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Abstract:

The central hypothesis of this paper is that the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty offers significant philosophical groundwork for an ethics that honours key feminist commitments – embodiment, situatedness, diversity and the intrinsic sociality of subjectivity. Part 1 evaluates feminist criticisms of Merleau-Ponty. Part 2 defends the claim that Merleau-Ponty’s non-dualist ontology underwrites leading approaches in feminist ethics, notably *Care Ethics* and the *Ethics of Vulnerability*. Part 3 examines Merleau-Ponty’s analyses of embodied percipience, arguing that these offer a powerful critique of *the view from nowhere*, a totalizing God’s-eye-view with pretensions to objectivity. By revealing the normative structure of perceptual *gestalts* in the intersubjective domain, he establishes *the view from*

¹ Thanks go to the anonymous reviewers who gave extremely cogent feedback on this paper. Thanks also go to various other persons for commentary on earlier versions of this paper; notably, Katherine O’Donnell (University College Dublin), Adam Loughnane and other philosophers who attended the invited lecture on this paper at University College Cork (November 2017), and also participants of the SWIPI (Society for Women in Philosophy, Ireland) conference at the National University of Galway, December 2016.

everywhere. Normativity is no longer deferred to higher authorities such as duty, utility or the valorised virtue, but through the perceptual gestalt it is returned to the perceiving embodied subject. This subject, defined by inherent intersubjectivity, is thereby vulnerable to others and has the capacity for care.

Keywords: phenomenology, feminist ethics, ontology, Merleau-Ponty, intersubjectivity, perception, normativity, Care Ethics, the Ethics of Vulnerability

Introduction

Maurice Merleau-Ponty is criticized by some feminists for failing to address the concerns of feminism and the specificities of women's embodiment. Simone de Beauvoir is famously critical of Merleau-Ponty, but unfortunately, often in defending Jean Paul Sartre.² Nonetheless, I argue it is Merleau-Ponty, not Sartre, in philosophical alliance with Beauvoir, who provides fertile philosophical groundwork for an ethics that honours important feminist commitments – the body, situatedness, empathy, vulnerability, diversity and the intrinsic sociality at the heart of subjectivity. Part 1 evaluates the principal criticisms of Merleau-Ponty from feminist philosophers. Part 2 defends the claim that Merleau-Ponty's non-dualist, relational ontology underwrites leading approaches in feminist ethics, notably *Care Ethics* and the

² After Merleau-Ponty's positive review of Beauvoir's *L'invitée*, to which he accorded immense ethical significance in recognizing our inherent ambiguity, Beauvoir wrote a review of *The Phenomenology of Perception*, proposing that Merleau-Ponty's analyses overcoming the subject-object divide provided the basis for an ethics that could be embraced "wholly and sincerely" (Beauvoir, 'Revue de *La Phénoménologie de la Perception* de Maurice Merleau-Ponty', 363-367). Her later *Ethics of Ambiguity*, however, did not mention him once although the thinking is conspicuously complementary to Merleau-Ponty's own thought and, despite avowals to the contrary, opposes many of Sartre's key notions. The only explanation in the absence of a rift is her overwhelming personal commitment to Sartre; she did refer to herself as the "midwife of Sartre's existential ethics rather than a thinker in her own right" (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2014). As Monique Langer writes: "Both in her written works and in interviews Beauvoir consistently and misleadingly portrayed her thought as simply derivative of Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*; and in the *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, she names Sartre immediately after a passage that echoes Merleau-Ponty perhaps more than any other passage in the work [*Force of Circumstance*, 75; *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 121-122]" (Langer, 'Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty on Ambiguity'). Langer offers a fine-grained analysis with detailed textual support of the inconsistencies in Beauvoir's elaborations as she unsuccessfully aligns her thought with Sartre while her philosophical ally is in fact Merleau-Ponty. The correspondences are striking. So too, the article 'An Analysis of Sartre's and Beauvoir's Views on Transcendence: Exploring Intersubjective Relations', by Christine Daigle and Christinia Landry, illuminates the philosophical tensions between Beauvoir's immanent transcendence which enables a true existential ethics and Sartre's failure to effectively address bodily immanence.

Ethics of Vulnerability. I have further argued that Merleau-Ponty's ethics of intersubjectivity provides ontological justification for important principles in the three main normative ethical accounts – the “everyone considered” of *Utilitarianism*, the universalizing principle of *Deontology* and the values of sociality implicit in *Virtue Ethics*.³ Part 3 turns to perception, one of the keystones of Merleau-Ponty's philosophical vision. Through his ground-breaking analyses of embodied perception, I argue that Merleau-Ponty offers a powerful critique of *the view from nowhere*, a totalizing God's-eye-view with pretensions to objectivity. He achieves this by revealing the normative structure of perceptual *gestalts* in both the phenomenal and the intersubjective domains, thereby establishing *the view from everywhere*. Normativity in the ethical domain is thus no longer deferred to a higher authority such as duty, utility or the valorised virtue, but through the perceptual gestalt it is returned to the perceiving embodied subject. This subject, defined by inherent intersubjectivity, is thereby vulnerable to others and has the capacity for care.

Part I: Evaluation of feminist critiques of Merleau-Ponty

1.1 Simone de Beauvoir and Luce Irigaray and the question of gender

The philosophical canon, without question, is not gender-neutral and this has incited important and incisive critiques of key figures in the history of philosophy. It is thus not surprising that the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty has also attracted fire.⁴ Is this warranted? Most certainly we can say that he was a man of his times and certain assumptions entered into the manner in which he expressed his philosophical vision. Simone de Beauvoir and Luce Irigaray criticize Merleau-Ponty for

³ See Daly, *Merleau-Ponty and the Ethics of Intersubjectivity*.

⁴ See Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*. Trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevalier. While I have used this 2015 translation as it has some advantages over the earlier one by Parshley in 1949, it is still far from adequate as a faithful translation of Beauvoir's thought as explained in a number of writings by Toril Moi, 'The Adulteress Wife'; see also, Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*; and Butler, 'Sexual ideology and Phenomenological Description: A Feminist critique of Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception'.

universalizing the body and thereby eliding the important role of gender.⁵ We can agree that there is still work to be done here and feminist philosophers have already begun these important critical analyses.⁶ In Merleau-Ponty's defence, we could say he was not specifically aiming to subsume female embodied experience under male experience but rather was seeking to articulate experience below such divides; the problem of articulation of his non-dual ontology was one he revisited at a number of junctures across his philosophical career even up until the last unfinished work.⁷ At the end of the chapter "The Body in its Sexual Being", Merleau-Ponty is clearly affirming a non-reductive, non-essentialist and dynamic conception of human sexuality and being. He writes: "... everything in man is contingency in the sense that this human manner of existence is not guaranteed to every human child through some essence acquired at birth, and in the sense that it must be constantly reformed in him through the hazards encountered by the objective body. Man is an historical idea and not a natural species [.....]. Human existence [.....] is the transformation of contingency into necessity by the act of taking in hand".⁸ Furthermore, his later work expanded the philosophical concerns to include the notion

⁵ See the entire section 'The Body as a Sexed Being', in *The Phenomenology of Perception*, to which the vast majority of criticism refers. Nonetheless, it is my deeply considered view that while Merleau-Ponty does use the generic "man" to refer to humans in general, along with almost all writers of that pre-politically-correct time, the views he espouses when examined carefully in context do not elide the role of gender. Beauvoir herself uses "he" to cover those instances where women are not specifically referenced. There is also the very French approach of presenting the *problématique* followed by the view one wishes to defend. Some of the accusations of inconsistencies may in fact be attributed to this very approach; the first view presented along with the related argumentation are not Merleau-Ponty's own view, but just his careful presentation of the opposing view which he subsequently seeks to refute or undercut. And invariably the first presentation of the problem along with the supporting argumentation is incompatible with the *telos* of Merleau-Ponty's overall philosophical project. See also a similar observation from Robert Vallier, the translator of Merleau-Ponty's *Nature* course notes, *Nature*, xiv.

⁶ Young 'Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment Motility and Spatiality'; Butler *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*; Ainley "'The Invisible of Flesh": Merleau-Ponty and Irigaray'; Fielding, "'Only Blood Would Be More Red": Irigaray, Merleau-Ponty and the Ethics of Sexual Difference'; Weiss *Body Images: Embodiment as Intercorporeality*; Lennon 'Imaginary Bodies and Worlds'; Lennon 'Feminist Perspectives on the Body'; Gatens 'Beauvoir and Biology: A Second Look'; Diprose *The bodies of women: Ethics, embodiment and sexual differences.*; Murphy 'Feminism and race theory'; Braidotti *Nomadic subjects: Embodiment and sexual difference in contemporary feminist theory*; Heinämaa *Toward a Phenomenology of Sexual Difference*; Grosz *Volatile bodies: Toward a corporeal feminism*; Kirby 'Culpability and the double cross: Irigaray with Merleau-Ponty'; Guenther 'Merleau-Ponty and the Sense of Sexual Difference'; Dolezal, and Petherbridge *Body/Self/Others: The Phenomenology of Social Encounters*.

⁷ PPb: 182- 183; 408-409; ILVS: 80; VI: 3, 46, 73, 74, 105, 130. For extended discussions of this problem of articulation across all of his works see, Landes, *Merleau-Ponty and the Paradoxes of Expression*.

⁸ PPa: 197, 198; PPb: 174.

of interanimality. By taking the philosophical analyses wide and deep, Merleau-Ponty could be considered inclusive of all genders and all creatures, thereby giving philosophical justification to the central feminist ethos of diversity. Nonetheless, let us examine some of the later criticisms levelled at him and his work from feminist philosopher, Judith Butler.

1.2 Judith Butler and Merleau-Ponty's theory of sexuality

Butler is both critical and appreciative of the work of Merleau-Ponty and her chapter, 'Sexual Ideology and Phenomenological description: A Feminist Critique of Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception', targets specifically Merleau-Ponty's theory of sexuality.⁹ While she acknowledges inconsistencies in Merleau-Ponty's writings, she nonetheless gives significantly more sustained attention to those that lend themselves to feminist critique and for this reason her early assessments are often skewed towards the negative. Butler notes that Merleau-Ponty stresses the idea that sexuality is "co-extensive with existence",¹⁰ thereby avoiding the trap of naturalizing sexuality along with the attendant problems of a normalizing normativity that prescribes standards of normality against which the perceived sexual and bodily characteristics of diverse individuals can be measured and found wanting. So too the body as the locus of possibilities is given positive note. Nonetheless, her criticisms of Merleau-Ponty are strong and in my view overstated. Butler writes:

⁹ Butler's target is clearly identified at the beginning of this chapter, she writes: "The appeal to a natural desire and, as a corollary, a natural form of human sexual relationship, is thus invariably normative, for those forms of desire and sexuality which fall outside the parameters of the natural model are understood as unnatural and, hence, without the legitimation that a natural and normative model confers", Butler, 'Sexual ideology and Phenomenological Description: A Feminist critique of Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception', 85.

¹⁰ PPb: 172

Not only does he assume that sexual relations are heterosexual, but that masculine sexuality is characterized by a disembodied gaze that subsequently defines its object as mere body. Indeed, as we shall see, Merleau-Ponty conceptualises the sexual relation between men and women on the model of master and slave.¹¹

With regard to her first criticism, we could ask, if Merleau-Ponty had for example discussed sexual relations from the perspective of lesbian sexuality, would he then be opening himself to even more serious critique in presenting a viewpoint for which he himself had no direct experience?¹² Does Merleau-Ponty generalise from a prepersonal body that is abled, heterosexual and masculine? There is most certainly a potential tension here – but of what order? I would like to argue that the tension arises, as already stated, due to the problem of articulating a non-dual ontology and seeking to address a prepersonal that undercuts the concrete interpersonal distinctions between male and female, abled and disabled, straight and gay. Merleau-Ponty, himself, acknowledges the problem in the earlier works of still being caught in the language of subject-object and so the ontology of the later works deploys a much more evocative, poetic style of language which avoids dichotomous polarisations.¹³

Butler's second criticism that masculine sexuality is characterised by a disembodied gaze references Merleau-Ponty's discussions of a brain-damaged war veteran who had lost capacities that would have otherwise enabled responsiveness within a sexually charged situation. Due to his injuries "the unfortunate Schneider" was incapable of responding to sexual cues.¹⁴ This is not an example of across-

¹¹ Ibid., 86

¹² Irigaray in 'The Invisible of the Flesh: A Reading of Merleau-Ponty, The Visible and the Invisible', *The Intertwining--The Chiasm*, makes a similar criticism of the masculinist bias of Merleau-Ponty's account of the prepersonal. But again in his defence, we could argue that if he were to present the feminine prepersonal he would be decried as a fraud, trespassing where he had no authority.

¹³ PPb: 179; VI: 200, 246

¹⁴ PPb: 105-140, 157-160

the-board masculine sexuality, but rather an illustration of the break-down in sexual functioning that for Merleau-Ponty does useful philosophical work in highlighting the differing roles of body schema and body image in negotiating events in the intersubjective domain. For Merleau-Ponty, disembodiment is problematized across a number of domains, and he argues extensively and persuasively that selves and others are conscious corporalities and incarnated consciousnesses.¹⁵ And so Butler's criticism does not find its mark.

Regarding the third criticism, in my view, Butler is here confusing Merleau-Ponty with Sartre and even Beauvoir who do endorse dualist ontological accounts. While Beauvoir's primary aim is to avoid the simplistic equation that Sartre advances in *Being and Nothingness* with "the gaze" wherein relations are inevitably and pessimistically characterised by reification with the male as master and the female as slave, there are textual references wherein she does conflate women and slaves, or women and subjection.¹⁶ Despite these anomalies and the dualism her thought sustains, in the end the direction of Beauvoir's thought finds a closer ally in Merleau-Ponty.

The passage which Butler critiques does refer to the dyad master-slave as a possibility in the processes of objectification, but importantly Merleau-Ponty's critical appraisal is that this is in fact "self-defeating, since, precisely when my value is recognized through the other's desire, he is not longer the person by whom I wished to be recognized, but a being fascinated, deprived of his freedom, and who therefore no

¹⁵ PPb: 56, 151, 364- 369, 525en: VI: 133, 248-251

¹⁶ See Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 29, 504, 537; Debra Bergoffen clarifies Beauvoir's position thus: "Dismissing the explanatory value of the idea of women's inferiority, we are able to see why Beauvoir references Hegel's master-slave dialectic rather than Sartre's 'look' to account for women's inessential otherness. Sartre's 'look' parallels Hegel's master-slave dialectic to the extent that both accounts of intersubjectivity tie the demand for recognition to a contest between equally demanding authoritarian subjects. Beauvoir, however, indicates that women and men have never confronted each other this way. Woman is not the one who has lost the fight to death. She is the one who has never had the right to look or to fight", Bergoffen, 'The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Gendered Phenomenologies, Erotic Generosities', 170.

longer counts in my eyes”.¹⁷ Furthermore, we can see in the quotation below from Merleau-Ponty, his view of sexual relations is anything *but* dualist or objectifying of the other.

... for the first time, through the other body, I see that, in its coupling with the flesh of the world, the body contributes more than it receives, adding to the world that I see the treasure necessary for what the other body sees. For the first time, the body no longer couples itself up with the world, it clasps another body, applying [itself] to it carefully with its whole extension, forming tirelessly with its hands the strange statue which in its turn gives everything it receives; the body is lost outside of the world and its goals, fascinated by the unique occupation of floating in Being with another life, 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 labour of desire, begin the paradox of expression.¹⁸

This is neither dominance nor subjection; this is mutuality. Merleau-Ponty argues that reciprocity is non-negotiable or otherwise the world of one absorbs the world of the other; he insists that “co-existence must in all cases be experienced on both sides”.¹⁹

Butler also refers to Merleau-Ponty’s anthropological *naïveté* in failing to recognize that biological processes are not prior to cultural relations but rather culture is present at the outset.²⁰ Again, to my mind this is too hasty and I cannot find any expression of such a view in Merleau-Ponty. Rather, he writes – “everything in man is a necessity” and “everything in man is a contingency”; “human existence

¹⁷ PPa: 193; PPb: 170. Note the use of the male pronoun “he” for the objectified subject.

¹⁸ VI: 144

¹⁹ PPa: 415

²⁰ Butler cites the earliest version of the *Phenomenology of Perception*, 160.

is the transformation of contingency into necessity by the act of taking in hand”.²¹ There are, moreover, many more textural references that speak of the enmeshment between nature and culture which is the *telos* of his philosophical interrogations.²² So too any reductionism or foundationalism is firmly repudiated in his articulation of the “intentional arc”. He writes:

The life of consciousness - cognitive life, the life of desire or perceptual life – is subtended by an ‘intentional arc’ which projects round about us our past, our future, our human setting, our physical, ideological, and moral situation, or rather *which results in our being situated in all these respects*. It is this intentional arc which brings about the unity of the senses, of intelligence, of sensibility and motility.²³

²¹ PPa: 197, 198; PPb: 174. A prefiguration of Butler’s notion of performativity.

²² VI: 126, 149, 155. Clearly, such a view does not fit well with the knowledge that he was a close friend and colleague of anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss. And moreover, I do not find it convincing to suggest that Merleau-Ponty was ignorant of the “linguistic and psychosomatic origins of human sexuality”, Butler, ‘Sexual ideology and Phenomenological Description: A Feminist critique of Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology of Perception’, 98. His critical appreciations of Freud (for detailed discussion of Merleau-Ponty’s relationship to Freudian psychoanalysis see, Beata Stawarska’s chapter, ‘Psychoanalysis’, in Diprose and Reynolds, *Merleau-Ponty: Key Concepts*; that he held the chair in Child Psychology at the Sorbonne (1949-1952), that Lacan was engaged in presenting his seminar in Paris when Merleau-Ponty held the chair in philosophy at the Collège de France (1952-1961) and wrote of their friendship in a memorial after Merleau-Ponty’s death - Lacan, ‘Merleau-Ponty: In Memoriam’, all suggest someone with the interest and opportunities to be extremely well informed of these domains, and this is borne out in his scholarship. Merleau-Ponty makes use of the research and studies on psychopathology for many of his analyses and the domain of sexuality is no different. Here he again draws on the case of “the unfortunate Schneider” who had suffered a brain injury and elaborates at length on the psychosomatic effects of his injuries. Merleau-Ponty writes that “pathology reveals a living zone between automatic reflexes and representation in which the sexual possibilities of the patient are elaborated”, PPb: 158. And in his endorsement of Freud he writes that, “the significance of psychoanalysis is not so much in making psychology ‘biological’ as it is in discovering a dialectical movement in functions believed to be ‘purely bodily’ and reintegrating sexuality into human existence” Merleau-Ponty, (PPb: 160). For more extensive discussions of Merleau-Ponty’s engagement with psychology and psychoanalysis, see Hoeller (ed), *Merleau-Ponty and Psychology*. Merleau-Ponty offered an ontological interpretation of Freud’s psycholanalysis, and emphasized the existential meaning rather than unconscious representations. See also Masubu, ‘Psychoanalysis and Ontology: Lacan, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty’, 201-217. His regard for Lacan was also critically appreciative; like Lacan, he also drew on Saussurian linguistics but they differed in their analyses of the relationship between gesture and language. For Merleau-Ponty, sexuality is metaphysical and is grounded in expressivity; and the language of the body in sexual being is paradigmatic of human existence.

²³ PPa: 157; PPb: 137. And later, he writes: “Thus sexuality is not an autonomous cycle. It has internal links with the whole active and cognitive being, these three sectors of behaviour displaying but a single typical structure, and *stand in a relationship to each other of reciprocal expression*”, PPa: 182; PPb: 160. Berendzen offers a similar critique of Hubert Dreyfus’s claim that “skilful coping” in Merleau-Ponty establishes a kind of operative foundationalism from which higher level cognitive capacities are derived, Berendzen, ‘Coping Without Foundations: On Dreyfus’s Use of Merleau-Ponty’, 629-649.

1.3 Philosophical resources in Merleau-Ponty's work which support feminist theory

There is much in Merleau-Ponty's work that provides important philosophical resources not just for philosophy in general but I propose most particularly for feminist ethics and here I find concordance with other feminists.²⁴ Moreover, the very same feminist philosophers who are critical of Merleau-Ponty, either explicitly or implicitly, acknowledge the pertinence of many of his analyses. Butler thus allows that because he offers significant arguments against naturalistic accounts of sexuality, these serve to counter reductive normative views of sexuality.²⁵ As he writes, the human is a "historical idea" and is not a "natural species" and "human existence is the transformation of contingency into necessity by the act of taking in hand".²⁶ This coheres with Beauvoir's very famous statement that "one is not born, but rather becomes woman"²⁷ and also contradicts Butler's earlier claim that Merleau-Ponty fails to appreciate the cultural construction of sexuality.²⁸ Furthermore, is not Butler's signature notion of performativity anticipated here in Merleau-Ponty's "transformation of contingency into necessity by the act of taking in hand"? The upshot of my evaluation is that there are many more important points of concordance than discordance between Butler and Merleau-Ponty.

²⁴ Weiss *Body Images: Embodiment as Intercorporeality*; Kruks 'Merleau-Ponty and the problem of difference in feminism'; Young 'Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment Motility and Spatiality'; Lennon 'Feminist Perspectives on the Body'; Murphy 'Feminism and race theory'; Fielding 'Envisioning the other: Lacan and Merleau-Ponty on intersubjectivity'; Andrews 'Vision, Violence, and the Other: A Merleau-Pontean Ethics'; Kirby 'Culpability and the double cross: Irigaray with Merleau-Ponty'; Dolezal & Petherbridge *Body/Self/Others: The Phenomenology of Social Encounters*; Brubaker 'Care for the Flesh: Gilligan, Merleau-Ponty and Corporeal Styles'.

²⁵ See Butler, 'Sexual ideology and Phenomenological Description: A Feminist critique of Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception', 85.

²⁶ PPa: 198; PPb: 174

²⁷ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 29. It has been supposed that this statement from Beauvoir is inspired by the previously mentioned quotation from Merleau-Ponty, but there is reason to suggest that she (and possibly Merleau-Ponty as well) was first alerted to this insight by the work of the Hegel interpreter, Alfred Fouillées (1838-1912) whose writings she studied at her Lycée. "L'homme naît pas libre, il le devient" – man is not born free but becomes free.

²⁸ See Butler, 'Sexual ideology and Phenomenological Description: A Feminist critique of Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception', 92.

So too, it is Merleau-Ponty who credits Beauvoir and her novel *She came to stay (L'Invitée)* with inspiring key ideas in his analyses, such as, those concerning appearances, temporality, embodiment, and the tension between immanence and transcendence. In contrast, Sartre's opus, *Being and Nothingness*, written after *She came to stay*, makes no such acknowledgements although the provenance of many of his philosophical inspirations are evidently related to Beauvoir's novel.²⁹ So we could say that not only do Merleau-Ponty's pivotal philosophical notions lend themselves to feminist interpretations, but that as a philosopher he was supportive of women and their philosophical endeavours.

Some of the insights from Merleau-Ponty's work already identified as relevant to a feminist ethics are the following: firstly, the recognition that sexuality is coextensive with existence;³⁰ secondly, his account of the prepersonal body contributes much to understanding human existence by undercutting disjunctions of race and gender;³¹ thirdly, his non-reductive analyses of the "lived body" work below any such disjunctions, but allow that bodies are nonetheless historically, culturally and socially situated.³² Finally, and most importantly, I argue that it is Merleau-Ponty's non-dualist, relational ontology that furnishes the kind of grounding that is important to the claims and commitments of various elaborations of feminist ethics, such as feminist work in *Care Ethics* and the *Ethics of Vulnerability*.³³

While the assertions for social and relational ontologies at the heart of feminist theory exactly cohere

²⁹ See Simmons (Ed) *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Critical Essays*, for extended close scholarly analyses of the convergence and divergences between these philosophers.

³⁰ See Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*; Butler, 'Sexual ideology and Phenomenological Description: A Feminist critique of Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception'; and many others.

³¹ See Kruks, 'Merleau-Ponty and the problem of difference in feminism', 27-28; Leach-Scully, 'Disabled embodiment and an Ethics of Care'; 'Disability and the Thinking Body'.

³² See Hartsock, 'The feminist standpoint: Developing the ground for a specifically feminist historical materialism', 283-310; Mussell, 'The Truth of the Matter'.

³³ See Hamington, *Embodied Care: Jane Addams, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Feminist Ethics*; 'Resources for feminist care ethics in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body', 203-220; Brubaker, 'Care for the Flesh: Gilligan, Merleau-Ponty and Corporeal Styles'.

with Merleau-Ponty's project, what is often overlooked is how these ontologies are established in the first place and this is where a return to Merleau-Ponty is important. How does he achieve this? While still maintaining his focus on the three equiprimordial axes of his philosophical vision – the body, perception and intersubjectivity - Merleau-Ponty's later work seeks once and for all to overcome thinking within the terms of dualism which tied him to his philosophical targets. He does this through the reversibility thesis which reveals his relational ontology of chiasm, flesh, intertwining and unity-in-difference.

Part II: A phenomenological grounding of ethics

In this part of the essay I present the case that Merleau-Ponty's non-dualist ontology grounds major approaches in *Feminist Ethics*.³⁴ I begin by summarising the development of Merleau-Ponty's arguments for his non-dualist ontology from the earlier work, focusing on embodiment and perception, to the later work in which *the reversibility thesis* becomes central.

2.1 Interiorities and exteriorities

What is Merleau-Ponty's overall project?³⁵ It is to overcome solipsism and scepticism once and for all. These are the two most significant problems in the history of philosophy and they are two sides of the same problem - how can we get out of our own heads, get out of our own interiority to know a world?

³⁴ The non-dualist, relational ontology also offers support for key principles in the three main normative ethical accounts - the "everyone considered" of *Utilitarianism*, the universalizing principle of *Deontology* and the values of sociality implicit in *Virtue Ethics*. Potentially, it could also address the question of the amoralist – why be moral? A thorough treatment of these claims are however beyond the scope of this paper. See Daly, *Merleau-Ponty and the Ethics of Intersubjectivity*.

³⁵ Although regarded by his peers as a very humble philosopher, Merleau-Ponty has made some very big claims. For example, he claims that resolving "the Problem of the Other" would lead to an entire reconstruction of philosophy, VI: 193. He asserts that the reversibility of the visible and the invisible is the ultimate truth, VI: 155. The overall aims of his project are no less grand, but I would say not grandiose. While it is still in dispute whether he achieved his aims, I propose the answers are there in his work. Nonetheless, his insights were sometimes ahead of himself and so it is possible to identify inconsistencies. We must, like Merleau-Ponty himself with regard to other thinkers, notably Husserl, focus on the interpretations and writing that cohere with and complete the project rather than focus on minor scholarly quarrels.

How can we bridge the interiority and exteriority divide? And the basis for these philosophical problems is dualism. Without dualism there would not be the problems of solipsism and scepticism. So while the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead declared that all Western philosophy is but a footnote to Plato, we can also say that because of Plato's dualism, philosophy has been burdened with some of the most intractable problems. Importantly for us as feminist philosophers this dualism has divided the world and experience into dichotomous categories wherein one term becomes the positive and the other the negative thereby underwriting the denigration of the feminine.

Merleau-Ponty's project to establish a non-dualist ontology thus has immense political implications. How does he achieve this non-dualist ontology? To begin with, he reinstates exactly what Plato and the heirs to his philosophical lineage had rejected in their accounts, the fact of embodiment and the primacy of perception. Merleau-Ponty's concern to establish a rehabilitated account of the body and perception spans his entire project and at every stage he reworks these both to address different domains and also to find the language capable of doing justice to his insights without either reductionism or objectification. Recognizing that his earlier works were constrained by the dichotomous language of object and subject, phenomena and consciousness,³⁶ Merleau-Ponty sought to express his non-dualist ontology in more dynamic and non-reductive terms; hence in the later works we find terms such as reversibility, chiasm, wild being, wild logos and flesh.

2.2 The Primacy of Perception

As a way into the more complex discussions, I would like to very briefly recap Merleau-Ponty's thesis of the primacy of perception. *The primacy of perception thesis*, defended the claim that "the perceived

³⁶ VI: 130, 183, 200

world is the always presupposed foundation of all rationality, all value and all existence”.³⁷ This is another big claim. And it has attracted criticism. Grounding everything including cultural and intellectual capacities in pre-reflective embodied percipience seems to lead to a reductionism and anti-intellectualism. How then can rationality, value, notions of truth and falsity and even philosophy be meaningful?

Before discussing how Merleau-Ponty ultimately lays to rest these concerns through his *reversibility thesis*, it is important to examine the two principal criticisms of the thesis of *the primacy of perception* so as to better appreciate the force of the later arguments.

Historically, the epistemic status of perception has been challenged through the argument from illusion; that due to the undeniable fact of illusions, perception was incapable of offering truths. Merleau-Ponty’s rejoinder is both simple and elegant; illusory perceptions are corrected not on the basis of any cognitive intervention but rather on the basis of another perception.³⁸ And so he proposes that the illusory perception is just one phase in the interrogation of the world.³⁹ The mirage in the desert is revealed to be not an oasis but just more sand by taking a closer look, by another perception.

In his rejection of objectivist views, the *God’s-eye-view*, also known as *the view from nowhere* because it is disembodied and unsituated, it seems that Merleau-Ponty has to address an even more serious criticism of his theory of perception, that of perspectivism. If we allow that perceiving subjects are embodied and situated, then surely this reduces the epistemic status of perception to a relativism and

³⁷ PriP: 13

³⁸ To support this claim Merleau-Ponty refers to the Müller-Lyer Illusion and also to the illusion that the moon looks bigger on the horizon than in the middle of the sky – both these illusions persist despite cognitive corrections. Recent scientific investigations have also shown that in cultures wherein the inhabitants are perceptually exposed to carpentered environments of edges and angles, they are less susceptible to the Müller-Lyer Illusion.

³⁹ VI 41

correlatively claims to knowledge are rendered unreliable and impotent. Merleau-Ponty initially addresses these related issues of perspectivism and relativism through the capacities of finding concordance in language and artistic expression. Our communications are meaningful whether in agreement or dispute; I can consider anything from your perspective and in fact all potential perspectives and we can negotiate our understandings through language and expression. And so it is through these generalities of communication and expression that we know we live in a shared world. This is Merleau-Ponty's *view from everywhere* which applies to other subjects (the intersubjective) as much as to things (the phenomenal).

To see is to enter a universe of beings which display themselves ... Thus every object is the mirror of all others. When I look at the lamp on my table, I attribute to it not only the qualities visible from where I am, but also those which the chimney, the walls, the table can 'see'; the back of my lamp is nothing other than the face which it 'shows' to the chimney. I can therefore see an object insofar as objects form a system or a world and insofar as each of them treats the others around it like spectators of its hidden aspects and a guarantee of their permanence.⁴⁰

Later in Merleau-Ponty's work, this *view from everywhere* becomes the *view from everyone* in the intersubjective moral domain - he writes:

We observe it [morality] in an experience, which is the perception of others.... Just as perception of a thing opens me up to being, by realizing the paradoxical synthesis of an infinity of perceptual aspects, in the same way the perception of the other founds morality by realizing the

⁴⁰ PPa: 79

paradox of an alter ego, of a common situation, by placing my perspectives and my incommunicable solitude in the visual field of another and all the others.⁴¹

Importantly, we can see here that Merleau-Ponty grounds morality unequivocally in perception and that perception opens up to the infinity of perceptual perspectives of all potential and historical others (and even future others) so that we inhabit a multiplicity of perspectives. Nonetheless, *the view from everyone* does not elide our differences; while I am always this side of my body both physically and culturally, I am no longer the impenetrable interiority as advanced in Cartesianism; there are exchanges and intertwinings between subjects and the world. This is how he is able to universalise his ethics and thereby avoid reduction to a relativist monocular perspective. Moral consideration is thus never a purely internal and private deliberation, but already implicates a multiplicity of perspectives. This claim is further vindicated in the analyses of perceptual *gestalten*, which I discuss below in Part 3.

It is Merleau-Ponty's *reversibility thesis* which is ultimately able to fully address the problem of perspectivism, by addressing the ontological grounding, undercutting the dichotomies of body-mind, immanence-transcendence, self-other and by means of the ultimate reversibility which Merleau-Ponty maintains holds between what he calls the *Visible*, the phenomenal world, and the *Invisible*, the cultural world of language, reflection and expression.

2.3 The Reversibility Thesis

What is *the reversibility thesis*? It is this thesis which underwrites Merleau-Ponty's *view from everywhere*; all perspectives potentially can contribute to our apprehension of things and others and all relations are in principle reversible; self, other and world are inherently relational or chiasmic; self, other

⁴¹ PriP: 26

and world are internally related; they are ontologically interdependent.⁴² And this is the key to Merleau-Ponty's continued significance to a *Feminist Ethics*. The social or relational 'ontology'⁴³ regularly cited by feminist philosophers attends to the concrete interpersonal dimension but does not address the deeper ontology, the constitutive intersubjectivity of subjectivity which underwrites the concrete interpersonal.⁴⁴ Merleau-Ponty elaborates this deeper ontology through the reversible, inherently chiasmic, relational interdependencies of selves, others and world revealed through the body and perception. Merleau-Ponty's *reversibility thesis* proposes that selves, others and world are internally related, that there is interdependence at the level of ontology. To clinch his claims, Merleau-Ponty demonstrated reversibility across a number of levels and domains.

2.4 Reversibility and the Visible

Merleau-Ponty analyses the reversibility firstly within the embodied subject, then reversibility between the subject and objects and the world, and finally that between subjects which is of particular relevance to this essay. He uses the famous model of one hand touching another; that the subject can be both the toucher and the touched; we can alternate between these modes thereby setting up an alienation within subjectivity. And this is why he says we already have the category "other" internal to the self. And

⁴² For an extended discussion and defense of *The Reversibility Thesis* see Daly, 'Does the Reversibility Thesis deliver all that Merleau-Ponty claims it can?'

⁴³ There seems to have been a confusion in the use of terms. The ontological concerns Being, the deep structures that underlie beings (or entities) and of which the ontic instantiates; and ontic refers to particular beings, the concrete phenomenal dimension of existence and the entities therein. So when feminist ethicists refer to social ontology they are really discussing social onticism. See Jenkins, 'What Women Are For: Pornography and Social Ontology'.

⁴⁴ These issues and distinctions are also reflected in the more general domain of feminist philosophy and the debates around the relevance of metaphysics for feminist theorizing. See Haslanger & Sveinsdóttir, 'Feminist Metaphysics'; Witt, *Feminist Metaphysics: Explorations in the Ontology of Sex, Gender and the Self*. Sally Haslanger, one of the key contributors to the debates, exemplifies some of the critical divides in her elaborations of what she terms 'social constructivism', which she argues is real but not metaphysically fundamental because it is contingent. Without disputing the cogency of Haslanger's analyses of the social constructivism at work in gender, whether it qualifies as metaphysics is arguable; nonetheless, it is clear that it is not ontology. See also Mikkola, 'Doing Ontology and Doing Justice: What Feminist Philosophy Can Teach Us About Meta-Metaphysics'; 'Ontological Commitments, Sex and Gender'. What is of interest to this current paper is that there is a recognition of the importance of metaphysics and grounding for feminist philosophy.

without this possibility of self-alienation it would be impossible to recognize external others.⁴⁵ Merleau-Ponty describes the reversible relation as similar to “two mirrors facing one another where two indefinite series of images set in one another arise which belong really to neither of the two surfaces, since each is only the rejoinder of the other, and which therefore form a couple, a couple more real than either of them”.⁴⁶ Thus it is the relation that is primary, not either of the poles of seer and seen, toucher and touched; they are mirrored ontologically in each other, they are ontologically interdependent.

2.5 Reversibility and the Invisible

Following a similar strategy with regard to the *Visible*, Merleau-Ponty firstly examines the reversible relation internal to the subject of language and reflection, then the relation of language to objects and the world and finally the linguistic relation between subjects. Due to the length constraints of this paper I will not expand on these analyses here.⁴⁷ Suffice to say that the alterity of things, the world and other subjects thus depends on ipseity and vice versa. And while this interdependence is intrinsic and pervasive, the otherness of things, world and other subjects maintain their sovereignty; there is no fusion, these Others are genuine and irreducible Others.⁴⁸ The binaries within the reversible relation are not absolute disjunctions, but rather interdependent terms *within* the relation, distinguishable in thought but inseparable in reality.

2.6 Affective Reversibilities and Feminist Ethics

⁴⁵ PPa: 410

⁴⁶ VI: 139

⁴⁷ See Daly, ‘Does the Reversibility Thesis deliver all that Merleau-Ponty claims it can?’, for a full discussion of these domains.

⁴⁸ VI: 123

How can Merleau-Ponty's *reversibility thesis* support and inform two dominant ethical accounts within feminist theory – *Care Ethics* and the *Ethics of Vulnerability*? One of the key contributors to *Care Ethics* is philosopher Maurice Hamington, who notably draws on Merleau-Ponty and also recognizes the important founding role of the body for *Care Ethics*. He writes; “care denotes an approach to personal and social morality that shifts ethical considerations to context, relationships, and affective knowledge in a manner that can be fully understood only if care’s embodied dimension is recognized. Care is committed to the flourishing and growth of individuals yet acknowledges our interconnectedness and interdependence”.⁴⁹ Crucially, Hamington asserts that care not only underpins this particular ethical theory, but also because of the embodied dimension of care it founds morality.⁵⁰ Interestingly, Hamington has articulated a similar insight to the account I am advancing here, that of the need for a grounding for *Feminist Ethics* below the concrete interpersonal. While he has come to this through *Care Ethics* and Merleau-Ponty’s account of embodiment,⁵¹ my own account directly addresses the ontological through the non-dualist ontology that Merleau-Ponty demonstrates according to the various levels and domains of reversibility; perceptual reversibility, intersubjective reversibility of bodies and language and finally affective reversibility which underwrites our vulnerability and empathic responsiveness to others. It is not rational deliberation but rather this affective reversibility at the heart of subjectivity that galvanizes the ethical subject for action and in this way my account finds agreement with Hume’s famous dictum “Reason is and ought to be the slave of the passions”.⁵² Rational deliberation and rationalist ethics are incapable of motivating ethical action. Not only do I propose,

⁴⁹ Hamington, *Embodied Care: Jane Addams, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Feminist Ethics*, 3; ‘Resources for feminist care ethics in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of the body’, 203-220.

⁵⁰ Hamington, *Embodied Care: Jane Addams, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Feminist Ethics*, 5.

⁵¹ For updated accounts that vindicate Merleau-Ponty’s interrogations of embodiment in the domains of developmental psychology, neuroscience and *Theory of Mind*, see Gallagher and Meltzoff, ‘The earliest sense of self and others: Merleau-Ponty and recent developmental studies’, 211-233; Gallagher, *How the Body Shapes the Mind*; Varela, *Ethical Know-How: Action, Wisdom and Cognition*.

⁵² Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 1739, 1978.

along with others, that affective reversibility, primary empathy (fellow-feeling), is constitutive of subjectivity/ intersubjectivity but I also argue that this closes the affective gap between subjects and answers the amoralist's question – why be moral?

Empathy is a direct, irreducible intentionality separable in thought from the other primary intentional modes of perception, memory and imagination, but co-arising with these. In regard to the inter-personal level, the concrete relations with others, primary empathy as fellow-feeling is both the ground for the possibility of the secondary manifestations – projective or introjective empathy, perspective taking, etc., and motivates them. Finally, it is the movement in the core of subjectivity initially generated by shifting attention between the “I” and “we” perspectives and intensified through affect to become shifting identification, which opens up the intersubjective domain. So we can affirm that we are not only born into sociality but our sociality goes to the roots of our being as Edmund Husserl, Max Scheler and Merleau-Ponty have all claimed.⁵³

This affective reversibility internal to the subject underwrites our capacities for care and also explains why vulnerability can be a motivating ethical force. Merleau-Ponty's ethics is “bottom-up” as opposed to the “top-down” approaches of the three main normative ethical theories of deontology, consequentialism and virtue ethics within which the ethical imperative relies on principles of duty, utility or virtue and does not take sufficient account of the particular perceiving embodied subject.⁵⁴

Part III: Normativity, Perception and Intersubjectivity

⁵³ Max Scheler's articulation of this idea is for me particularly cogent. He describes the double incorporation as the ‘I’ within the ‘we’ and the ‘we’ within the ‘I’, Scheler, *The Nature of Sympathy*, 229 & 230.

⁵⁴ See Daly, ‘Primary Intersubjectivity: Empathy, affective reversibility, ‘self-affection’ and the primordial ‘we’.

3.1 Perceptual Gestalts

As stated in the introduction, I propose that percipience itself has a normative structure and because of its pervasiveness it is then able to return moral authority to the embodied perceiving subject rather than outsourcing this to a higher authority such as duty, utility or the valorised virtue which all employ “high altitude” thinking.⁵⁵ Merleau-Ponty, drawing on gestalt psychology, provides justifications for this claim; he writes – “The perceptual ‘something’ is always in the middle of something else; it always forms part of a ‘field’”;⁵⁶ this is the very nature of perception itself, that it is structured in terms of figure and ground, or in other words, focus and context or environment. With regard to a phenomenon, it is perceived against the background of other phenomena which form a field and the field may be auditory, visual, tactile, gustatory or olfactory. With regard to a subject, the subject is perceived against the background of other subjects, historical, actual or potential. The perceptual *gestalt* includes both the figure and the ground, the “something” and the context; we never find one without the other. As Sean Kelly notes,⁵⁷ for Merleau-Ponty while the figure is in focus and determinate, the background is indeterminate, but this background despite its indeterminacy is still nonetheless a positive presence.⁵⁸ And so Kelly proposes background, ground, or context for Merleau-Ponty has normative force, in contrast to Husserl’s account which is merely descriptive.

Merleau-Ponty illustrates this intrinsic normativity between figure and ground in a number of ways, such as the perception of the landscape on a misty day.⁵⁹ The misty environment conditions (or prescribes) the way the landscape is perceived and if there is a sudden dispersal of the mist with strong

⁵⁵ ‘High altitude’ thinking (*pensée de survol*) is 3rd person objectivist thinking, VI: 69.

⁵⁶ PPa: 4

⁵⁷ Kelly, ‘Seeing things in Merleau-Ponty’.

⁵⁸ PPa: 6

⁵⁹ PPa: 7

sunlight, then the landscape will appear more clearly. So too in cognitive science there is much work being done on perception with regard to the roles of hue, saturation and luminosity in perception. So for example, patches of grey will appear of different hues if the background is either lighter or darker even though the patches themselves abstracted from the background are exactly the same hue.⁶⁰ Merleau-Ponty writes: “The real colour persists beneath appearances as the background persists beneath the figure that is, not as a seen or thought-of quality, but through a non-sensory presence”.⁶¹ Thus, inadequate illumination clearly does not change the figure itself, but it does impact on the perception of the figure, not as some current theorists claim by penetrating perception, but rather it is an intrinsic aspect of the perceptual *gestalt* which presents the figure as obscured. In this way the affordances, whether of colour, shape or motion, on offer for the subject are normatively informed by the environment.

3.2 Intersubjective Gestalts

The same perceptual *gestalt* of figure-ground is evident in intersubjective engagements. Our attention in the intersubjective domain is constantly shifting between self-awareness and other-awareness whether the particular individual before us or the potential and historical others who haunt us. As Merleau-Ponty writes: “Whenever I try to understand myself, the whole fabric of the perceptible world comes too and with this comes others who are caught in it”;⁶² we are *of* the world.⁶³ Our understanding of our own situation is normatively influenced by all the other actual and potential perspectives; and we know immediately when our perspective deviates from or accords with this intersubjective background. Deviations or accordance thus structure our intersubjective responsiveness and may play a role in the

⁶⁰ See Hansen, et al, ‘Memory modulates colour experience’, 1367-1368; MacPherson, ‘Cognitive penetration of colour experience. Rethinking the issue in light of an indirect mechanism’, 24-62.

⁶¹ PPa: 305

⁶² S: 15

⁶³ VI: 127

decisions we make; do we seek solidarity and approbation or do we have the strength of conviction and courage to be different, to be an outsider and resist the coercive pull of the group. In this way context or environment (physical or social) are intrinsic to the perceptual or intersubjective *gestalt*. Moreover, because normativity inheres in the relation generated by the shifting focus of attention between figure and ground, between self and others, all our ethical engagements and deliberations regarding the concrete other before us and all the other potential and historical others become part of the action. Contrary to rationalist ethics, actions and deliberations cannot be abstracted from the context for evaluation and independent justification; just as there is never any isolated sense-datum, so too there are never any isolated, acosmic, purely rational ethical subjects. As Merleau-Ponty expresses this: the *gestalt* is “the birth of a norm, not realized according to a norm; it is the identity of the exterior and the interior, not the projection of the interior into the exterior”.⁶⁴ Normativity does not need to be outsourced to duty, utility or to the valorised virtue, it subsists in the relation which is the *gestalt*; and moreover, this ontological normativity of the *gestalt* thus underwrites reflective normativity. And it is the affectively informed intersubjective *gestalt* which renders us both vulnerable to others and susceptible to the interests of their care.

Conclusion: Where to from here?

It is not surprising that feminists refer regularly to social or relational ontologies because they offer not just an alternative to reductive objectivist patriarchal accounts but challenge these accounts at their foundations. However, as I have argued, there is sometimes a failure to appreciate *how* these social and relational ontologies are established and *why* they can offer such a powerful critique of reductive objectivist patriarchal accounts. And this is where a return to Merleau-Ponty is important. I have argued

⁶⁴ PPb: 62

that it is through his *reversibility thesis* as elucidated in his analyses of perception and embodiment that he accomplishes his non-dualist ontology which underwrites social and relational ontologies. And it is my contention that *because* he addressed the underlying ontology, his work is able to reconfigure many domains and can offer a non-reductive grounding of *Feminist Ethics*.

In disputing both *the view from nowhere*, a totalizing God's-eye-view with pretensions to objectivity, Merleau-Ponty offers us *the view from everywhere* with his groundbreaking analyses of embodied percipience. He does this through his analyses of the normative structure of perceptual *gestalts* in both the phenomenal and the intersubjective domains. I have argued that these *gestalts* have a normative structure due to the shifting attention between figure and ground, between self-awareness and other-awareness; the perceptual ground or environment prescribes the perception of the figure and so too the intersubjective context has a prescriptive impact on the subjective experience. Furthermore, this ontological normativity, I have argued underpins key principles in reflective normativity as found in the three mainstream ethical accounts; the universalising principle of deontology, the "everyone considered" of consequentialism and the values of sociality implicit in virtue ethics.

It is my deeply considered view that phenomenology and most particularly the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty coheres with the feminist project or we could say the egalitarian project which when allied to an ethos of diversity addresses feminist concerns. While some might object that I am indulging in utopian thinking by proposing a post-feminism future, I nonetheless insist that it is necessary to keep this aspiration in view to guard against feminism becoming yet another ideology with all the attendant problems of ideologies; passionate adherents resistant to considering contrary viewpoints, epistemic echo-chamber effects, dogmatism, shibboleths and in-group mentality. Feminism works best as an interrogative methodology challenging philosophical dogmas and socio-political practices, not as a

destination wherein it will be enshrined as ideology. In this paper, I have endeavoured to resist such ideological seductions and rather contribute to the philosophical surety of feminist ethics by proposing a non-reductive grounding of the oft-cited social or relational ontologies of *Care Ethics* and the *Ethics of Vulnerability*, on the basis of Merleau-Ponty's elaborations of his non-dualist ontology and embodied percipience.

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