees, or rather thinks that he sees, an automaton, a mannequin that resembles him, but that is not really there. The Cartesian mirror performs a double illusion and, at once, reflects back to the Cartesian the impossibility of a bodily ethics.

The image that the Cartesian sees in the mirror is an unreal effect produced by the play of reflected light rays. Vision occurs by the causal impact of these light rays on the eyes: a movement is transmitted from

the object (which is itself merely extension, figure and motion). This movement is conveyed through a transparent medium to the eyes, and from the eyes to that little gland in the brain whose vibrations the soul feels.⁵ Through this mechanical, causal transfer of movement, the soul begins to see.⁶

The mirror is an obstacle on the path of these light rays, a contingent detour that results in an illusion. For, being used to a vision that is geometrical and causal, the Cartesian is led to project into the mirror the image seen, in a straight line from his eyes. The mirror subverts the normal functioning of vision and reveals its weaknesses, its illusions.

The resemblance between the object and the mirror image is no more than a projection of the Cartesian's thought. There can be no real resemblance between the two, one being a thing of extension and motion, the other a collection of light rays. Their relation is constituted by causality and difference. The image is at best a *representation* of the object; the reflected light rays are like signs that excite the soul to see the object but that do not resemble that which they represent.⁷ Resemblance always comes afterwards in Cartesian vision; it is a result of projection, and another illusory effect of the mirror.

If the Cartesian recognizes himself in the mirror, the illusion is doubled. For the mirror image can represent no more than an outer shell, a body that could be mistaken for an automaton. The image is a surface reflection without expressive life.⁸ For the Cartesian, "the mirror image is in no sense *a part of him*" "l'image spéculaire n'est rien *de lui*" (EM 39/131). This surface reflection, this outside without inside, is nothing intrinsic to the one before the mirror, nothing that really resembles him. The reflected light rays have no genuine resemblance to his body; even less can they capture the essence of his soul. For the Cartesian, the factitious experience in the mirror transforms him into an automaton, as does the vision of another who sees him through a window as he walks down the street. This becoming-automaton is a possibility that haunts the Cartesian body — a body that senses nothing, least of all itself.⁹ Neither the Cartesian body, nor the image that it projects in the mirror, is sensing-sensible (*sentant-sensible*); neither one is flesh.¹⁰ For the Cartesian, this automaton-body

is extrinsic to questions of ethics. The root of ethics is to be located in the will, the soul, not in the mechanically produced gestures of a body.

The Cartesian mirror generates the illusion of an illusion. The mirror image represents a mere outer form without life, and this representation is nothing but the play of reflected light. What the mirror reflects back to the Cartesian body is its inhumanity, its impossibility as an ethical subject.¹¹

What, then, happens when I look into Merleau-Ponty's mirror? We first learn that the mirror is a technical object that "has sprung up along the open circuit *between* the seeing and the visible body" (EM 33/129); the mirror is hence a "technique of the body" (EM 33/129). This follows from what we know of *The Phenomenology of Perception*. The mirror can be seen as an extension of my lived body, an apparatus derivative upon my corporeal schema, not unlike the pen that I use for writing, or the cane that the blind person uses to perceive the world. In this context, the mirror is an instrument that allows me to see more of my visible body — but only by relying upon its already constituted visibility. Because the body is already a seeing-visible, the mirror can extend what the body sees of itself. This addition does not, however, produce a qualitative change in the lived body, which, on this account, is an already fully constituted being, a seeing-visible and a sensing-sensible. Hence, we read in *Eye and Mind*: "Every technique is a 'technique of the body.' . . . The mirror emerges because I am a visible see-er [*voyant-visible*], because there is a reflexivity of the sensible; the mirror translates and reproduces that reflexivity" (EM 33/129).

Even with this preliminary description, Merleau-Ponty goes far beyond the Cartesian mirror. Merleau-Ponty's mirror does not merely reflect an outer shell, a feeble and illusory copy of myself; it translates and reproduces the reversibility of the lived body. This reversibility defines the flesh of the body for Merleau-Ponty: "A human body is present when, between the see-er and the visible, between touching and touched, between one eye and the other, between hand and hand a kind of crossover occurs, when the spark of the sensing/sensible is lit, when the fire starts to burn that will not cease until some accident

befalls the body, undoing what no accident would have sufficed to do" (EM 21/125). This reversibility that characterizes my flesh can infect the body in the mirror. In this way, the mirror image is no longer an automaton but a sensing-sensible that duplicates me, that is invested with my own life. The spark between the sensing and the sensible, which defines my lived body, can be extended to its image in the mirror. What I encounter in the mirror is another myself, a double with whom I am reversible, and with whom I can exchange experiences. Hence, Merleau-Ponty can say (in an example taken from Schiller), "smoking a pipe before a mirror, I feel the sleek, burning surface of the wood not only where my fingers are but also in those otherworldly fingers, those merely visible ones inside the mirror"¹² (EM 33/129).

This goes far deeper than any Cartesian mirroring. Merleau-Ponty's mirror gives me a double animated with life, expression and feeling — a double who has both an inside and an outside, who is both sensing and sensible, another body that is flesh. But is this double still any more than an extension of myself, a thing invested with my life, a copy drawn from my original flesh? On this account, Merleau-Ponty pushes the Cartesian mirror to its breaking point, but it does not yet produce a genuine and irreducible other. I find myself again as a solipsistic subject with no intrinsic connection to others. My mirror image, my other, remains accidental to me. The encounter in the mirror alters nothing of my essential being, so that, after the mirror, I am left sovereign and alone in my world. No more than the Cartesian am I forced to become ethical.

There is much more in Merleau-Ponty's account in *Eye and Mind* than this, and much more in the mirroring experiences he describes than we have shown up to this point. So far, it has seemed that the mirror image is accidental to the original; its existence depends upon the contingent placement of that special device, the mirror, before me. The image shows something about me, but it is not necessary to me. It comes as an accessory to my already constituted, sensing-sensible body. But *Eye and Mind* moves beyond this presentation of the constituted, phenomenological body to the genesis of that body. This accounts for the peculiar point of view of *Eye and Mind*. It allies itself

with the painter and the mirror — instances of a magical and pre-human vision that sees what is invisible to profane vision and yet what makes it possible, a vision that sees to the genesis of bodies and things.

Hence, it becomes important to note that the other myself that I see in the mirror is not a contingent addition to my body. It arises, not only with literal mirrors, but everywhere I encounter others; “man [*sic*] is a mirror for man” (EM 34/130). And these others, these mirrors, do not come after the body, but arise along with it, and haunt it perpetually: “Further, *associated bodies* must be revived along with my body — ‘others,’ not merely as my congeners, as the zoologist says, but others who haunt me and whom I haunt; ‘others’ along with whom I haunt a single, present, and actual Being as no animal ever haunted those of his own species, territory or habitat” (EM 13/122). The actual body never arises alone; it is not a solipsistic possession. Its genesis is at the same time a haunting, an interpenetration and reversibility with other bodies. That the lived body always arises with others and cannot be constituted alone can be seen in concrete terms in Merleau-Ponty’s account of early childhood experience (see my coda at the end of this essay). For Merleau-Ponty, every genesis in the flesh is at least a doubling; the flesh radiates in a multiplicity of bodies. Is this, then, how the spark between the sensing and the sensible comes to be lit? Is that spark ever possible in an isolated body? Thus, we may begin to locate the possibility of an ethics in *Eye and Mind*.

With these considerations, we must return to the mirror — the mirror as the figure of doubling and of multiplicity, of radiation in the flesh. This mirror “outlines and amplifies the metaphysical structure of our flesh” (EM 33/129). At the same time, we must return to the relation of the body and the mirror image, seen not as extension, but as “transubstantiation” and “effective resemblance” (*resemblance efficace*). With these terms, Merleau-Ponty turns to a theological register, to an aesthetic theology, a theology made flesh. He appeals beyond Cartesian categories of representation, with their evacuation of resemblance, to a magical theory of vision, of transubstantiation and effective resemblance.¹³ In this regard, the mirror is no longer a mere technique derived from the structure of the body; rather, “Mirrors are instruments

of a universal magic that converts things into spectacles, spectacles into things, myself into another, and another into myself” (EM 34/130). The mirror and the other are intrinsic to my body and my flesh. Far from being derivative, they are, as we shall see, called for by my flesh and complete it.

THE MIRROR, THE PAINTER

We thus come to the mirror and the painter — instances of that magical and prehuman vision that wanders through *Eye and Mind*. Merleau-Ponty says of the mirror: “This prehuman way of seeing things is emblematic of the painter’s way” (EM 32/129). But who is this painter, and what does she see?

The painter is situated at the threshold of any faculty of representation, at the limit of knowing subjectivity. The vision of the painter wanders in the subrepresentative, in the prehuman domain of the workings of the flesh.¹⁴ The painter sees at the limits of the visible; she sees that which makes it visible, the genesis of spectacles and things. Hence,

Light, lighting, shadows, reflections, color, all these objects of [the painter’s] quest are not altogether real objects; like ghosts, they have only visual existence. In fact they exist only at the threshold of profane vision; they are not ordinarily seen. The painter’s gaze asks them what they do to suddenly cause something to be and to be *this* thing, what they do to compose this talisman of a world, to make us see the visible. (EM 29/128)

This domain of the painter is invisible to ordinary, profane vision. Profane vision constructs and represents, as science does; it sees only *things*, objects-in-general, positivities (EM 9/121). Painting, on the other hand, performs a noncategorical seeing.¹⁵ It sees that which is elided by profane vision in its drive to grasp objects. The painter’s vision aims at that which has only visual existence — that which refuses synthesis under a concept, which cannot be made into an object. The merely visual is nothing to a conceptual seeing, since it is in excess of what can be cognized; it has existence only for vision, not for the faculty of representation.

That which is merely visible (which is invisible from the profane point of view) is no less real, no less felt. The prehuman vision of *Eye and Mind* is more expansive than ordinary vision. It is a vision of lights, colors, textures and depth, but also of what is normally taken to be hidden in the recesses of the body; it is a synaesthetic vision of movement, touch and affect.¹⁶ These invisibles, or secret visibles, as Merleau-Ponty calls them, are not negligible effects of profane vision, secondary qualities or illusions. They are that which allows us to see, that which makes there be visibles to be seen; they provide the very structure, the invisible lining of the visible world, the secret of its genesis.¹⁷

Painting sees these invisibles, not because it evokes them through "visual data," but because it *sees* them, because it sees more. "[Painting] gives visible existence to what profane vision believes to be invisible" (EM 27/127). In this sense, painting performs a *transubstantiation*.¹⁸ The invisible of profane vision, the secret of the world's visibility, becomes visible in the painting. That which was only virtually visible "becomes at once visible for us and for itself" (EM 32/129). Like the ritual of the sacraments, painting transforms what was only profanely seen into an embodiment and visible expression of the invisible. What was merely bread and wine becomes body and blood. Though profane vision detects no difference, the prehuman vision of the painter sees the invisible reality penetrating the profane visible, and expresses their intertwining.

This is what characterizes the vision of the painter. It is a seeing that is at the same time a production, a transubstantiation, transforming that which it sees into paintings. "The painter's vision is an ongoing birth," says Merleau-Ponty (EM 32/129). In the painter, "vision becomes gesture" (EM 60/139).¹⁹ And this gesture is the continual genesis of images. The image is not the visible *thing* of profane vision, nor is it a copy or representation. It is "a 'visible' of the second power" (EM 22/126), which shows what makes visibility possible. That which is elided in profane vision finds visible expression in the painting and takes on reality for itself. The image reveals the invisible and internal workings of vision — the genesis of visibles and seeing-visibles in the world. But how is this labor of vision seen in the mirror?²⁰ How is the

"round eye of the mirror" an instance of the magical and prehuman vision in *Eye and Mind*?

As I stand before it, what does the mirror see? It sees what it takes to make me body; it sees the secret of my flesh, that spark that is needed to make me a sensing-sensible and a seeing-visible. As the painter's vision wanders the world in search of the secrets of its visibility, the mirror's gaze searches out the secret of my being. Where profane, Cartesian vision sees only an outer shell, a possible automaton, the mirror goes deeper. What it sees is the reversible structure of the body — that blending and indivision of sensing and sensible, that fire that will make me a living body.

Like the painter's vision, the vision of the mirror is a genesis. As Merleau-Ponty says: "In [the mirror], my externality becomes complete. Everything that is most secret about me passes into that face, that flat, closed being of which I was already dimly aware, from having seen my reflection mirrored in water."²¹ In the mirror, I see more than my body; I see my face. And in this face there is still more to be seen. For the face in the mirror expresses my inner life. Suddenly what is most intimate and secret, what *I* could never before see, takes visible existence. My outside completes itself. It is no longer a mere shell, a flat and closed entity, a Cartesian reflection. My outside becomes, in the mirror, the form and expression of an inside; my outside, my face, becomes intertwined with my invisible, affective life, and brings it to visibility. Thus, the mirror completes my body by lighting the spark of inside and outside. It establishes in the mirror image the indivision of sensing and sensible; it brings together the profane visible and its invisible lining for the first time before my eyes. For the first time, I see this face where my secret is expressed, and I experience a reversibility between this visible in the mirror and my inner, sensing life. The spark is lit, flickering between the mirror image and my body, and both my body and the image become flesh. (For a concrete parallel, see Merleau-Ponty's description of the mirror stage in childhood experience in the coda to this essay.)

Hence, the mirror not only recognizes the secret of my flesh, it accomplishes it. In the mirror is produced that secret genesis of living

bodies which characterizes the flesh. The mirror shows the simultaneous doubling, the multiplicity, of that genesis. The mirror (as well as the face of the other) transforms my vision. My vision is no longer a profane vision, grasping only objects in the world, but a vision that sees, and generates, the invisible life that animates the face.

Merleau-Ponty describes another experience that reiterates the burning link of sensing and sensible which arises in the mirror: “Schilder observes that, smoking a pipe before a mirror, I feel the sleek, burning surface of the wood not only where my fingers are but also in those otherworldly fingers, those merely visible ones inside the mirror” (EM 33/129). How is it that these merely visible fingers feel anything? How is it that the visible and sensible also senses (a feat impossible in a Cartesian body)? These reflected fingers are phantoms at the threshold of profane vision, which dismisses them as illusions. But in the prehuman vision of the mirror, these fingers take on reality. The mirror captures, in the sheer visibility of the fingers, the invisibles that make them flesh. It transforms, transubstantiates, my fingers into those merely visible fingers — and, in so doing, it gives visible existence to what was invisible and secret about them. In this sense, the merely visible mirror image is also affection, touch and movement. The burning sensation in the mirror is not deduced by analogy with my own fingers, nor is it given by empathy; rather, that feeling is part of the enveloping visibility of the mirrored fingers themselves. In this way, the phantom fingers are glorious for Merleau-Ponty. They perform, within the visible, the synaesthesia of the senses — that promiscuity and overlap that is the secret of my body’s flesh. Merleau-Ponty’s mirror shows not only the genesis of visible bodies in the world but the production of affectivity and thickness in these living bodies that are flesh.

EFFECTIVE RESEMBLANCE: THE MIRROR AS FIGURE OF THE FLESH

These experiences in the mirror point us to what Merleau-Ponty means by *ressemblance efficace* (effective resemblance) — a resemblance that characterizes the relation of visible thing and painting, of body

and mirror image. Unlike the Cartesian relation of representation, the resemblance that links me to my image in the mirror is an intrinsic one. The image is not a mere copy, but reproduces what is most essential about me. The image in the mirror duplicates me in all my affective life, in all that makes my body this sensing-sensible. It doubles me, but with a difference; it exposes me, making visible what was most intimate and secret about me.

But there is another sense in which this resemblance is intrinsic to me. There is a necessary duplication of my body, an essential mirroring and othering that is part of the structure of the flesh. My body arises with its necessary ghosts, and these ghosts, these mirror images complete its flesh. The possibility of ethics can be located in this necessary mirroring. My body is never alone. Its genesis is at once a cogeneration of other bodies in the flesh. This intrinsic intercorporeity calls for a development of my relation to the other; it calls for an approach to the other and hence brings me into the domain of ethics. That this mirroring is an ontological structure of the flesh can be seen in the importance that Merleau-Ponty accords the “mirror stage” in early childhood experience; this offers a concrete example of the cogeneration of lived bodies, mine and the other’s, in the flesh.

The relation of my body to its other, to its mirror image, is not that of an original to a copy; it is a relation that emanates, radiates, from the flesh and gives rise to both terms. Hence, there is an inherent multiplication and emanation in the flesh, with which we come to the aesthetic theology of *Eye and Mind*. For *ressemblance efficace*, as Merleau-Ponty uses it, evokes the resemblance of the persons of the Trinity, and in particular the relation of Father and Son.²² The Son is the image of the Father, linked to him by a “primary resemblance” and a “primary equality” that makes them *consubstantial*. Both are of one substance, converging in the unity of God, though they express different personal properties. They are the same flesh, under different aspects. The persons are inseparable, the Son radiates from the Father but cannot be separated from him. Like the ghostly bodies and mirrors that haunt me and with whom I haunt the flesh, one person is essential to the other, forming with the third the unity of the Christian

God. In addition, the Son is the visible image of the invisible Father. Their resemblance generates something, the visible expression of an invisible. The Son, the image, is not a mere representation indicating a hidden reality. It is the actual, visible embodiment of that reality, that same flesh, having efficacious existence in the world.

The prehuman vision of the flesh behaves according to such an effective resemblance. "All flesh, and even that of the world, radiates beyond itself" (EM 81/145). It radiates, splits itself up, and generates the visible world with its invisible texture — as well as the images that haunt this world — reflecting back to it the secret of its own genesis. Paintings and mirrors perform the magic that is in all vision, the duplication and radiation of the flesh that is involved in all seeing; for everything seen is both there and here, both thing in the world and image for vision (EM 28/128).²³ Only profane vision insists on fixing and defining boundaries — on separating seeing from the thing seen, soul from body, and sensing from sensible. But the flesh knows only promiscuity, reversibility and encroachment. The mirror and the painter are instances of this reversibility and overlap. They are instances of a desire, the desire of the vision that is flesh to see itself, to fold over and be visible for itself. This desire, which functions more by excess than by lack, is the principle for the fission and multiplication of the flesh, for its radiation into bodies and images. The mirror and the painter are effects of this desire.²⁴ This desire of vision, this fission and multiplication of flesh, establishes a cogeneration of bodies, an intercorporeity, and hence brings us to the question of an ethics.

THE GENERALITY AND TOTALIZATION OF VISION

At the time of his candidacy for the Collège de France, Merleau-Ponty writes:

The study of perception could only teach us a "bad ambiguity," a mixture of finitude and universality, of interiority and exteriority. But there is a "good ambiguity" in the phenomenon of expression, a spontaneity which accomplishes what appeared to be impossible when we observed only the separate elements. . . . To establish this wonder would be metaphysics itself and would at the same time give us the principle of an ethics. (UP 11)

The phrasing of this citation represents an earlier terminology, one that is humanist and not yet that of the flesh. But the movement outlined therein will be repeated in both *The Visible and the Invisible* and in *Signs*. What is this move from perception, or vision, to expression? And how does this allow for "the principle of an ethics"?

Thus far, we have analyzed a genetic (and almost mythical) moment in the flesh, a moment that the mirror points to and reproduces each time I find myself before it. This is the moment of the cogeneration of bodies, as radiations and folds of the flesh. The moment of the fission of the flesh makes my embodiment at once a haunting and interpenetration by other bodies, *les corps associés, les autres* (associated bodies, others) (EM 13/122).

But what happens when this moment is extended, when one body fixes its gaze upon another, and their vision interlocks? What happens when the bodies, which have been engendered out of the flesh, remain tied to one another solely through that prehuman vision that has witnessed their genesis and produced it — when the two bodies continue to exchange look, touch and affect, as I did with my mirror image in Merleau-Ponty's examples in *Eye and Mind*? This question arises explicitly in both *The Visible and the Invisible* and in the preface to *Signs*:

What is it like when one of the others turns upon me, meets my gaze, and fastens his own upon my body and my face? Unless we have recourse to the ruse of speech, putting a common domain of thoughts between us as a third party, the experience is intolerable. There is nothing left to look at but a look. Seer and seen are exactly interchangeable. The two glances are immobilized upon one another. Nothing can distract them and distinguish them from one another, since things are abolished and each no longer has to do with anything but its duplicate. (PS 24/16)

As soon as we see other seers . . . [f]or the first time the body no longer couples itself up with the world, it clasps another body, applying [itself to it] carefully with its whole extension, forming tirelessly with its hands the strange statue which in its turn gives everything it receives; the body is lost outside of the world and its goals, fascinated by the unique occupation of floating in Being with another life, of making itself the outside of its inside and the inside of its outside. And henceforth movement, touch, vision, applying themselves to the other and to themselves,

return toward their source and, in the patient and silent labor of desire, begin the paradox of expression. (VI 188–89/143–44)

In each case, the vision that joins my body to the other is found to be intolerable. This experience of transitivity in the flesh — the exchangeability of bodies, the transference of touch, movement and vision from one body to the other — proves unbearable. For this experience reduces to a duality that excludes the interruption or diversion of a third term, that suspends both the existence of the world and that of further others (*les tiers*).

To understand this experience, we must refer back once again to the painter. “The painter’s world is a visible world, nothing but visible: a world almost mad, because it is complete though only partial. Painting awakens and carries to its highest pitch a delirium which is vision itself” (EM 26/127). Vision, even the painter’s prehuman vision, has a totalizing tendency. Vision pretends to capture everything, to possess its landscape — and to do so only through visibility. It forces the other aspects or dimensions of being to take on visibility in order to exist for vision (EM 27/127). This is at once the virtue and the excess of vision. The painting and the mirror show all there is to see, even my inner life; they allow me to come to existence before my very eyes, lighting the spark of my inside with my outside. But this transformation, transubstantiation, has a cost. All that I am must take on visible existence in the painting or the mirror image; all that is hidden must be exposed to view, possessed by visibility.

Is there not, in the end, some remainder that resists the totalization of vision, and that is its precondition? Is there not for every invisible transubstantiated into visibility a further invisible upon which depends the vision of the mirror or the painter — a blind spot or stain that remains behind every visible? While a totalizing vision may claim closure for itself and complete possession of the other, the possibility of ethics lies with this irreducible remainder. By maintaining the openness of vision — by interrupting its attempts to possess itself and the other, by restoring the world and inserting a third term, a further invisible, between the two visibles who continually exchange their regards — we can finally approach an ethics.

The totalization of vision is a forgetting, or more accurately, a refusal to remember, the remainder of invisibility.²⁵ It is the metaphysical desire of vision (already evoked above) to see itself, not only as it sees the world, but also at the very place where it sees itself; it is the desire for complete specularly and closure. Merleau-Ponty evokes this generality or anonymity of vision in *The Visible and the Invisible*. Indeed, for the cycle of vision to achieve closure, for the two seeing bodies to be exactly matched and substitutable one for the other, they must remain in generality and universality. This is because the introduction of a singular term would create a break, an untranslatable and indeclinable element that cannot be exchanged for another. There would then be something in what the other sees that I could not possess — the other’s way of seeing, her field of experience, which would be inaccessible to me. Thus, within the hypothesis of generality, my body and the other are but different instances of the same anonymous, prehuman vision. This vision is exchanged and adjusted between us in a closed cycle.²⁶ This vision, which is flesh, looks at itself looking — and I and the other are swept up in the cycle of generality. This vision seeks to be complete, to see itself at the very root of what makes it vision, at its final blind spot. Through the cycle of two anonymous bodies, vision pursues this desire without end, “sans vainqueur, et . . . sans titulaire” (which has no victor, and no titular incumbent) (PS 24/17); it is fascinated in this narcissistic pursuit.

But vision is, at the same time, insufficient to this pursuit; for though it may desire to be total, it can only be partial. In Merleau-Ponty’s account, there is some slight difference (*écart*) between the two bodies that resists the cycle of totalizing vision, a singularity that cannot be incorporated into it. For my body and that of the other remain distinct, as do my two hands that touch. Though they may exchange experiences, our bodies maintain the minimal difference of number — and vision is forced to circle between them, without achieving stability. If not for this noncoincidence, this invisible remainder or blind spot, the cycle of vision could be closed, and the experience would be one of fulfillment and joyful contemplation, not of intolerable fascination. We feel the trace of this difference in the unbearable of the experience

Merleau-Ponty describes, in our resistance to forming a synthesis or totality with the other, in our attempt to maintain the distinction between us, at the very least that of number. Hence, this slight difference or *écart* is at once the negative sign that the cycle of vision cannot be sustained, and the positive ability to interrupt the cycle, to move beyond generality to a new dimension of differentiation and invisibility. This difference is the precursor to expression.²⁷

ETHICAL BODIES: EXPRESSION, GESTURE, VOICE

To break out of the totalizing cycle of vision, intercorporeity must be definitively extended beyond the generality of the visible.²⁸ This production of a new dimensionality constitutes, for Merleau-Ponty, a *sublimation* of the flesh. Hitherto visible flesh is sublimated into invisible dimensions of singular expression — dimensions that remain intertwined with the visible and sensible while going beyond them and resisting incorporation back into them. As he says in *The Visible and the Invisible*,

Yet this flesh that one sees and touches is not all there is to flesh. . . . 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. Among my movements, there are some that go nowhere — that do not even go find in the other body their resemblance or their archetype: these are the facial movements, many gestures, and especially those strange movements of the throat and mouth that form the cry and the voice. (VI 189–90/144)

There is no longer a mere difference of number between my body and that of the other, but a differentiation that spans the dimensions of the flesh. This new dimensionality, this multiplicity of dimensions of the flesh, represents for us the concrete possibility of an ethics. It opens up between myself and the other, beyond the numerical distinction of our two bodies or our two looks, all the possible differentiations that can be generated between us, and that express the singularity of each. Hence, voice, gesture and speech, as well as thought, are inserted between us. “Speech . . . would interrupt this fascination [of vision]. It would not suppress it; it would put it off, carrying it on forward”²⁹

(PS 24/17). In excess of its visibility, the body before me begins to smile, to speak and to think. This body is no longer anybody in general, any *voyant* (seer), but reveals a particular character and expresses a specific style of life. In its gestures, its facial expressions and the tone of its voice, it is incomparable to any other.³⁰ That body which is before me is a particular field of interrelated qualities; it is an individuated field of experience, a concrete and singular other. In this sense, when the other’s regard intersects with my own, this event has repercussions beyond what is visible. For within the expression of a face and in the context of bodily gestures, the regard communicates the other’s singularity in her attitude toward me (her pleasure at seeing me, her attempts at avoidance, her curiosity, openness or animosity, and so on); this regard marks a distinctive way of being that cannot be exhaustively defined nor exchanged with any other.

Expression thus transforms the seeing-visible body beyond the realm of visibility — by a further transubstantiation or sublimation of its flesh. From the multiple expressions that differentiate our bodies, my body and that of the other can no longer be considered instances of anonymity and generality in vision, but take on the aspect of singularity. The lived body expresses itself in new and distinctive dimensions, becoming a singular, human body, *un corps propre* (one’s own body). This individuation in the flesh is reflected in the importance that expression (vocalization, gesture, facial expression, speech) takes on in Merleau-Ponty’s account of early childhood development; in this sense, as we shall see in the coda at the end of this essay, the “mirror stage” understood on purely visual terms is necessary though not sufficient for the genesis of singular, social bodies.

For Merleau-Ponty, new dimensions of expression and differentiation do not have the effect of isolating the body in absolute particularity; rather, through them, the body is opened to sociality and hence to questions of ethics. The sociality that is produced in this case is not that of assumed agreement but the mediation and communication by means of a third term, which is nonoppositional difference.³¹ Every new dimension that is opened between us, differentiating me from the other, is also a difference that connects; this is likewise the meaning of

the chiasm in *The Visible and the Invisible*. In expressing its difference, its singular character, the lived body also communicates this to others; however, this communication is difficult because the expressed difference does not fall under ready-made categories of cognition (which would subsume it to the same), nor can it be comprehended starting from my own field of experience; it can only reach me, affect me, by an attentive effort on my part.

This makes it possible for us to envision a kind of expressive vision, or more precisely, an attitude of the whole lived body, that performs an ethical relation to the other. Such an ethical relation is not merely seeing but also action and affection as well as gesture and language. It is a synaesthetic relation where the dimensions of the other are not translated into visibility (as they are in the vision of the painter or the mirror). Rather, what is visible points beyond itself to other dimensions, sonorous, affective and linguistic, that intertwine with it but are not reducible to it. Hence, this expressive vision does not seek to return to full visibility but, recognizing its partial and dependent nature, opens the path to the other through different senses, through an attentive listening and touch. "We should have to return to this idea of proximity through distance, of intuition as auscultation or palpation in depth" (VI 170/128).

Such a bodily attitude, such an expressive "vision," breaks out of the generality and ubiquity of vision. It is only by renouncing its hegemony, by abandoning its attempts to possess all of experience, that vision can become part of ethics.³² This ethical vision has in common with the vision of the mirror and the painter that it is a noncategorical seeing; it is not limited in what it sees to objects, to the constructs and representations of profane vision. In this sense, no less than the mirror and the painter, this vision is an awareness of the invisible; but unlike them, ethical vision does not seek to bring invisibility to sight. It comes in contact with the invisible in its own dimensions; it joins it on its own terms, not by capturing the invisible within visibility, but by differentiating itself into all those dimensions within which the invisible resides, and hence "seeing it from within," as Merleau-Ponty says. This requires on the part of ethical vision not an effort of

appropriation, but an effort of creation and expression, of self-differentiation. It requires, above all, a gentle effort of attention with regard to the invisible, the other — an ability to interrupt the usual tendencies of vision, its desire for ubiquity, as well as its habits of objectification and generalization, and to await the other in active attentiveness, in auscultation and palpation. One's response to the other then comes not through habitual and ready-made formulas, but with attention and nuance, recognizing the other as a singular and unrepeatable event, and expressing and sustaining that difference. This attentive vision would translate concretely into a seeing that avoids stereo-typical classifications and clichés, at once providing the basis for their critique. In "Habits of Hostility: On Seeing Race," Linda Martin Alcoff points to the need for such a vision — the need to see better. This does not involve abandoning vision, or aiming at "color-blindness," but it is a way of seeing the racialized other that "unlearn[s] racism." Such vision would not erase histories of oppression or ignore the ways in which categories of race inform our habits of seeing, but would provide a concrete way of "seeing race" that unlearns and criticizes these habitual and categorical ways of seeing.³³ Here, the ethical seeing that I am proposing in this essay — a seeing that is attentive to nonoppositional and fluid differences rather than repeating ready-made categories — meets up with Alcoff's account of vision.³⁴

For Merleau-Ponty, there is no opposition between sociality and singularity, between communication and irreducible difference. At first sight, vision posed us with a problem because it maintained too small, too weak a difference between bodies. As a result, all bodies were reduced to the generality and homogeneity of vision, while at the same time the communication between them was limited to an intolerable, binary exchange. The chiasm is already prefigured within vision, although it is threatened there with collapse. To arrive at ethics, this chiasm must unfold in dimensions that go beyond the duality and "bad ambiguity" of the visible — dimensions that allow for the emergence of both the singularity of the human body and the sociality of its connections to other bodies.

THE INTERTWINING OF VISION AND ETHICS

The emergence of new dimensions in the flesh does not constitute a move to a transcendent or intelligible realm beyond the sensible. These new dimensions emerge within the sensible, as dimensions of the now singular, human body. Yet was there not already something of that singular, expressive body in the mirror image referred to above? The vision of the mirror already caught sight of this singular way of being when my body was reflected with its associated affects. For pleasure, pain and the burning touch in my fingers are affective experiences that mark my body as my own — given to me and suffered by me from within. Others may perceive the symptoms of these affections in the outer comportment of my body, but my pain and my joy, as experienced by me, are inaccessible to them. Hence, when the burning sensation is felt by the fingers in the mirror, this gives the mirror image a singular being apart from my own; it is not simply an extension of my life, but an embodiment of the burning link of sensing and sensible, another in the flesh. The prehuman vision of the mirror thus anticipates the ethical, expressive body in which singularity is inscribed; in the experience of affect, the singularity of the lived body is found constituted. In some ways, the vision of the mirror is already an expressive vision; more than mere visibility, it is action and affection, and engagement with the other as affective reality. But expression reverts in the mirror to visibility, and the singularity of the body is contracted into what is seen. The vision of the mirror is one of mute visibility; a different approach is needed to reach ethics.

This points us in the direction of the intertwining of the visible and the expressive for Merleau-Ponty — a relation between vision and ethics in which their irreducibility is maintained. We have attempted to separate out these orders, with the purpose of witnessing the genesis of visibility and of bodies in the flesh. This genesis provides us with the opening for an ethics; concrete ethics comes from a consideration of the expressive body, in its multiple dimensionalities. It is this that Merleau-Ponty allows us to think: the intertwining of ethics and nonethics, of the human and the prehuman in the thickness of the flesh.

CODA: THE "MIRROR STAGE" IN CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCE

In "The Child's Relations with Others," Merleau-Ponty describes a period in childhood development that is characterized by what he terms "transitivism" (or, following the child psychologist Henri Wallon, "syncretic sociability"). In this period of syncretism (from six months to around three years) the distinction between one's own body and that of the other begins to emerge, and the body image is acquired. Prior to this, the body exists without self-ascription or objectification. Others are part of the child's surrounding world, but they are not yet identified as "others," nor is the body defined in opposition as "mine." Even within the period of syncretism, the ascription of the body as "mine" and its identification with its image as seen by others tends to oscillate, and is only finally stabilized after a long process.

For Merleau-Ponty, the experience in the mirror offers a unique and irreducible situation that is crucial to the development of one's body image. Merleau-Ponty draws his theory of the "mirror stage" in childhood development (which he locates after about the age of six months) from both Henri Wallon and Jacques Lacan. And yet it should be noted from the outset that he differs from both thinkers. Though he remains close to Wallon in his descriptions, Merleau-Ponty refuses to see the child's experience in the mirror as an intellectual exercise, a matter of acquiring a belief (CRO 196/132). And though he cites Lacan's comments concerning the child's "jubilation" in identifying with the specular image, Merleau-Ponty does not see the body image as necessarily idealized or narcissistic (CRO 202/135). Indeed, Merleau-Ponty's version of the mirror stage includes the parental other or caregiver who holds the child, and the role of this other remains central.

According to Merleau-Ponty in "The Child's Relations with Others," the child first comes to recognize, and to distinguish, the other's specular image before it does its own. This often occurs in the course of play, where it seems that the child has learned something new (that the image in the mirror is not the real parent, and yet the parent can be recognized in the image).³⁵ This experience helps the child to arrive at an identification of his or her own specular image; for the problem that the child encounters with respect to his or her own

image is doubly complex. As with the image of the parental other, the recognition of the child's own specular image must involve an identification (that the image belongs to me), and at the same time a distinction (that it is somehow different from me). But, unlike the case of the parental other, the child cannot compare his or her specular image with a direct visual perception of his or her own body. As Merleau-Ponty says,

Thus for [the child] it is a problem of understanding that the visual image of his body which he sees over there in the mirror is not himself, since he is not in the mirror but here, where he feels himself, and second, he must understand that, not being located there, in the mirror, but rather where he feels himself introceptively, he can nonetheless be seen by an external witness *at the very place at which he feels himself to be* and with the same visual appearance that he has from the mirror. In short, he must displace the mirror image, bringing it from the apparent or virtual place it occupies in the depth of the mirror back to himself. (CRO 193, 129)

The formation of a body image has its source for Merleau-Ponty in the ambivalence and confusion of the child's experience before the mirror. The child begins by seeing her specular image as a double of her body; only later does the child identify this image as distinct from her own body. But even in adult experience, the separation of the specular image from the reality of one's body remains incomplete (as we have seen in the experience described by Schilder above). According to Merleau-Ponty, the doubling by which the specular image is seen to have its own existence, to be "another myself," lingers in our experience of the mirror. In this sense, my specular image does not only belong to me as an object would; it has a "quasi reality," so that it is experienced as extending and participating in the life of my body. It cannot be reduced to a mere representation. I may be able to conceive of it as a confluence of light rays, but it retains a magical and constitutive role in the development of my body image, to which I cannot be indifferent.³⁶ This understanding of the specular image, and of the mirror stage, stems from the novel way in which Merleau-Ponty conceives the mirror — both as a technical device and as an instrument of magic.

But the mirror stage is not sufficient for understanding the individuation and self-ascription that takes place in the development of the child's body image. This is because, as Merleau-Ponty notes, drawing on Wallon, dimensions of expression and differentiation other than simple visible differentiation exist between the child and his or her companions (parental other or caregiver). Indeed, what captures the attention of the infant is first the other's voice, before seeing the other's face or the form of the other walking past. From Wallon we learn that the first "extroceptive stimulus" to which the infant responds is the voice (prior to six months). At first this response takes the form of a smile on the infant's part, developing into vocalizations and cries soon after.³⁷ It is voice as self-produced and as heard that gives rise to the distinction of "I" and "other," to the beginnings of sociality in childhood experience.³⁸ (In this sense, the term "stages" of development is not accurate. Rather, Merleau-Ponty sees various experiences taking place in childhood development, each contributing something new but none of which are definitive acquisitions. His descriptions of the experience in the mirror apart from expression, in the passages from *Signs* and *The Visible and the Invisible* cited above, reveal a process of abstraction rather than a temporal, developmental order.)

To extend Merleau-Ponty's account of vocalization, let us take the case of what is commonly called infant "babble," which designates the child's first produced sounds and coos. This "babble" ordinarily connotes a kind of nonsense — sounds that one cannot understand, of which one cannot even say whether they belong to a language. The infant has not yet acquired the rudimentary structures of language, and yet the infant produces sounds. These vocalizations may take the form of melodic or rhythmic sounds, a series of phonemes, of cries or coos. What role do they play? In *Maternal Ethics and Other Slave Moralities*, Cynthia Willett suggests that this is a form of communication or attunement to the other that is preconceptual and prelinguistic, if by language we mean "papaese, i.e., the discursive language of conceptual thought" (including the Saussurian view of language as structure). This communication "consists of expressions of intonation, rhythm, and intensity addressed to another person."³⁹ This affective and

expressive language before language (*langue*), this vocalization before discursive speech, can be designated by the term "mamaese."⁴⁰ Hence, the child's first vocalizations should not be taken to contain a conceptual signification, but a melodic or phonic sense of the child's own bodily and affective being vis-à-vis the world and others.⁴¹ In this sense, the voice is someone; it is a nascent subjectivity. The voice is embedded in a singular living body and expresses the rhythm and style of that existence in difference from and response to others. The whole flesh of the body participates in the inflection, intonation and musicality of vocalization. As such, each voice is a singular and nongeneralizable expression that conveys more than the mere content of words. But voice is not only expression; as we have seen, vocalization implies and is motivated by the presence of others; it is both responsive and playful.⁴² In this sense, vocalization at once installs a distinction between bodies and the means for their communication.

With the beginning of vocalization and expressivity (including facial expressions) in general, the infant starts responding to others, according to Merleau-Ponty. Others are no longer merely lived as a vague and enveloping atmosphere felt in the infant's body by sensations of pleasure, displeasure or comfort;⁴³ others are genuinely heard (or, to use Wallon's words, become explicit extroceptive stimuli). Vocalization functions on several levels here. It constitutes the demand on the part of the infant for the attentive look of the other,⁴⁴ but it is more than the desire for a blank stare from the other; vocalization, in fact, initiates a reciprocity with the other, resulting in animated exchanges in play.⁴⁵ In this context, we could say that vocalization participates in an expressive relation with the other that includes but is not reducible to vision. Vocalization is not literal imitation; otherwise, infants would echo and reproduce the speech of adults (as parrots do). In this sense, vocalization is not a matter of reproducing the sounds that the infant hears in his or her surroundings; it involves *responding* to others in affective and expressive ways. The child's vocalizations and expressions are thus already nascent forms of sociability and communication. That is to say, the vocalizations arise in contact with and in correspondence to others; the concrete form they take will derive from these

interactions. Both through the mirror stage and by means of these forms of expression the child's sense of his or her own body as singular and distinct from other bodies is formed and intercorporeal communication becomes possible. The genesis of an ethical dimension of the flesh is to be located here.